

Lenten Sermon Series #2

“What Led to the Cross?—Caiaphas”

March 17th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

2nd Sunday in Lent

Based on Matthew 26:57-68, 27:1-2

SCRIPTURE:

Matthew 26:57-68, 27:1-2

⁵⁷ Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered. ⁵⁸ But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end. ⁵⁹ Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, ⁶⁰ but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward ⁶¹ and said, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.’” ⁶² The high priest stood up and said, “Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?” ⁶³ But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, “I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” ⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” ⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. ⁶⁶ What is your verdict?” They answered, “He deserves death.” ⁶⁷ Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, ⁶⁸ saying, “Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?”

^{27:1} When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. ² They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: Dear God, let the fire of your Spirit shed light on your Word—that as we have opened these pages, we may find a breath of fresh understanding, a word for our hearts, and a light for our path as we continue our Lenten journey. In Jesus’ name we pray; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

The Season of Lent Continues

As we continue to move through the season of Lent and spend time anticipating the Holy Week drama that will soon unfold, let us be mindful that we are not just on some cosmic, spiritual countdown to Easter—doing our best to navigate our regular lives and routines along the way. Instead, during the season of Lent, we truly are on a journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem and the cross—a journey that involves the awareness of all the emotional and faith-filled ups and downs that Jesus experienced along his way—ups and downs that should affect each of us along our own way, if we allow ourselves to become invested more deeply in our faith, as this particular church season invites us to do. And, so let us continue our journey to the cross with Jesus and the disciples ...

Sermon Series: What Led to the Cross?

Last week I began a sermon series that is focused on a few of the main characters involved in the final days of Jesus' journey. My hope and prayer is that by providing context and background as to who and what actually led Jesus to the cross, both our understanding and our faith may be strengthened. I want everyone to seek answers to such questions like ... What were the circumstances that led up to and through the trial and execution of Jesus Christ? There can be no doubt that Jesus was executed, but why? Why was Jesus arrested? Why was Jesus put on trial? Why was Jesus condemned to die on the cross?

Because, like I said last week, here's the reality—despite Jesus' warnings and words to his followers, his death was a complete shock—it was totally unanticipated. Even more, the death of Jesus was an embarrassing and demoralizing event for Jesus' early followers and for a young church proclaiming Jesus as Savior and Son of God throughout the Roman Empire. Remember, in the thinking of the Roman world, sons of God and heroes and saviors did not die on crosses. So how can the teachings of a man who died so horrifically be considered "good news?"

Week 1 Recap: The Last Supper and the Betrayal of Judas Iscariot

First, a quick recap of last week ... on the first Sunday of Lent, we began by exploring the circumstances surrounding what we now call the Last Supper, and

the subsequent betrayal of the disciple, Judas Iscariot—that on what we call *Maundy Thursday*, Jesus shared a meal with his closest friends and followers ... a meal that was many things all at one time—it was a moment of Passover celebration and a moment of remembrance of their ancestors; and it was also a moment of friendship and family and a sharing of love. And, more than anything, through the sharing of bread, cup, and the foot washing (that we get from John’s gospel), it was an intimate and profound moment when God touched individual lives through Jesus’ actions. In those Last Supper moments, Jesus offered himself to each person present, and his actions say as clearly as anything ever could that this was a personal, sacred moment—that God wants to wash us and clean us and claim us—every single part of us—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

And, so this was the context of Judas Iscariot’s act of betrayal—for we must remember that Judas had his feet washed, too. He had tasted the bread and he had shared the cup with all the others. Judas was one of Jesus’ inner circle of twelve disciples. He was trusted and he was loved, and yet he sold Jesus out for 30 pieces of silver (about 4 months’ worth of wages)? Scripture doesn’t provide us with answers as to why Judas did what he did. All we know for sure is that Judas slipped out of the Last Supper party before it was over, and then led the Jewish authorities to the garden to arrest his master and friend, Jesus—a sequence of events initiated with a kiss that led to circumstances so much worse.

The Next Character: Caiaphas, the High Priest

Now, as I said a moment ago, at this point we are only dealing with Jewish authorities, not Roman. There’s a whole lot that has to happen before the Roman authorities get their hands dirty in all this drama. So Jesus is arrested, not by Roman soldiers, but by guards who are loyal to the *Sanhedrin*—a Jewish supreme court and council made up of seventy priests, scribes, and elders, and presided over by the high priest. And, at this point in history and in Jesus’ lifetime, the high priest was a man by the name of Joseph Caiaphas.

As high priest, Caiaphas was the true Jewish head honcho, the biggest wig of them all—he was the supreme cultic official in the Jerusalem Temple, he was the appointed mediator between Israel and God, and he was the only human being

alive able to enter the *holy of holies*—the inner sanctuary inside the Temple—a place entered only once a year, by this one man, to atone for the people’s sin. He was the figurehead of the entire Jewish faith, and he ensured that a delicate balance was maintained between Roman occupation and control and his people’s freedom to keep practicing Jewish customs.

Different Gospel Versions

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Caiaphas was appointed high priest in 18 CE, which means he’d been on the job about 15 years when the “Jesus problem” starting coming to a conclusion. And, similar to how the four gospels describe Judas differently, each of the gospel accounts present Caiaphas in a differing light as well.

In the overnight drama following Jesus’ arrest in the garden, Mark’s gospel refers to Caiaphas simply as “the high priest” with no name (Mark 14:53) and presents him as the convener of the late-night mock court intent on putting Jesus to death based on the charge of blasphemy. Luke’s story is *very* different—the Jewish trial is held in the morning rather than at night, it is condensed, and it has more of a feel of a preliminary investigation, like an episode of *Law & Order*, as the gathered assembly merely questions Jesus regarding his identity as the Messiah before passing him off to Pilate. John’s gospel is different yet again, as the gospel writer seems to focus more on Annas, Caiaphas’ father-in-law who had been deposed as high priest by the Romans in 15 CE, but who still exerted a lot of control through his son-in-law. John interestingly includes a short snippet where Annas questions Jesus about his disciples and his teaching (John 18:19) before sending Jesus off to Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, as if Annas’ informal trial was designed to also indict Jesus for secretly training his disciples to be revolutionaries.

Again, Matthew’s Gospel Offers More Details

And, again, as with the story of Judas, it is Matthew’s version that adds a few more helpful details. Matthew follows Mark’s story closely, but actually uses Caiaphas’ name when referring to the high priest. And, Matthew not only places the court at night, but also places the mock trial within Caiaphas’ own home,

likely in the courtyard area, as well as explicitly identifying the involvement of the entire Sanhedrin.

Joseph the Mathematician

However, what no gospel account records about Joseph Caiaphas was that he was also a mathematician, “of sorts.” Remember, as the high priest, he was the figurehead of the entire Jewish faith, and one of his main responsibilities was to ensure that a delicate balance was maintained between Roman occupation and control and his people’s freedom to keep practicing their Jewish customs. And, in his mind, Jesus had become a grave threat to maintaining that delicate balance. So Caiaphas did the math and calculated that it was better for one person to take one for the entire team than for the many on the team to suffer on account of one person. And, that’s exactly what many of the Jewish leaders and authorities had begun worrying about, too—that they may all get into hot water with the Roman occupiers because of the way Jesus was carrying on.

So the Jewish authorities cooked up a plan to eliminate the thorn in their side—to get rid of the “Jesus problem” once and for all—and they even found a way to convince one of Jesus’ own to help hand him over. Then they put him on trial in front of their version of the Supreme Court. Jesus was accused and charged with blasphemy, and condemned, in their judgment, as deserving death. Caiaphas and his gang probably thought they had the whole thing wrapped up with a nice little bow on top.

But, along the way to Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus had already made several calculations of his own, and the kind of math God-in-the-flesh does goes a bit like this: “He said that heaven gets a bigger kick out of one sinner who repents than out of ninety-nine saints who don’t need to. He said that God pays as much for one hour’s work as for one day’s. He said that the more you give away, the more you have.”¹

Indeed, through a different sort of arithmetic, Jesus had reached the same conclusion as Caiaphas. He knew that the only way to fix all the mess that had

¹ Buechner, Frederick. Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC’s of Faith. HarperOne: New York, 2004. p.55.

been made, and to really reconcile the world back with God, was to take one for the entire team. Because Jesus knew that it was better for one person to make the ultimate sacrifice than for everybody else on the team to suffer—a team that included Judas ... and it even included Caiaphas, too.

What Led to the Cross?—Caiaphas

After Judas Iscariot, Joseph Caiaphas was the second domino to fall in the sequence of events and characters that led Jesus to the cross. Thanks be to God that Jesus' math was better than Caiaphas' math—because that's the kind of arithmetic that makes grace possible. And, it's only by grace that our salvation is made possible as well. Amen.