



Lent 4  
Take Up Your Cross  
March 26, 2006

John 18:38b-40  
*The Criminal*  
M. Craig Barnes

Passover commemorates the Hebrews' freedom from slavery in Egypt. Every year as they celebrated this great feast, the Jews would renew their heritage as a free people. When they celebrated Passover under Roman rule, they also renewed their longing to be free again.

According to the Gospel of John, the people of Jerusalem somehow convinced the Romans to participate in their celebration by freeing a prisoner at Passover. I don't know what Pilate thought of this tradition, but the year he was stuck conducting a trial of Jesus, the Passover amnesty plan must have seemed like a good idea. That's because it was clear to Pilate that Jesus had not committed a crime. He thought Jesus was just a rabbi who got on the wrong side of his own religious leaders. But it was also clear that those religious leaders are furious with this man and want him killed. So Pilate was stuck.

Politicians are always looking for a creative, alternative way of solving dilemmas like this. Maybe Pilate remembered it was Passover and he would have to free a prisoner, or maybe an ambitious administrative aide whispered the suggestion in his ear, but Pilate seizes on this opportunity for releasing Jesus. He can't just let Jesus go, or the religious leaders will be furious with Pilate, so the governor develops a political maneuver that is sure to work. He decides to give the people a choice between Jesus and the most despicable prisoner he can find in his jail. That way, when the people cry out for him to free Jesus who is the obvious choice, Pilate can tell the religious leaders he was just giving the people what they wanted.

So there they are on the platform in front of the crowds of people—three men. The first is Jesus of Nazareth who has healed the sick, fed the hungry, cast out demons, and recently raised Lazarus from the dead. Less than a week ago the people who saw all of these things hailed Jesus' arrival to town, calling him their new king. The second man is Barabbas whom Pilate found in his prison. The Gospel of John calls him a "bandit," but that word can refer to more than a thief. Mark and Luke tell us that Barabbas tried to lead an insurrection but he ended up killing people.

There were many small insurrections against the Romans in those days. The Jews hated having Roman soldiers patrol their streets, Roman taxes steal their money, and Roman authority usurp the power of their kings. Often small, disorganized bands of men would strike out against a Roman outpost of soldiers. Inevitably innocent bystanders would be killed. Barabbas was possibly a leader of one of these bands of the resistance movement. He wanted so much to get rid of the oppressor, but he couldn't do that without hurting innocent people. By the laws of both the Romans and the Jews, he deserved to die for his guilt.

The third person in front of the crowd is Pilate who is now confronting the people with an obvious choice: “Whom do you want me to free—Jesus or Barabbas?” Will they choose the innocent man who heals, forgives, and raises the dead, or the guilty man who only promises freedom but actually hurts them?

You have all read ahead and so you know that the crowd chose Barabbas. Why would they choose to free the guilty man? Well, I think the real question is not why did it happen, but why does it happen? Why would you and I make the same choice? I can tell you why. It is because Barabbas is our guy. We know about trying to do something good, but hurting people along the way. And if there is a way to free Barabbas, or you and me, from guilt you had better believe we will take it.

Most of us don’t set out to hurt someone else. Our goals were good. Some of us just wanted to climb up the ladder. But someone had to pay for our success at work. Don’t kid yourself into thinking that you got where you are simply by your hard work. Someone, probably at home, paid part of the cost. Others of us wanted to fix injustice or do something good like getting rid of the Romans. But no one is as dangerous as a person on a mission. Some of the meanest people I know are trying to do good. Still others just want to be happy. But it is amazing how many people we can hurt just trying to find happiness.

Do you really have to think hard about the people you have hurt so far? You can try to stay busy enough to outrun the memories, but late at night when you are too tired to keep running, or when a grown child struggles still because of the mistakes you made, or when a spouse or friend points again to one of the wounds of the past, it hits you. You are not the innocent person in this story. Somewhere there is someone who is hurting because of what you did. Even if it happened a long time ago, you still feel like you cannot escape the sentence of guilt.

Sometimes the guilt is not because we have hurt someone, but because we cannot fulfill the legacy others have left for us. In Wendell Berry’s recent novel *Hannah Coulter* a young woman struggles to live up to the goodness of her mother and husband who both died too soon. Although she is exhausted, she believes “the dead are helpless,” which means that it is up to the living to protect the meaning of their lives. But if you’ve ever tried to live up to a legacy, then you know about guilt. Because we can never be good enough for the dead. So we feel guilty—both for what we have done and for what we have left undone.

This guilt is also manifested on a larger social level. The last pope died still trying to apologize for the church’s complicity in the holocaust. The bishops are still apologizing for the terrible abuses of children by some of their priests. The president apologized for the problems with Katrina relief, and our previous president apologized to Africa for enslaving its people. We will never get over what we did to the Native Americans. Even Billy Graham has apologized about his distractions with presidents. All of these apologies reveal that guilt is simply everywhere. And that is when we are at our best. The alternative to apologizing over guilt and protesting our innocence leads to cover-ups at best and armed conflict at worst.

So it has always been. The name Barabbas means son of the father. That is another reason why we choose him—this is family. As the Bible claims, the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children and the grandchildren. This is how we best understand the doctrine of Original Sin. It does not mean that sin is a biological taint. It means that sin is a spiritual contagion, which we catch like a disease from our own parents. And the only way we can manage it is with more sin and more guilt.

So when the crowd is confronted with a choice between Barabbas, the guilty, or Jesus, the innocent, are we really surprised that they screamed out for Barabbas' release? Like Barabbas, we would all love to be released from our sentence of guilt because it is more of a cross than we can bear. We would love to think there is some way to go free after what we have done and left undone.

Remember, you are in this crowd with everyone else. And in Barabbas you see your own guilt up there on the platform next to Jesus. Now you are confronted with a choice about whom you will set free. What are you going to say? I'll tell you what you had better say: "Give us Barabbas. Set us free from our guilt." Because that is what Jesus wants you to say. He wants to take the cross and thus the guilt for you. He wants to set you free. No one agreed with the crowd's choice more than Jesus.

If we had cried out for the release of the innocent man, his purity would have continued to be our judgment. There has been enough judgment. You're doing pretty well on that point by yourself, aren't you? The Son of God did not come to add to your judgment. He came to free you from it. He didn't die just because we chose Barabbas. That would make him a victim of our desperation. He died because, from the beginning, this was his mission from God.

Do you know what that means? It means that you are forgiven. To be forgiven is to be freed from guilt. If you believe this, if you take this gift of forgiving freedom to heart, then you can stop trying to pay for your sins.

Benediction: *We don't know what happened to Barabbas after Jesus took his place on the cross. History is silent about him. Maybe that is best because it means that, as a free man, anything was possible for him. And such is the freedom that now stands before you. Amen.*