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National Presbyterian Church

Following Jesus: Who Killed Jesus Why?

Luke 23:1-25; Acts 4:26-28

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In our sermons at the moment, we're looking together at the events that took place in the last week and the last moments of Jesus' life, and we're doing so through the eyes of one of the four accounts we have of Jesus' life and ministry in the Bible – the account of St. Luke.

Last week, at the beginning of the sermon, I explained “*why we were doing this in the midst of the pandemic*”; why we were sticking with this story, when, e.g., I might be speaking directly to issues relating to the pandemic. And – you can find my explanation from last week online!).

But the brief answer is that -- while I will almost certainly do this at some point after Easter, the message I want to convey at the moment is this: that as Christians, we believe that the story of the Bible, and the story of Jesus in particular, *is the lens through which we can best see and understand life – ALL of Life*. Indeed, all great novelists know that a good story *doesn't just entertain, but influences and shapes* the reader.

So here's *THE* story, given to us by God . . . to influence and shape us, especially at such a time as this. And, I, for one, think that it is providential that the part of the story we – and all Christians – are focusing on at this time of the year (*and during the pandemic*) *is the story of Jesus' own CRISIS!*

- His betrayal, trial, suffering and death, before and on Good Friday.
- To be followed by His resurrection on Easter Sunday: a powerful reminder that with God, suffering and *even death never* have the last word.

But for today, we stick with the hard stuff: Jesus' suffering, and with **two questions that I want to address:**

1. Who put Jesus to death? – *Who's to blame?*
2. And, Why? – *Why did he die?*

I. So, who put Jesus' to death? According to the Bible? According to Luke's account?

Well, fortunately, Luke himself answers this question in his sequel to the Gospel that we call *The Acts of the Apostles*: the story of the early Christian Church. In Acts 4:27-28, in a prayer prayed by one of Jesus' friends (Simon Peter), Peter speaks to God and says this:

²⁷For in this city, in fact,

**both Herod and Pontius Pilate,
with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,**

gathered together against your holy servant Jesus – whom you anointed, (in Hebrew, the word “anointed” is “*messiah*”)

²⁸to do whatever your hand and your plan . had decided beforehand (could also be translated “predestined”) to take place.

And this is exactly what we have seen in the passage we just read from Luke 23. After Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane – where he was betrayed by one of his friends, and let down by all the rest, Jesus is taken to the house of the Chief Priest, who was the key religious leader in Israel in those days, to be tried in a sham trial. He was then brought to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, *for one simple reason . . .* the Jewish Religious leaders *did not have the legal authority* to put anyone to death; only the Romans (and they alone) could impose the death penalty on anyone.

So there *needed to be* a joint decision . . . which Pilate at first wanted to avoid. So he passed the buck, so to speak, sending Jesus to another key political leader in Israel: Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great in the Christmas story), who was effectively the “King of Galilee,” Jesus’ home region.

But Herod Antipas plays “ping pong” and sends Jesus straight back again to Pilate, after he and his soldiers mock him. And Pilate finds himself now facing not only the religious leaders, but a mob of people, ALL demanding Jesus’ death! (Lk.23:18ff):

¹⁸ Then they all shouted out together
²¹ they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!”
²³ and urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified . . . And their voices prevailed.

So that Pilate gave in to the pressure, and did what was expedient: he released someone who was clearly guilty (Barabbas), and sentenced the innocent Jesus to death.

Q: So who killed Jesus? Well, technically, the Romans

A: But, in the picture that St. Luke paints, it’s clear that **all kinds of people** are to blame for Jesus’ death . . .

- Both Political Leaders and the people
- Both Romans and Jews
- “Both Jews *and* Gentiles” (which was shorthand for *the whole world*).

And this is **really important to remember, among other things, because of the anti-Semitism** that has tragically riddled Christian history, with the Jewish people often being singled out and blamed for the death of Jesus. Which *JUST ISN’T SO* . . . Sure – *they’re* in the picture (obviously, the story is set in Judea!) but **SO ARE WE!** Jew AND Gentile alike means all of us! If we’d been there, we’d be right in the middle – either deliberately or by default.

Indeed, whether it’s *the death of Jesus* or *a pandemic*, the message of the gospels and Jesus repeatedly is

- *beware of pointing to the failures of others*
- *beware of “the blame game”* (see John 8:1-11 especially)
- *because there are plenty reasons for others to point back to US!*

Intentionally or unintentionally, deliberately or by default, we’re all in this human mess together, all of us, humanity! *Jew and Gentile – Italian, Chinese, American; leaders and common everyday people* oblivious to the impact of our actions; whoever we are.

SO: WHO killed Jesus? . . . All of us!

II. BUT WHY?

A. On a Human Level, there were *all kinds of reasons*.

Ostensibly, the main religious reason, for example, was ***blasphemy***. Jesus had said and done things that only God could say and do (see especially Mark 2:7, and John 10:30-31). Jesus was “an outrage” to many devout religious people.

And then, politically – the main reason was ***sedition***. Jesus was a threat to the public good, to the rule and stability of the Roman Government.

And then, if you look at the broader human reasons – all the usual suspects play their part: *Fear (the disciples and the crowds); Cowardice (Peter); Greed (Judas); Power and Jealousy (the religious leaders); Career and Reputation (Pilate)*.

So -- on a human level there were all kinds of reasons for Jesus’ death; none of which included his guilt! *He was INNOCENT* – more innocent than anyone the players in the game had ever met. So, very quickly, the first Christians began asking “*Why, IF Jesus was Innocent, did he die?*” And the question moved from the human level to the divine level.

B. On the Divine Level, they asked, “*Was God up to something in the death of Jesus?*” To which they answered, “*Yes!*” Listen again to Peter’s prayer in Acts 4:27-28.

²⁷For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate,
with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, (*that is, the leaders and everyone else*)
gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed,
²⁸**to do whatever your hand and your plan had decided beforehand** (“predestined”) to
take place.

So, from their point of view, God *was* involved in Jesus’ death; it wasn’t mere accident or tragedy. But quite the opposite: *God had planned to experience death himself – in the person of Jesus – from all eternity . . .*

But, the question still remained: why?

Well to that question, the Bible gives a number of answers.

1. FORGIVENESS: The first answer Jesus’ followers gave was that

- ***He died to bear the punishment for our sins;***
- ***He died So we could be forgiven;***
- ***He died to end the blame game.***

We need to note, that “forgiveness” is not just “letting us off the hook!” Our sins are serious and need to be judged. But in the death of Jesus, God says “Let ME pay. I’ll take care of the fine or penalty.”

In fact, one of the primary reasons why the first Christians believed that God was somehow involved in it all – and therefore Jesus’ death *wasn’t just an accident*, or just another example of *the triumph of injustice over what was right* -- was that the prophet Isaiah, 500 years beforehand had *predicted* the coming of an anointed servant of God, an innocent “messiah” who would suffer and die for the sins of others.

Let me read from Isaiah 53:8-9; 5-6. Speaking of this suffering messiah, Isaiah writes:

⁸By a perversion of justice he was taken away . ⁹although he had done no violence... ⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for *our* iniquities; upon him was the punishment (laid by God) that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

And it's this passage in Isaiah that *almost certainly* the apostle Paul refers to when he tells a church in Greece that "*Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.*" (1Corinthians 15:3)

He died for our sins . . .

We're in the crowd that put him to death . . .

We ALL need mercy . . . and God gives it . . .

2. LOVE: Second, Jesus died to demonstrate that **God Loves Us!** God Loves and Adores YOU and me!' And Jesus' death shows this love, makes it real and tangible, more clearly than anything else.

The Bible spells this out most simply in John's gospel Ch.3 and v.16

¹⁶“For God so loved the world (loved you and me SO much!!) that he gave his only Son (i.e., gave him up *to die*),

So, Jesus' death is the concrete material evidence of the depth of God's love for us. We don't just depend on feeling as if, or hoping that God loves us; but we can actually know that God loves us because of a specific action of God: what God did in the person of Jesus within history, in flesh and blood; his willingness to suffer on the cross, for us.

3. RECONCILIATION and RELATIONSHIP: Jesus' death – that brings us (1) forgiveness and (2) love is also the means by which God reconciles us to himself forever; brings us into a relationship with God that not even death can destroy. *One that never ends.*

2 Corinthians 5:19 puts it like this:

God was in Christ (in his death especially) reconciling the world to himself.

In his death, Jesus was restoring our broken relationship with God for ever.

John' Gospel goes on to say in v.16 of Ch.3 that

God gave his only son -- so that everyone who believes in him may not perish -- but may have *eternal life*.

Eternal life – is not just “life when we die,” but “*life lived WITH God*” both now and beyond the grave. . . . How important is this for us to know, *when we're all disconnected in our fight with the virus? To know that nothing can disconnect us from the God who died to reconcile us?*

4. TRANSFORMED BEHAVIOR: And then, fourth, Jesus died to demonstrate for us a new way of life.

That is, the fact that our lives are now lived with God (*reconciled forever*); the fact that our lives are now loved by God (*demonstrated by a sacrificial act that nothing can undo*); and that the actions and inactions of our lives have been forgiven by God (*who has born the penalty fully*), IS MEANT TO TRANSFORM OUR BEHAVIOR, so that we are morally shaped by the love and humility we see in Jesus' willingness to die; changed forever by his example – even, and especially in his Death.

In 2 Corinthians 5:14, the Apostle Paul says:

we are convinced that Jesus died for all, so that those who live -- might no longer live *for themselves, but for him* who died and was raised for them.

In other words, the knowledge that *someone died for us*, had to die for us is supposed to affect our moral lives profoundly.

And nowhere is this spelled out more clearly than in Paul's Letter to the Philippians where he says in Chapter 2 (vss.3-8)

³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

(why? Because of Jesus' example in his death; in dying for us he counted us better than himself!)

⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

(as Jesus did in his death)

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

(Look at Jesus example: No matter how important he was, he never used his privilege)

⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — *even death on a cross.*

So . . .

Who Killed Jesus? All of us did!

Pilate, Herod, the Priests, scribes, the crowd, the Powerful and the Powerless, both Jew and Gentile (*ALL OF US*)

And why?

Because (*from a human point of view*) of our sins; our human will and weaknesses! Our cowardice, greed, power, jealousy. Our concern for reputation and self interest. Our desire to be outside of God's authority. All the usual suspects .

But he died FOR US anyway

Because (*from a divine point of view*) God chose to incorporate Jesus' Suffering into his eternal plan, using the death of his son – this moment of ungodly crisis, for something wonderful, to be

1. The means of our forgiveness
2. The demonstration of His love
3. The source of our relationship and reconciliation with God forever
4. And the model and inspiration for a transformed life.

That's why he died.

And this, my friends, IS THE BEST NEWS IN THE WORLD, available 24/7: the news we should tune into every day, all the time, at any time and perhaps especially at this time, when the world is turned upside down!

- Embrace it fully!
- Hold onto it with your whole life!

- Depend upon it . . . now and for all eternity . . . Do not cling to what you have done for God; or to all those things that you have faced that seem so unfair, or unjust; nor to what you have not done that you regret

But cling to, depend on fully, trust completely – TODAY – in the good news of what *God has done for you* IN THE DEATH OF CHRIST

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