

I

This winter and spring, we've been reading and preaching our way through the gospel according to John.

We left our reading from John last week at the end of chapter 18. Jesus and the disciples have once again come to the city of Jerusalem to observe the holy day of Passover.

When we come to story today, Jesus has been already betrayed by Judas and arrested by a detachment of both Roman soldiers and Temple police. He has already been questioned by the high priest, who has handed him over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the region. Pilate has already questioned Jesus at length, and now, as the morning light begins to brighten into midday sun, the unruly crowd outside Pilate's headquarters is growing larger and more agitated.

So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from John 19:1-16.

*Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.' So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!' When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify*

*him! Crucify him!' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.' The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.'*

*Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, 'Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?' Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.' From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, 'If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.'*

*When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!' They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor.' Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

## II

As we've been making our way through John's gospel this winter, an image of Obi Wan Kenobi keeps coming to my mind. If you're not a Star Wars fan, in the Star Wars movies, Obi Wan Kenobi is a Jedi master, sort of a religious mystic who, even when lasers are blasting and ships are exploding all around, always seems to keep his wits about him. Even when he's facing off for a showdown with the Darth Vader himself, the very personification of evil, Obi Wan Kenobi always plays it cool. And that's the image that keeps coming to mind as I look at this scene between Pilate and Jesus. "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above," says Jesus, and I half expect to hear him say, "And if you strike me down now, I will become more powerful than you can possibly imagine."

In John's gospel, Jesus always seems to be one step ahead of everyone else. He can read people's thoughts. He knows when his friend Lazarus has fallen ill, and without being told, he knows when he has died. When Judas brings a detachment of soldiers and police to the garden, it is Jesus who steps forward and demands to know who they are looking for, and when Jesus identifies himself, it is the soldiers and police who drop to the ground, not the other way around.

John's gospel does not record Jesus' anguished prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, asking fervently that if it be possible that this cup might pass from him. No, in John's gospel, even when he is on trial before the powers that be, Jesus is calm, cool, and collected. Pontius Pilate is the most powerful man in the world outside of the emperor himself, and he does indeed have the power to let Jesus go or to hand him over to be crucified. But Jesus looks him right in the eye, and says, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above."

And all of this makes me wonder. Jesus, according to John, can turn water into wine. Jesus, according to John, can give sight to a man who had been born blind from birth. Jesus, according to John, can even raise people from the dead. So if Jesus is so calm, cool, and collected, if Jesus really is in control through the whole ordeal, then why on earth does Jesus put up with this nonsense? Why doesn't Jesus fling that crown of thorns at the crowd, rip open that purple robe like a Clark Kent becoming Superman, call down a legion of angels from heaven, and start taking care of business? Why on earth does it have to be this way?

I think what John is telling us is that the miracle of the cross is that Jesus didn't *have* to endure any of it, but because God so loved the world, because God so loved us, Jesus *willingly chose to endure all of it.*

### III

And what that means for you, my friend, is that there's nothing that the God of the universe wouldn't give for you. There's nothing the God who made all that is, seen and unseen, wouldn't do for you. There's nowhere that God, who sets the stars on their courses, wouldn't go for you. There's no fallen power in this world that God wouldn't take on for you.

In the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, God comes to you, my friend, not because of anything you've said or not said or done or not done. In Jesus, God comes to you not because of who you are or who your people are or because you said a certain prayer or because you worship in a certain way.

God is crazy about you, my friend. And not even the cross can keep God away from you. There is nothing, neither death or life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation that can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### IV

The question is, how are we to live our lives in response to that kind of love and grace?

Some years ago, someone sent me a screenshot of a church marquee sign from a church in rural Missouri. It was the time of the NCAA men's basketball tournament, and the Missouri Tigers

were making a deep run. The sign said this, "God doesn't choose sides, but we do. Go Mizzou."

But as Jesus Christ stands defiantly before Pontius Pilate and the fallen powers of this world, I think John makes the case that God does choose sides. God chooses to stand on the side of the powerless, on the side of everyone who's ever been mocked and shamed for simply being who they are.

In Jesus Christ, standing defiantly before Pilate and the fallen powers of this world, God stands on the side of dispossessed and the disinherited, with all of those who have been told that the world would be a better place if they'd never been born.

In Jesus Christ, standing defiantly before Pilate and the fallen powers of this world, God stands on the side of the powerless and penniless, the weak and the vulnerable.

And that has some implications for us, for we who live out our discipleship in this thing we call the church.

For the church is the body of Christ. The church is the possession of God. And where the Lord stands, the church must stand, too. And if God is for us, then who can stand against us?

Thanks be to God. Amen.