

Jesus and Barabbas

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
April 6, 2023 – Maundy Thursday Meditation
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Mark 15:6-15

(Note: I owe a debt of gratitude to theologian Andrew Wilson for some of what follows)

In a moment we will hear the story of Jesus' crucifixion as it's told in the gospels. Before we accompany Jesus on that journey, I want to look at a detail from that story, a detail that's in all four gospels. And that's the detail of Barabbas, the prisoner who the people chose to release instead of Jesus. In all four of the gospels the people are given a choice between Barabbas, whom Mark describes as an insurrectionist and a murderer, and Jesus. In all four Gospels, the people call for Barabbas to go free and shout for Jesus to be crucified. I want to view this famous choice from two different angles – from the perspective of the crowd, and from the perspective of Barabbas.

First, let's look at the choice of Barabbas from the perspective of the crowd. In the past when the church was more anti-Semitic, it was popular to use this choice as a way to point a finger at the Jews. "You Jews killed Jesus!" That misses the point completely. The truth is, the choice between Jesus and Barabbas is an archetype. In other words, we face the choice between Jesus and Barabbas all the time, and more often than we like to admit we choose Barabbas.

What do I mean by that? Who was Barabbas? He was someone who was trying to change the world, and he was trying to change it in a certain kind of way. He was an insurrectionist. He was a revolutionary and a mercenary who was trying to bring about a change. And as a way to bring about that change, he chose the road of power and violence and force. That's a popular choice. The way of Barabbas is a well-traveled path when it comes to changing things. It's a road populated with the series of warriors and strong men and militias; people who believe that if you want to make an omelet you have to break a few eggs. To the crowd, Barabbas looks like a strong man, a decisive man of action.

Jesus is also someone who is trying to change the world, only he's doing it a different way, and from the perspective of the crowd, Jesus' way looks weak and passive. The crowd knows Jesus has power. They've seen him do all those miracles. But now he's clearly not using that power. It's like he's giving up. He surrendering. He's allowing himself to be beaten and spit on and mocked. It enrages them. Standing next to Barabbas, Jesus looks like a wimp. So, like a group of middle school bullies whose animus somehow always runs towards the weak ones, the crowd turns on Jesus. "Get rid of him. Crucify him. He's useless. Give us Barabbas. He may have some rough edges, but he's not afraid to get the job done" Is this a choice that modern people make? Do we get fed up with the slow way of love and sacrifice, and choose instead the way of force and outrage, violence and deceit? Is that a modern temptation, a modern choice? Yes. Is that a temptation that we sometimes give into? Yes. We have all chosen Barabbas more than once over the course of our lifetime. When the crowd chooses Barabbas, the Holy Spirit holds up a mirror to us and our own failures.

In addition to looking at the story from the perspective of the crowd's choice, let's think about the story from the perspective of Barabbas. For Barabbas this must have been an amazing day. Think about it: He woke up that morning under a death sentence, and not just any death sentence, he was facing death by crucifixion; a slow, painful, excruciating death. But all of a sudden he finds himself next to this quiet, grace-filled Galilean, and in a miraculous moment, Barabbas is set free. Barabbas was guilty. He knows that he is guilty. But he finds

himself walking home through the streets of Jerusalem, walking into the arms of his family, sitting at a table, taking food is a free man. His life is literally given back to him. What Joy!

Did you notice that Jesus is essentially charged with the same thing as Barabbas? Barabbas is an insurrectionist, charged with trying to overturn the political order. That's what Jesus is charged with too. That's the sign they put over his head to identify the charge. "The King of the Jews." He's charged with making himself a king over against Caesar. Barabbas is guilty of that crime, but not Jesus. Jesus is innocent. And yet Jesus will receive the punishment for Barabbas' crime and Barabbas will be set free. It's a substitution. Barabbas is set free because Jesus, an innocent man, takes his punishment.

When you look at it that way, we are all Barabbas. What Jesus does for Barabbas he does for you and me. We were guilty, guilty as sin. We were facing a place of judgment where we could expect a terrible sentence. But this quiet Galilean shows up, and even though he's innocent, he takes the punishment and we find ourselves walking out into the sunshine of freedom. Our guilt suddenly lifted from us. Our life completely changed in one moment.

I wonder what it was like for Barabbas to go back into his regular life? Do you think he went back to his old ways? Do you think he returned to his criminal past? Or did the gift of forgiveness change him? When he surveyed the wondrous cross, did he leave his mercenary ways, and start to live a life of gratitude and generosity? You'd think it would change him, wouldn't you?

The fact is we don't know what Barabbas did. What about you though? How will this affect you? Now that you've had your slate wiped clean and given your gift of freedom, as you walk out of this church a free man, a free woman, because of the sacrifice of this man who took the punishment you deserved, will you just go back to life as usual? Or will you let yourself be changed?

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