

Who grew up watching westerns?...

all the greats. John Wayne...Gary Cooper...Jimmy Stewart
It was easy to know in most of them
who the bad guys and good ones were.
Good guys wear what? And bad guys wear? Black.
Unless you are Chuck Norris, in that case,
good guys can wear black.
He is Chuck Norris after all.
I have always seen myself as the good guy
I never wanted to be a bad guy

Today, we are focused on Barabbas,

someone we know is most definitely a bad guy.
A killer. A revolutionary. A rebel with a cause or a clue.
But was he really that bad?
This happens these days in our movie villains, too.
A villain doesn't think they are a bad guy.
They believe what they are doing is right.
But no matter his motivation, what did
he feel after he had his unlikely freedom?
Maybe it was shame?

Probably most, if not all, of us have
a story of shame somewhere in our families.
Members of our family who made bad choices
or landed themselves in jail or chained to addiction.
Brutal divorces and histories of abuse.
Maybe the shame was about you.
You were or are the black sheep of the family.

Story of shame...mom when she got sick

Shame was the name of the game
early in Genesis in the story of Adam and Eve.
Remember, God told them they could eat of all
the fruit from every tree except one.
And what tree did they eat fruit from?
The one that was off limits.
There seems to be something inside of us that
won't listen to limitations and take the advice of even God,
let alone others around us.

Then God comes early in the morning,
and where are Adam and Eve?
They are hiding because they know they are guilty,
and they are also ashamed.
The author discusses original shame rather than original sin.
That this wasn't about guilt.
Guilt can be a good force in our lives
because guilt tells me I made a bad choice.
But shame is different.
Shame is when we tell ourselves, "I am a bad person."

And that shame leads to blame,
Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent,
and the serpent had no one to blame.
We need a scapegoat to blame.

Now, did you know that a scapegoat was an actual goat in ancient Israel?

The community would symbolically put their sins
on the goat and then send it off to carry their sins away.

Today is no different as we turn on the news,
doomscroll through our social media feed,
watch a press conference, or attend
a civil/not-so-civil meeting on anything,
and realize that we have to have someone
to blame for our pain.

In Matthew 27, we find the one who
will become our Savior and scapegoat.
Jesus was captured by the religious officials,
tried while Peter stood outside,
and then was handed over to the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate.
It is clear here that Pilate does not want to
deal with this and isn't sure what to do,
but he could read the room and see that
the crowd needed someone, anyone, to blame.

That is where we start

15 Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. 16 At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus[a] Barabbas.

It seems these kinds of pardons were a Roman practice.

17 So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, “Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?”

And did you notice what Barabbas's first name is?

Not Peter or Paul but Jesus.

This, my friends, is a choice between two Jesuses:

Do you want Jesus the Messiah or Jesus Barabbas?

Once again, we don't know much about this background character.

But his name is forever etched into the story of Jesus's passion.

Matthew says he was a notorious or well-known prisoner.

Mark says he was an insurrectionist.

In addition, Luke labels him as a murderer.

So, it is pretty clear that Barabbas is not a good guy and is not going to win the plays well with others sticker.

He is a rebel against Rome.

Some scholars speculate that he might have even been a Zealot, a religious fanatic.

That was a whole different animal than just a rebel.

If that is true, then Pilate was actually offering a choice not just between two men, Jesus, but two different visions of religious salvation.

In this corner, Barabbas, the fight for your life, take up your sword, let's kill our way to freedom, a mindset that believed the only way to get out from under Rome's rule is by force.

That makes me wonder what Barabbas is thinking?

Maybe he liked being in the center stage for his cause.

Maybe he was thrilled that the crowd was there for his death.

No pardon for him.

Give me liberty or give me death.

This was his hero's moment of sacrifice.

Most movies have it.

It is the Braveheart scene.

It is the moment when it sinks in that this is goodbye, and the hero is not coming back but will save everyone by dying.

What if Barabbas was tired of the occupation and weary of oppression, of living

under the crushing weight of Rome?
Could it be that Barabbas was not a common criminal
but someone who saw no other way
but violence to reclaim what had been taken from him?
That in his eyes, he was not a rebel but a freedom fighter,
driven by a conviction that resistance
through force was the only path to justice.

To me, there is a clear analogy to the two
different leaders of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.
Barabbas speaks to me of Malcolm X and how he believed
that freedom would come to his people.
And then Barabbas looks over at Jesus and is probably like.
I know why I am here, but what is this other Jesus doing here?

And then in this corner is Jesus of Nazareth

the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the World,
who believes the meek shall inherit the earth, not the mighty,
that love for God and our neighbor is always the answer,
never violence, even to protect him,
and forgive our enemies even when they persecute you.
A king not riding on a white horse as a military conqueror,
where might makes right, but instead kneeling
before the feet of his disciples as a servant
washing them with a heart of mercy.

The nonviolent resistance Dr. Martin Luther King Jr
preached and lived out to his followers.

In fact, I learned that if you couldn't handle the verbal and physical abuse
during their practice runs at the sit-ins,
then you were pulled out and couldn't participate.

20 But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

21 "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas," they answered.

So, let's put ourselves in the shoes of Barabbas.
You are standing, expecting to be condemned to death
for what you have done, and now you are hearing
the crowd at the moment is screaming you are spared.
What do you think he was feeling?

What would you be feeling?
Knowing an innocent man was going to die in your place?

What if Barabbas, standing in the presence of Jesus,
felt a shame he never expected?
What if, rather than dying for what he believed and fought for,
he was left to wrestle with the reality
that someone else had taken his place?
What if Barabbas had to deal with the resentment of being
denied his moment of dying for his cause,
while this other Jesus, who preached peace
rather than violence, was condemned?
Maybe Barabbas blamed Jesus for stealing his thunder.

Have you ever noticed that we are always looking
for someone to blame when a tragedy happens?
We've been watching the HBO series
The Pitt with Noah Wyle from ER fame.
And the last two episodes have been about
a mass-casualty event at a music festival.
When those kinds of things happen,
the blame game immediately starts
to happen in the media and public opinion.

The debate begins again about where the problem lies.
Is it mental health, gun laws, or is society becoming less civilized?
The answer is yes and no.
But you know what troubles me most in those moments?
That we don't take time to grieve or to understand
everything before we react,
we rush to assign fault to someone or something.
We also see it in plane crashes.
And in weather events like an unpredictable tornado, flood, or winter storm.
Instead of acknowledging what we know is true,
that these events are very complex
and there is plenty of blame to go around,
our culture demands that we have a scapegoat,
someone to bear responsibility for our fear and helplessness.
Back to the press conference...

22 “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” Pilate asked. They all answered, “Crucify him!”

23 “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

24 When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!”

He washed his hands of it.

A phrase we use to this day.

The writer of Matthew was making a point

loud and clear by setting this up as a Jewish purification ritual.

Pilate was not just some passive gesture.

His handwashing mirrored what the priests did before offering a sacrifice.

Then the priest symbolically transfers the people's sins onto the sacrifice.

Matthew is telling us that Jesus is about

to become the sacrifice for us all, especially when...

25 All the people answered, “His blood is on us and on our children!”

Standing before the people are two Jesuses,

two potential scapegoats.

And the ultimate scapegoat didn’t resist or fight back,

but was willing to take on the weight of our sin, rejection, and even our shame.

Matthew wanted us to see Jesus standing in

for all of us while Barabbas went free.

Pilate tried to wash off the guilt, but Jesus took it all.

Barabbas draws us back to the beginning,

to that place of original shame,

where humanity first wrestled with guilt, fear,

and the desire to shift blame.

Was his release a moment of redemption

or a haunting reminder of the weight of his sin?

By standing in the place of Barabbas,

Jesus bears witness to the ineffectiveness of violence,

revealing that power built on force and

bloodshed ultimately leads to emptiness.

26 Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

Jesus invites us into an invitation of grace
and a kind of justice that is not
about retribution but transformation.
Jesus calls us to lose the shame and blame.
He did not look at Barabbas,
and say, "I'll die for you, but I'll never forget what you did."

Jesus took Barabbas's shame as well,
absorbed his blame, and let him walk away free.
And Jesus is doing the same for us.
Whatever shame you're carrying, the guilt,
the regret, the should-have-done-betters, give it to Jesus.

So today, lay your shame down.
Stop picking at the shame, stop replaying the failures,
Jesus already took the shame.
Something I often have to remember to tell myself
and maybe you need to hear it too...
We are not defined by our worst moments.
Lose the shame and the blame.
That is the unlikely freedom that Jesus gave Barabbas and us.