



LESSONS IN LIVING

“I’m No Hero...I do what I have to do”

A St. Andrew’s Sermon
Delivered by Heather Malkawi
April 13, 2025

Scripture Reading: Matthew 27:11-24 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Then Jesus was arraigned before Pontius Pilate, the governor, who questioned him. “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus replied, “You say that I am.” Yet when Jesus was accused by the chief priests and elders, he made no reply. Pilate said to Jesus, “Surely you hear how many charges they bring against you?” But Jesus did not answer Pilate on a single count, much to the governor’s surprise. Now, on the occasion of a festival, the governor was accustomed to release one prisoner, whomever the crowd would designate. At the time, they were holding a notorious prisoner named Barabbas.

So when the crowd gathered, Pilate asked them, “Which one do you wish me to release for you? Barabbas? Or Jesus, the so-called Messiah?” Pilate knew, of course, that it was out of jealousy that they had handed Jesus over. While Pilate was still presiding on the bench, his wife sent him a message: “Have nothing to do with that innocent man. I had a dream about him last night which has been troubling me all day long.” But the chief priests and elders convinced the crowds that they should ask for Barabbas, and have Jesus put to death. So when the governor asked them, “Which one do you wish me to release for you?” they all cried, “Barabbas!” Pilate said to them,

“Then what am I to do with Jesus, the so-called Messiah?” “Crucify him!” they all said. “Why? What crime has he committed?” Pilate asked. But they only shouted louder, “Crucify him!” Pilate finally realized that he was getting nowhere with this—in fact, a riot was breaking out. Pilate called for water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, declaring as he did so, “I am innocent of this man’s blood. The responsibility is yours.”

Sermon

All right! Good morning, friends. I want to just say thank you so much for inviting me to help kick off Holy Week with you all. To be honest, I was a little bit surprised, and yes, a little bit nervous, when Babs offered up Palm Sunday to me. I mean, I'm UU or Unitarian Universalist, which means I come bearing more questions than answers most days. But truly, from a minister standpoint, Palm Sunday and Holy Week offer up a kind of sermon grab bag. There's drama, betrayal, political intrigue, crowds, processions, prophecy, and oh, yeah, a donkey. So I said, "*Absolutely.*" I thanked Babs for the opportunity, and I quickly dove into the text to see what I could find.

But it's the scene in Matthew's gospel that brought me back, not just to scripture, but to childhood. Let me explain just a little bit. I grew up with the story of Jesus's journey to the Cross. And when I think of Palm Sunday, I don't just think of the palms, waving, or the triumphant entry into Jerusalem. I think of the annual Easter Cantata.

I'm transported to my childhood church where every year the sanctuary became a full-on theatrical production of Holy Week. The space was transformed into a visual representation of the biblical Jerusalem. I can still hear the crowd's voices echoing off of the walls. "*Crucify him. Crucify him.*" That's the part that always got me in my feelings. But what really stuck, what etched itself into my memory, was the image of Pilate.

The image of Pilate on the balcony, washing his hands. Just on the balcony, washing his hands. And so I've been thinking, how easy it is for us to get so wrapped up in the big dramatic moments of Holy Week that we miss the quiet ones, the overlooked ones, the small, almost invisible acts that don't get center stage. So, this morning, I want to talk about one of those small moments, one that happens in a single verse. But first we need to set the stage.

So, picture it. Jerusalem, around 30 CE, give or take. The city was under Roman rule. There was political tension, religious infighting, and fear in the air. The Passover Festival was drawing huge crowds, and tensions heightened. The Roman authorities, led by Pontius Pilate, were particularly concerned about the potential for rebellion. Here we see Jesus, surrounded by masses, awaiting trial before Pilate.

The pressure in the moment was more *intense* than when I try to do a quick release on my Instant Pot. (*laughter*) Everyone knew something was about to explode. Jesus knew death was near. The crowds were being stirred up by religious leaders and their own agendas. And Pilate. As the governor appointed by the Roman Empire, he was tasked with keeping peace. So he's torn between justice and politics, between what he knows is right and what will keep him safe and powerful. He's also stuck with a tradition. During Passover, one

prisoner is released. Will it be Jesus or Barabbas, a known criminal? And in the middle, in the middle of all that pressure, a woman speaks.

In verse 19, while Pilate was still presiding on the bench, his wife sent him a message:

“Have nothing to do with this innocent man. I had a dream about him last night, which has been troubling me all day.”

Not a disciple, not a prophet, a Roman woman, unnamed, delivering a dream.

One verse, one message, one act of moral courage.

Some of the most courageous people I have ever met, they never saw themselves as heroes. They're not the folks on TV. They don't wear capes or give rousing speeches. They're the ones that show up, quietly, faithfully. They do the right thing, simply because it needs to be done.

Now, you've probably met people like that, too. The ones that say,

I'm no hero. I'm just doing what needs to be done.

But that's what I imagine Pilate's wife might have said.

In a system that favored power over justice, she took responsibility to bear witness to what she knew. Let that sink in for just a moment. She took responsibility to bear witness to what she knew. She didn't make public declarations. She didn't interrupt the trial or demand a platform. She didn't even stop the crucifixion. And yet, she didn't stay silent. In a world where power spoke loudly, this woman whispered truth. She bore witness to what she knew, and she did it without any guarantee that it could change a thing. She didn't change Pilate's decision, but she changed the moment. She made sure injustice did not go unnoticed or uncontested. That, to me, is courage.

We're in our own time of tension and fear, aren't we? Living in a time of political chaos and moral compromise. We're experiencing legislation that hurts the vulnerable. Here in Texas, and across the country, it targets teachers, bans books and curricula that tell truth, criminalizes compassion, and dehumanizes our trans kids and their family. We've seen immigrants targeted, voting rights attacked, and reproductive rights stripped away. Historical truth is being censored and erased. People are tired. People are scared. People are wondering, what's the point of speaking up if nothing changes? But the truth is, silence? It's a choice, and it carries the cost. The cost is often higher than we think.

Let's talk about Pilate again. He knew Jesus was innocent, his wife told him. The crowd, they weren't fully convinced of Jesus's guilt, either. Torn between speaking up for the innocent and appeasing Rome, the religious leaders, and the growing crowds, Pilate had to manage this situation. He had every reason to speak up and every excuse not to. So what's he supposed to do?

He washed his hands. A symbolic gesture meant to say, *This is not on me.* Washing your hands does not erase the stain of injustice. He still handed Jesus over. He still gave in to fear and pressure. And his silence, his refusal to act, cost everything. Well, at least for one man.

We don't know what happened to Pilate or his wife after these moments, but their story remains a haunting reminder. You can't wash away the silence. You can't wash away what silence allows. What about today? Is there a cost of silence today? A lot of people would argue that this scenario with Pilate, Jesus, and the crowd would never happen today because we all have human and civil rights that are granted to us by our Constitution. Additionally, they might say, "*We wouldn't convict and sentence someone who's innocent. That's why we have due process of law.*" Sure. To those people, I have one side note. I have recently heard that El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guantanamo Bay are hot vacation spots these days, and the government is giving discounts on group rates for migrants. If you act now, you might get free airfare. But seriously, all jokes aside, innocent people still suffer while power tries to stay neutral. We see that kind of silence when elected officials, who know better, refuse to speak. When clergy avoid political topics in the pulpit, while well people suffer. And when everyday folks, when everyday folks, think staying neutral means staying safe. I'm here to tell you, silence isn't safety.

When we see harm and say nothing, we are not innocent. Pilate had a chance to listen to truth. He ignored it. His wife tried to speak up, but it wasn't enough to change him. So, let me be plain. Silence is surrender. Neutrality in the face of injustice is not peacekeeping. It's complicity. When we have the chance to speak, will we?

So that brings me to us. Because courage doesn't always look like a protest sign, or a sound bite, or a headline. It doesn't wear a cape. It actually often looks like you. Now, I'm no hero. I am a shy, single mom with a Muslim kid and a trans kid in Texas. I am a minister in formation with enough student loan debt to rival the national deficit. I work for an organization that tries every single day to help people of faith turn their values into action. Personally, I have a quick tongue that can sometimes get me into trouble. I have a dry and dark sense of humor that's seen me through a lifetime. It's seen me through a lifetime of epileptic seizures, surgeries, addiction, nursing homes, and learning how to walk ... twice.

But I don't share these things for praise or acknowledgement. As a matter of fact, there are times when it terrifies me to share some of these realities so publicly. But I claim them. I claim them because these lived realities, it's how I bear witness. It's how I speak up. When I can. For those who can't.

I know that I'm not alone. In my very few short months here at St Andrew's, I've seen courage. I mean, everyday courage. It's alive and well. I have seen parents and friends speaking out for their LGBTQIA+ community. I've seen building grounds, teams

faithfully showing up every month to maintain our beautiful building. Faith leaders and community members holding vigil at prisons. People showing up to testify against unjust bills at the capital. Neighbors helping neighbors when systems fail them. Opening our homes to care for those who are in need. People finding housing and jobs and crafting name tags that say you belong. These – these are the quiet acts, small, unseen, but sacred.

So in closing, we don't know what happened to Pilate's wife after she sent that message. We don't know if she regretted not doing more or if she felt peace knowing she did what she could. But we do know this, she didn't stay silent. She spoke when it mattered. She did what she could. And maybe that's all that's ever asked of us. Show up. Speak truth. Do what needs to be done, even when it's scary, even when it feels like it's just not enough, and even when no one thanks you. Because in the end, those that we call heroes, they're just ordinary people doing what they had to do. And maybe ... maybe that means we're not that far off from being heroes after all.

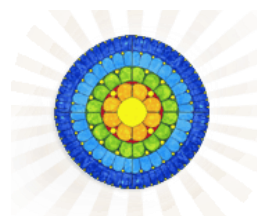
Benediction

Heather Malkawi

Friends, again, I will tell you thank you for the blessings that you provide to me, that you provide to the world and everyone.

God of truth and troubling voices, give us the courage to speak even when our voices shake. May we never wait for the perfect moment to do the right thing. Stir in us a love so deep that we cannot stay silent. Help us to do what needs to be done, not for praise or power, but for justice and mercy. Go in peace.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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