

**Good Friday  
April 6, 2007**

**Sermon by Rev Timothy A Leitzke on The Passion According to St John**

It's a political power play: This world against God's world. This world produces so much that is terrible; I say that as a product of this postmodern world, a man who straddles 'Generation X' and 'Generation Why'. We're different than those who went before us, but then so is everyone. We don't necessarily see the rampant sexuality of today's culture, \$4 Starbucks coffee, millions of people on anti-depressants and ethnic diversity beyond what the anti-segregationists dreamed as evil. No, the evil of this world is nothing new; it is timeless, as old as creation itself, and it's a political power play: God's, 'Don't touch my tree', against Sin's, 'You can be like gods, too.' It's the human tragedy. On Good Friday, that tragedy is played out in the man trapped in this passion story, Pontius Pilate. Yes, Jesus is the center of the story, but he's in complete control the whole time. Pilate is trapped.

He was, possibly, a poster child for all that made Rome powerful. Studies into his biography and the roots of his name suggest that his family were descended from slaves who became free Roman citizens. He was living the Roman dream, and became part of the Roman power structure. Rome didn't become an empire because it was built on democracy. It became an empire on its military strength and suppression of all opposition. Pilate was an excellent suppressor. His rule over Judea was harsh and bloody. It is this cruel ladder-climber who becomes the character at the heart of this story.

The local religious establishment brings him Jesus, indignant that he would want to know the charge against him. They suggest 'evildoer'. There is no such charge. They mention that they want to kill him, and here Pilate's problem begins. It's a capital case they want, and only Pilate has the authority to deal with it. Three times he examines Jesus and addresses the crowd. Each time Jesus befuddles him, and each time the religious establishment ups the ante, bringing more of the political power structure to bear. Pilate tries to placate them by having his soldiers make fun of Jesus and hit him a few times. They keep demanding crucifixion, finally citing a charge: blasphemy.

Pilate has to carry out the Roman rule of respecting local religious customs, and, lest there be any question, the religious authorities probably thought that they were doing God's work, following the law written in Leviticus 24:16. Pilate tries one more time, and the authorities play their trump card: 'If you release this (one), you are not a friend of Caesar; anyone who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar.' Caesar is the Emperor. Caesar is the High Priest of the Roman religion, practically a god among humans. Caesar is Pontius Pilate's sugar daddy. Caesar can pull the plug on Pilate's Roman dream, and you'd better believe he'll do it if Pilate lets this guy go around calling himself 'King'. There is no escape for Pontius Pilate. He is bound by the Law of Judea and bound by the Law of Rome to Sin by killing an innocent man.

One can sense the turmoil in Pilate's mind even from the number of times that he tries to release Jesus, the number of times he asks the authorities if they

really mean that they want to crucify Jesus, the way he offers to crucify a vicious criminal in Jesus' place. He *knows* that Jesus is not guilty—he finds him 'not guilty' twice! He *knows* the truth; he's staring the truth right in the face. Still, he asks the truth himself—Jesus—'what is truth?' Pilate's anguish and the political power play that causes it come out most lucidly in Pilate's second interrogation, inside the Praetorium, where trembling with fear he says to Jesus, 'You will not speak to me? You don't know that I have authority to release you and I have authority to crucify you?' All the might of Rome is behind him, the power and the glory, supreme authority over life and death, law and order, led by a god-man as emperor, and all of it is power in rebellion, authority given from God and abused by humans. So what will it be, Pontius? Will you choose what is right, or will you cave in to political pressure? Will you let an innocent man live, or will you let an innocent man die? Will you kill someone to protect your illusory power? It's Jesus, or it's Rome.

What do you think you would pick?

Pilate only *thinks* he has authority. He has none. He is not free. He is captive to Sin and its power, the Law. He is bound by Sin to kill Jesus. Given true freedom, of course Pontius Pilate would free Jesus! Jesus is innocent! Pilate's not stupid; he can see that. Given freedom, Pilate would follow God without hesitation. His hesitation is the chain Sin has wrapped around him, and because of Sin's chains, Pilate would kill Jesus every time he was asked. If you were free, you'd never kill Jesus; bound by Sin, you would kill Jesus every time you were

asked. God says, 'Don't touch my tree.' If you were free, you never would touch God's tree...but, 'You can be like gods' sounds awfully nice to us. Pilate, Rome, this world...all of it is sick with Sin, all of it is authority turned against the God who gave that authority in the first place. All of us stand before that weak, helpless Jesus and say, 'Don't you know who I am?' and that weak, helpless man says, 'You would have no power against me unless it had been handed to you from above.' That man we crucify remains in complete control.

Friends of Christ, God's control, even as we are killing God's son, is our only hope, and, Friends of Christ, it is hope that we can trust. Even in this brutal murder committed by a man in bondage to Sin, God's will of salvation is done. Know this: God does not want Jesus to die. God's will is salvation. On account of Sin, God's will in Pontius Pilate gets warped. Things don't happen just the way God willed them to happen. Jesus gets crucified. God's will gets done anyway. The man we crucify is in complete control.

Sin wants Jesus dead, just like Sin wants each of us dead, and Sin makes sure that Jesus dies. What Sin doesn't know, is that God is in Jesus' death, and by God dying on the cross God is forgiving us. In the grand scheme of things, God is right and we are wrong. On the cross, God, Jesus, that weak, helpless man, is surrendering any claim to being right. If God has no claim to being right, then we people are no longer wrong. God forgives our Sin. God sends away our Sin. It is as though Sin never existed. Sin kills Jesus, but because God is dying in Jesus, Sin is forgiven, sent away. Sin thinks it kills Jesus; Sin kills itself.

Good Friday is bittersweet. It's like laughing during a friend's funeral. We mourn the death of Jesus, but when we leave in darkness we leave with the laughter of a prankster, that delighted smirk that says, 'I can't believe Sin fell for it!'

Friends of Christ, Sin falls for it every time, and Sin will fall for it every time, because God is in control. Pilate will kill Jesus every time and God will forgive Pilate every time. God forgives us every time, for everything. Yes, there's more to Christian life than that—there are expectations of how to behave when you know that you're forgiven. That's not the point tonight. Tonight, and every Good Friday, Sin, Pontius Pilate, kills God's Son, and every time Sin kills itself and God forgives Pontius Pilate, or, rather, God forgives us. That ancient power play is broken by the bleeding of that helpless man. God says, 'Don't touch my tree,' and we nail God to it...and God sends away our Sin.