

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, March 20, 2016  
Palm Sunday**

**OUR ROLE IN THE PASSION**

**Luke 23:1-49**

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. It allows us to look back on situations, on events, and on people and learn from them so as to better ourselves or to be able to avoid future mistakes. But hindsight also has a darker side in that it also encourages self-righteousness and judgmentalism. When we read the story of Jesus' passion we have a tendency to look at the various people involved in sending Him to the cross – Pontius Pilate, Herod, the Sanhedrin, the citizens of Jerusalem – and declare: “I would have never done that!” Knowing that Jesus was the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the Lord of the universe incarnate, we'd have jumped in front of the Roman soldiers to shield Him from arrest. Or we would have pled His case before the Jewish Council. Or we would have demanded that Herod bow down and acknowledge Him as the Messiah. Hindsight, as they say, is always 20-20.

But I'd like for us to consider things realistically this morning. To see ourselves in the passion, not from the standpoint of omniscient observers looking back over 2,000 years of history, but as the flawed, sinful, fearful, ambitious people that we actually are in order to understand who it is that put our Lord on the cross and who it is that He came to save.

First, let's take a look at the crowd. The crowd demanded that Jesus be crucified. Some of those who yelled, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” had probably been in the crowd on Palm Sunday and they would have waved their palms and they would have shouted “Hosanna to the King of Israel! Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna! Hosanna. Hosanna...”

What happened during the week to turn the crowd against Jesus? Well, for one thing they were no doubt disappointed that He was not going to lead a revolt against Rome. In the course of the week as He preached and as He taught and as He mingled with the crowds in Jerusalem it undoubtedly became clear: This Man is not who or maybe what we thought He was. We thought He was going to lead a revolt that would free us from Roman rule, that would restore the Davidic kingdom in Jerusalem, that would put us on top of the human heap. And when it became clear that that was not going to happen, they turned their backs on Him. They were also told in the course of that week, I'm sure, that He didn't meet their approval as the hope for the Messiah. There would have been a good deal of intersection, of course, between the hopes of the crowds and the expectations of the leadership, but as is so often the case, when leaders give thumbs down, the mob follows.

As a matter of fact, the mob that previously had been cheering often becomes the loudest ones pointing their thumbs down. The fact is that they were like all crowds. They were subject to suggestion, they were easily swayed, they were unthinking, they were self-

interested. Anyone who has ever worked in a political campaign – and I have in my younger days – has seen this phenomenon at work. It’s amazing what happens when you get large crowds of people together. Frequently individuals will do things or say things they would never have said if they were alone. If you could get them by themselves and ask them afterwards, “Why did you say that? Why were you cheering for that?” they would say, “I don’t know. Everybody else was. It seemed like the thing to do.” If you’ve ever been to a rock concert you’ve probably seen that phenomenon as well. People will shout things and will do stuff that they wouldn’t do outside of that setting. Of course, some of them would, and they need some help. A lot of people just go crazy.

In the end they were calling for a murderer to be released rather than Jesus. Verses 19-20 say that Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city. Now we don’t know exactly what that means, but it’s likely that he had helped start a riot of some kind or another. Whether that was political or not is uncertain, though the word “insurrection” might suggest that. But regardless, something violent, really violent, had happened and he was wanted or had been charged with murder. I don’t know about you but I don’t often hear crowds chanting, “Release to us a murderer.” If someone is proven innocent of a murder for which they had been convicted, yes, that’s a completely different story. But someone everyone knows is guilty, everyone knows did it, people don’t often stand before a judge and say, “I really think that man needs to be let go.”

Well, that’s what they did. They asked for a murderer to be released to them. Specifically asked for him by name rather than allowing Jesus to go free. If we had been in that crowd I imagine many of us, maybe all of us, would have been shouting right alongside them. We display at least some of the characteristics of that crowd in the way that we live our faith. When we don’t get what we want from God, we turn our backs to God and we say, “No, I don’t want to have anything more to do with You. Something bad happened and You were supposed to stop it. Or something good was supposed to happen and You prevented it. One way or another I didn’t get what I want and so I’m cutting You out of my life.” We’ve all known people like that at times. Many of us have done that. We tend to let our passions rather than our will or our reason govern us. We ask the question: Do we feel religious? If we do, do we *feel* uplifted, do we *feel* inspired, do we *feel* encouraged? If we do, we’ll throw our hands up and say, “Praise the Lord!” And if we don’t, we’ll put our hands at our sides and say, “I just didn’t get anything out of that.” Have you ever heard anybody say that about a worship service? “That just didn’t speak to me. I just didn’t get anything out of that.” And I think to myself, why is it always about *you* or *me*? Why is it that the measure of an “effective” worship service is what I get out of it? It’s not about us. It’s about Him. And when we turn our backs on God because, “You know, I wasted an hour and a half this morning. I don’t feel any different than I felt before,” I want to say, “So what’s your point? You don’t feel anything? What’s your point?” It’s not about feelings.

Well, because we aren’t well-grounded in the truth of the Gospel it’s sometimes hard for us to recognize counterfeits. And that’s exactly what the crowd was doing. They were overlooking the whole thing in favor of something else, something that their leadership was foisting off on them. And when we aren’t well-grounded in the truth we have a

tendency to fall for those counterfeits. Did you know that the vast majority of those who join Jehovah's Witnesses are former members of Christian churches? They are not pagans off the street. They are not converts from Hinduism. They are people who have all along thought of themselves as Christians, but who didn't recognize the truth and so were easily taken in by a smooth line and a seemingly logical outline. We, brothers and sisters, are the crowd. We are the crowd.

Of course we're also Pontius Pilate. Pilate ordered the torture and crucifixion of Jesus. He was, after all, the man in charge. In verses 23-24, "With loud shouts they insistently demanded that He be crucified and their shouts prevailed." Despite the fact that he was the man, as it were, with the guns. He had the authority to stand up to the crowd. He had the men in arms to make it possible to stand up to the crowd. He folded like a house of cards. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. Why did he do that? Because it was the easy way out. It was the way to keep peace. It was the way to make people, if not happy, then at least satisfied. It would keep people off his back. He abdicated his responsibility to rule justly. And the funny thing is, I think he knew that. In Matthew 27:24 we read, "When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere but 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.'"

A great woman once said about that line, "How convenient!" How convenient to blame it on the crowd when the man with the power decided to take the easy way out. He acted so as to please a mob, regardless of justice. Mark 15:15 says, "Wanting to satisfy the crowd..." Of course we have no experience with politicians who do that, I'm sure. Who act to satisfy the crowd, to satisfy the mob, to satisfy the polls. In other parts of the world they act to satisfy a mob. In the United States they abdicate responsibility to polls. Seven hundred people, picked randomly out of the phone book, govern America. We don't know who they are and of course they change from day to day, but they're the people that our politicians look to. He acted as a coward, Pilate did. He acted as a coward, thinking first of his own position. John 19:12-16 says, "From then on Pilate tried to set Jesus free but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, 'If you let this Man go you are no friend of Caesar's.'" Anyone who does anything opposing Caesar...uh oh. When Pilate heard this he brought Jesus out, sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement, and we all know what happened after that. Heaven forbid that anyone would think that Pilate was not a friend of Caesar.

Have any of you ever been five years old? Have any of you ever had a three-year-old brother? Remember back to when you were five? Actually, I was six. My brother was three. Remember back to those days. Do you remember what your favorite line was to your parents about anything? "It was all his idea!" You're six years old. You're the one who is supposed to have sense. That's funny. And you're going to blame everything on your three-year-old brother because he's the one who is really in charge. He's the one who calls the shots. When we're confronted with an opportunity for witness, an opportunity to perhaps, if need be, to stand in front of those who do not believe and speak to what we know to be true and in the process risk a rejection and hostility, what do we do? Like Pilate before the crowd, we shrink from doing so. When we know what is true

we will often refuse to dispute falsehood, preferring the supposed peace and quiet of tolerance because “Can’t we all just get along?” has become our motto at least in some parts of America. Can we not just speak up or act even in the face of others’ clear wrongdoing? Simply because we don’t want to get involved. There might be a price to pay, even if it’s only inconvenience.

You’ve all heard the story, perhaps, of Kitty Genovese, a young woman who was a resident of Kew Gardens in New York City in 1964. She met her end violently at the hands of a murderer. Her screams were heard throughout the place where she lived. At least two dozen people heard her screaming and did nothing. And I remember the words of Martin Niemoller, a German pastor in the 1930s who eventually wound up at Dachau because of his opposition to the Nazis, but who recognized he had waited far too late for his opposition to be effective. He wrote: “First they came for the socialists and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. And then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me.”

And the funny thing is that in a couple of years Pilate lost his job and was banished because of his ineffectiveness as governor of Judea. I can imagine all the people who spoke up for him when that happened. Can you imagine them? Actually, I can’t. I don’t think anybody said a word about what a wonderful governor he had been. They just waved goodbye as he left. *We* are Pilate. *We* are Pilate.

We’re also King Herod. Herod collaborated with the evil being done. Herod was a king, supposedly. He had that title and he had some of the appointments of being a king. He was certainly wealthier than the average Judean. But the fact of the matter is that he was a puppet of Rome. He was simply someone who was helping them keep the Jewish population quiet, convincing those who didn’t know any better that they still had some degree of autonomy when in fact they didn’t. But Herod took that title of king very, very seriously. He thought that at least among his people everyone should acknowledge him on the basis of that title. Well, he thought that he was not treated as he ought to be by Jesus. Luke 23:9 says that, “He (Herod) plied Jesus with many questions but Jesus gave him no answer.” Verse 8 indicated that he wanted to see Him perform a miracle. He wanted the trained monkey to come in and write Shakespeare or something. I don’t know what he might have expected Him to do. But he wanted Him to do something amazing. And Jesus didn’t do that. So Jesus obviously disrespected him, in modern parlance. And in disrespecting him He earned his wrath and so we’re told in verse 11 that, “Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked Jesus, dressing Him in an elegant robe to mock His claim to be King of the Jews. They then sent Him back to Pilate.” And what happened? That very day Herod, the puppet king, and Pilate, the cowardly governor, became friends. They had nothing to do with one another before then. I don’t know if it would be accurate to say that they had been at one another’s throats, but the word “enemies” is used in the NIV translation. But from this day forward they became buds. And we can act like Herod as well. We think that we are owed something by God, that He has to treat us in a certain way and give us what we want from Him because we demand it.

I saw a refrigerator magnate once. I don't remember whose it was and I wouldn't mention it if I did remember. This refrigerator magnate said, "I'm a child of the King. I deserve better." I don't think I ever said anything. There's my cowardly side. I don't think I ever said anything to the person whose magnate that was, but looking back on it years later my response is, "And you deserve that why?" If you're a child of the King do you know what you deserve? You deserve persecution in this life. You deserve the hostility of people who reject the truth and the Gospel and Christ in this life. If you are a child of the King, you deserve deprivation in this life. Maybe the word "deserve" isn't exactly the right term, but the fact of the matter is, Jesus warned us about all of this. He didn't say, "Come, be my disciple. Follow me and I will give you everything you've ever wanted." Including that Mercedes Benz that Janis Joplin really, really wanted. "I'll give you everything." No, He doesn't say that. And when we mistakenly think that we are owed something by God we forget that in fact we have already been given far, far more, infinitely more than we could ever deserve, because Christ went to the cross for us when we deserve to be up there. And rose from the grave to free us from the powers of darkness that had held us in their shackles. God owes us nothing and despite that has given us everything. Not a Mercedes, but He's given us everything that we, as his children, were told that we were going to get.

It's also the case that we will frequently make common cause with the enemies of Christ if it will serve our ends. I alluded to Martin Niemoller a few moments ago. Fact of the matter is that most of the churches in Germany went right along with those who despised everything they said, everything they stood for. And they would one day destroy it simply to get themselves some space, simply to divert attention away from themselves, simply to be able to go about their business without anyone interfering with their privileges. And just as 2,000 years ago so many of us would have been in the crowd, 80 years ago at least some of us would have been right alongside those who played along with evil. We're all Herod, at least potentially. Even as we are all Pilate, even as we are all the crowd, potentially.

Finally, the leaders of Judaism, people who should have known better, turned over the Messiah to be crucified because it served their earthly goals. If He had given them what they wanted, which was independence from Rome, and the setup of a new kingdom in which they would be effectively royalty, they'd have gone all the way with Him. We know that for a fact, because on at least one occasion they did. With a man named Simon bar Cochba, about a hundred years later, who led that revolt against Rome that had been widely expected and who was proclaimed a Messiah by the Jewish leadership and by the people of Israel and who, of course, failed miserably and whose actions resulted in even a far greater dispersion of Jewish people from their historic land than had been the case at the end of the Jewish war 67-70 AD that resulted in the destruction of the Temple.

So we know that they would have done that because, when they were given the opportunity, they did. But because He wasn't what they expected or what they wanted, they turned on Him and they gladly arranged for His execution. They couldn't do it themselves. The Romans had to do that. But they could push and they could push and they could push and finally get what they wanted. They made all kinds of accusations

against Christ. They say in verse 2, speaking to Pilate, that, “We found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and He claims to be Christ, a King.” All of that is a distortion in one way or another. I don’t know whether they genuinely misunderstood or whether they deliberately were lying. In a sense it doesn’t matter because they were not looking to find out what the truth was. And it also doesn’t matter because they didn’t hesitate to communicate what might have been pure misunderstanding to the Roman governor. And then when Pilate tried to back off, when Pilate wanted to put this behind him, what did they do? They pointed the finger at him and said, “You know, if you don’t do what the crowd is asking you to do, (which we of course have ginned up) you are no friend of Caesar’s.” And we know what happens to those who are no friend of Caesar. Right? They get turned over to the IRS and life is all downhill from there. The leadership of Judaism did not hesitate to rouse the rabble, as it were, even as they accused Jesus of doing that. And they didn’t hesitate to accuse Jesus of blasphemy, which Pilate couldn’t have cared less about, but which nevertheless was effective with the crowd. And finally, then, they sought His execution.

Now you and I might not turn on Jesus. I certainly hope that we would not and in fact we believe that those who have once been made His children shall not be lost. But even as we say that we will never turn on Him, we have to acknowledge that we will gladly ignore Him when He seems to be directing us in ways that interfere with our own plans. The old saying is that man proposes but God disposes. We’re not really comfortable with that. We’d much rather that we not only propose but that we dispose, that we be the ones in charge. So one way or another we’ll get what we want. If God doesn’t give it to us, we’ll get it some other way. But if that means having to turn our backs on Him, we’ll do that. In many ways, once again, we are the leaders of Judaism.

When we read the story of the passion this week – and I hope that all of you will do so and in particular that you will do so at least in two different gospels, one of which is the Gospel of John, so that you get two different pictures that fill in a variety of holes – we need to hear and see ourselves in the story. And not as the hero. Not as the guy who stands back and says, “No! This is a terrible injustice! Don’t do it! You’ll regret it!” But instead as one of the crowd, as the evading and cowardly governor, as the scheming king, as the unbelieving Council. We need to recognize that it wasn’t just them who put Jesus on the cross, but us. And then, come Sunday, to turn from the sin for which He died. Because you see that’s the real difference between us and the people in the passion story. When it was over, they walked away congratulating themselves on a job well done. When this story is over for us, we fall on our knees. We seek forgiveness. And we open ourselves to new and eternal life.