

All Part of the Plan
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
March 17, 2024 PM Sermon
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Acts 2:22-36

In the mist of World War II, a man named Anthony Pratt was holed up in his home in Birmingham, England, due to air raids on the city. Because of this, he had time on his hands, time to think. A factory worker and musician, Pratt began to recall the murder mystery games that were played by some of the clients at his music gigs, as well as the detective fiction popular at the time, including books by Agatha Christie. Pratt, with the help of his wife, Elva, began to dream up a board game that would have a detective theme. Their thinking, planning, and designing eventually led to the game known as Clue. Although it has gone through a number of changes over the years, the game is still manufactured today. Perhaps some of you have played it.

You take on the role of one of the characters and try to figure out three things: who committed the crime, where the murder occurred, and what weapon was used in the killing. The answers to those questions are found in an envelope in the middle of the board. So you travel around the board, going from room to room, interrogating your fellow players to see what cards they have in their hands. If they possess a certain card – say, the library card, then you know the crime was not committed in the library. You wonder, however...was it Mrs. Peacock who is guilty of committing the crime in the study with her wrench? Or perhaps it was Colonel Mustard who did it in the dining room with the candlestick? The game continues until one of the players guesses all the answers correctly.

If board games are not your thing, never fear. The murder mystery theme can be found, as we know, in many other places: books, plays, movies, television shows. Some of you may recall the TV series *Murder, She Wrote*, which ran for 12 seasons from 1984 until 1996. It starred Angela Lansbury who played mystery writer and amateur detective, Jessica Fletcher, who becomes involved in solving murders that take place in the small fictional town of Cabot Cove, Maine, and then, probably because you can only have so many murders in such a small town, they occur both across the United States and abroad.

And for those PBS fans, we can't forget Father Brown, the fictional Roman Catholic priest and amateur detective that is based on short stories written by English author G. K. Chesterton. As one writer said, Father Brown answers the question, "Who done it?" by using his intuition and keen understanding of human nature.

Tonight we can also play a bit of "Who done it?" as we consider the death of Jesus, but instead of relying just on a keen understanding of human nature, we will dig into what we find in God's Word.

Peter, on the day of Pentecost, stands up in the crowd, raises his voice, and begins preaching his first sermon. Part way through it, he says, "People of Israel, fellow Israelites, listen! God publicly endorsed Jesus of Nazareth by doing powerful miracles, wonders, and signs, as you all well know. But with the help of those wicked men, those lawless Gentiles, you – you put him to death by nailing him to a cross." He says a similar message again in verse 36 of our text: "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

In essence, Peter is saying, "You killed Jesus!" And it's not just in our passage tonight that we find such a stinging indictment. We see it as well in Acts 3:15, where Peter says that they "killed the author of life," and similar charges can also be found in Acts 4 (verse 10) and Acts 5 (verse 30).

In Peter's view, the people of Jerusalem are guilty because as a whole they have rejected God's saving purpose. And while blame has been laid on this entire crowd, we also know that there are some key Jewish people who were involved in the plot to kill Jesus.

Judas is certainly one of them, probably of the first ones that come to our mind. One of the original twelve disciples, he heads to the chief priests, and says, "What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?" Thirty pieces of silver richer, Judas betrays Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane by kissing him on the cheek so the soldiers would know who to apprehend. Jesus, of course, is not surprised by any of this. We hear his prediction of Judas' betrayal when they were gathered together in the upper room.

Then there are the religious leaders. They follow him throughout much of his ministry and eye him

suspiciously for the claims he makes and the things he does, as well as the threat he poses to their religious system and their way of life. We see this early on in the book of Mark after Jesus heals a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath. Immediately the Pharisees go out and begin to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus – just three chapters into the gospel account.

We also see evidence of their guilt when they hold an illegal early morning trial to find Jesus guilty and arrive at a death sentence before the day progresses and news can spread among the masses of Passover pilgrims. Then in the trial before Pilate, it is the chief priests who stir up the crowd to have him release Barabbas instead of Jesus. And we all know the religious leaders readily joined their voices as the crowd cries out, “Crucify him. Crucify him!”

When you consider all these events, it seems easy to place all the blame on the Jews for putting Jesus to death, as has been done at times throughout history, but was it them alone who are guilty of putting Jesus to death? Peter says in verse 23 that wicked Gentiles help them do it.

When we consider this accusation, we can place the blame on people from that camp as well. For example, we can certainly put Pilate into this category. Even though he tries to exonerate himself and profess his innocence regarding Jesus’ death, the fact remains that he is the one who ultimately sentences him to death. And we also can’t forget the Roman soldiers who show absolutely no mercy when they whip Jesus, mock who he is, and nail his torn and bloodied body to the cross.

When we are surrounded by so much evil, we can often feel completely overwhelmed by it. This was the experience of Zamir, a young Muslim man living in Yemen. After losing his parents at a young age, he married in his early 20’s only to see his wife die while giving birth to their first child, who also passed away. Depressed, struggling with alcoholism, and angry at Allah, Zamir reached a low point in his life, a time where he was also struggling financially.

Around that time, he was recruited to smuggle weapons for fighters on one side of Yemen’s 1994 civil war. On one of his trips to pick up guns, 25-year-old Zamir and his colleagues were arrested for smuggling, and they each received an 8-month prison sentence. When Zamir’s siblings learned of his crimes, they refused to talk to him. “I felt sad and alone,” Zamir stated, yet his despair became even deeper while in prison.

In the facility in which he was housed, the guards brutally beat Zamir and his friends, leaving them with scars and injuries that caused lasting pain. In addition, the hard floor on which Zamir slept aggravated a back injury he had suffered years ago in a car accident. Authorities did offer to release him early if he could pay bail, but he had no family support and could not come up with the funds on his own. The situation for Zamir did not look good.

If we consider the story of Jesus’ suffering and death – from a human perspective, at least – the situation does not look good either. Peter, in his traveling days with Jesus, thought the same thing. In Matthew 16, after Jesus declares that he is the Messiah, he begins to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of the law, including his own death. Peter pulls Jesus aside and says, “Heaven forbid, Lord. This will never happen to you!” Jesus turns around, looks Peter in the eye, and says, “Get away from me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God’s point of view.”

When we view events like suffering and death merely from a human point of view, they look quite ominous, but when we view things from God’s point of view, that they’re part of his plan and used to accomplish his will and his purpose, the perspective changes.

Apparently it did for Peter as well. We don’t know for sure what brought about his change of perspective; whether it was Jesus’ rebuke of him, his restoration by Jesus after the resurrection, or the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, but the Peter who preaches the sermon in our text sees things very differently than the Peter who says that suffering and death will never come upon Jesus.

Hear again verses 22-23 of our text: “Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you *by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge*; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” Peter echoes a similar thought in his first letter when he says that we have been bought by the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish and defect *who was chosen before the creation of the world*” (1 Peter 1:19-20).

We see in these passages, as well as in other places in Scripture (Acts 4:27-28, 13:27-29), the paradox between divine providence and human responsibility. While those who carried out the act of Jesus' death, both Jew and non-Jew, were responsible for it, God was the one who destined Christ to die on the cross. It was all part of his plan of salvation for us.

Author, Max Lucado, describes it this way: "The cross was no accident, and the death of the Son of God was anything but an unexpected peril. No, it was part of an incredible plan. A calculated choice. The moment the forbidden fruit touched the lips of Eve, the shadow of the cross appeared on the horizon. And between that moment and the moment the man with the mallet placed the spike against the wrist of God, a master plan was fulfilled."

While sitting in prison, Zamir, the young Muslim man from Yemen, also began to experience a divine plan being fulfilled. As the guards continued to beat him regularly, Zamir's wounds needed medical care, so authorities allowed doctors and nurses connected with a local church to provide care for the inmates once a week under watch of the guards, who made sure their own abusive treatment was never revealed.

During one of those visits, a nurse named Eva treated Zamir's back pain. Although she was from Europe, she spoke fluent Arabic as a result of living in Yemen for several years. She asked Zamir about his situation, his family, and his health, and also promised to try and help him. One morning, the prison warden called him to his office. When he walked in, Zamir was surprised to see Eva there...and that his bail had been paid. He was a free man again.

Eva arranged for him to attend her church and introduced him to the pastor. She also provided him with a Bible, which made him a bit nervous because it can be dangerous to own one in Yemen. One afternoon he began reading it and read it until early the next morning. By the moving of God's Spirit, Zamir encountered Jesus Christ in those pages, and he surrendered his life to him.

The next morning, he ran to tell Eva the news. "I love Jesus," he told her. "I love his character. I can't explain it fully, but he is amazing." Today this former gun-smuggling Muslim produces a Yemeni-dialect Christian radio program, encouraging those curious about Christianity as he talks about his own journey to faith in Christ. From a human perspective, Zamir's situation seemed dark and hopeless, but God was on the move and in his redemptive plan, he used a nurse's visit in prison to turn his life around.

We may not experience the same challenges Zamir faced, but we all face our share of difficulties in life: a serious health concern, a relative who passes away at too young an age, strained relationships with others, all situations where things may seem dark and hopeless. But take heart, dear friends as our passage declares, the God who raises people from the dead, including our Lord Jesus Christ, is still on his throne, using for good what some intend for evil. Nothing takes him by surprise. Nothing slips past his gaze. Nothing happens outside of his plan. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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