

## Theme: “The People of the Passion” – Barabbas

### Sermon Texts

(Matthew 27:15-16) Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to releasing to the multitude one prisoner whom they wished. <sup>16</sup> And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas (Mark 15:7) *who was chained with his fellow rebels; they had committed murder in the rebellion.*

(Matthew 27:17) Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, (John 18:39) "But you have a custom that I should release someone to you at the Passover. Do you therefore want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" (Matthew 27:17-18) "Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" <sup>18</sup> For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy.

(Matthew 27:20) But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. (John 18:40) Then they all cried again, saying, "Not this Man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.

(Matthew 27:22-26) Pilate said to them, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" *They* all said to him, "Let Him be crucified!" <sup>23</sup> Then the governor said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they cried out all the more, saying, "Let Him be crucified!" <sup>24</sup> When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather *that* a tumult was rising, he took water and washed *his* hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see *to it.*" <sup>25</sup> And all the people answered and said, "His blood *be* on us and on our children." <sup>26</sup> Then he released Barabbas to them; and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered *Him* to be crucified.

Of all the accounts we read during the passion history of Jesus, this one, the choice the people make between Jesus and **Barabbas** in some ways seems to be the most *unthinkable* of all. Think about the situation for a minute: On the one hand you have **Barabbas**, who our text tells us was “**a notorious prisoner...who was chained with his fellow rebels; they had committed murder in the rebellion**” (Matthew 27:16; Mark 15:7) and he “**was a robber**” (John 18:40). On the other hand we have Jesus, a man who not only committed no crimes, but also “**committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth**” (1 Peter 2:22).

So, we have a rebellious, murderer and thief in **Barabbas**, and the innocent, sinless, all-loving, all-giving Jesus, whose only “crime” was that He spoke the truth of God’s Word, healed the sick, and claimed to be God’s Son, the Savior of the world (which He was!). You’d think it’d be a “no brainer” choice, right? Who would want a murderer running loose in the streets again? Jesus hadn’t done *anything* wrong; surely this mob would come to its senses and let Him go. Well, that’s what Pilate thought too. Shockingly, the people chose **Barabbas**, who is one of the “**People of the Passion**” of Jesus Christ we will be studying today.

As strange as it may sound, this courtroom scene involving the criminal **Barabbas** and the innocent Jesus is, in a couple of different ways, an illustration of us! First of all, this scene involving Jesus and **Barabbas** and the *unthinkable* decision that was made to crucify Jesus and allow **Barabbas** to go free, is a rather striking picture of our redemption.

Maybe we don’t always realize it, but we, by nature, have a lot more in common with **Barabbas** than Jesus! Maybe we’re not “career criminals” like **Barabbas**, but we are “career sinners” “**sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me**” (Psalm 51:5 NIV), as King David puts it in the Psalms. We have “**rebelled**” against God and His Laws and have been guilty of breaking every one of them—if not in our actions, then most certainly in our words and thoughts.

God's Word is also very clear that the punishment for these crimes, mistakes, mess-ups, moral lapses, sins—whatever you choose to call them—the punishment that our Holy God demands, is not prison, but death; eternal death in hell itself!

That's us! We are the hardened, lifelong sinners; "career criminals" against God's Holy Law. We like **Barabbas** stand before God in His courtroom "guilty" of all accusations that Satan can make against us. But just like in the account from our text, Jesus is there too. *God* had a choice to make: His innocent, only begotten Son whom He loved, or us rebellious sinners, breakers of His holy Law—whom, amazingly, He also loves! He chose us and set us free! He sentenced Jesus to the punishment of death in hell in our place! That is God's *unthinkable* justice! That is God's amazing GRACE! The prophet Isaiah described this *unthinkable* substitution of Jesus for us, "**Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all**" (Isaiah 53:4-5).

That's simply "not fair!" But that's the beauty of GRACE! Jesus' punishment for our sins was undeserved, and so was God's love for us! One of the greatest hymn verses ever written—one that we've sung earlier this Lenten season—puts it beautifully:

*The sinless Son of God must die in sadness;  
The sinful child of man may live in gladness;  
Man forfeited his life and is acquitted—  
God is committed.* (Hymn 143 v. 5 TLH)

By God's GRACE He has also caused us to hear and believe this incredible "Good News" of the Gospel: that He has sent His Son Jesus to suffer and die in our place to save us. Now, each day we live on this earth we are presented with a "choice," much like the one the people of Jerusalem were given in our text. Much like the choice God's servant Joshua gave the Children of Israel whom he led into the Promised Land of Canaan, "**And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD**" (Joshua 24:15).

We find a "picture" of this daily choice we face in Jesus and **Barabbas**. Will we choose "Jesus" and the ways of righteousness and truth; or will we choose **Barabbas** and the ways of lawlessness, violence, greed, and sin? Again, the "choice" seems to be an obvious one.

But how often don't we make the wrong choice?! You see, by nature we don't love God's "righteousness and truth;" by nature we find no joy and see no beauty in them. However, by nature we do see pleasure, joy, and excitement in sin, lawlessness, greed, and violence. The problem is we don't see the death and destruction that lies in the end. **Barabbas** is the choice of our sinful nature; **Barabbas** is still the choice of the unbelieving world.

To use a physical example, just think of the food that we eat. I think all of us would agree and we all understand that eating healthier foods is better for you than eating "junk food" and snacks. Right? But how often don't we turn to the bag of chips or the cookies instead of something healthy, or at least waiting until we can eat a more nutritious meal at dinner time. This is very much a picture of our human nature. Our human nature only wants to eat "snacks" so to speak: candy, chips, and junk food. That is, by nature we only want pleasure, fun, and whatever will make us happy now. The problem is candy, snacks, and junk food, even though they taste good, have little to no nutritional value. And if that's all we eat, or if we eat too much of them they will only make us sick! The healthy meal on the other hand may be a lot more work to prepare and may not give us the "instant gratification" of the snack, but it will truly satisfy us and in the end will make us healthier, stronger, and happier.

The problem is, by nature we can't even make the right choice on our own! Our sinful human natures *always* want to choose the path of sin—the “candy”—the path of sinful pleasures, and ultimately self-destruction; the way of **Barabbas**. We need the GRACE of God and the power of His Spirit, which He has given to each one of us through His gift of faith, to be able to choose righteousness and truth; to choose the “whole meal” instead of the “snack;” to choose Jesus!

How did God do this? In His GRACE He took us from the “mob mentality” of this world, of our own sinful flesh, and “separated” (sanctified) us to be His own child through His Word and the “**washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit**” (Titus 3:5) at our baptism. What God did for us at our conversion and in our baptism He continues to work in us today. Every day God assures us of this “**washing**” of forgiveness and rebirth, and every day He gives us the strength to say “No!” to our sinful flesh—our own personal **Barabbas**—and say “Yes!” to Jesus, and to righteousness and truth. The Apostle Paul reminds us in Ephesians that “**As far as your former way of life is concerned, you were taught to take off the old self, which is corrupted by its deceitful desires,** <sup>23</sup> **and to be renewed continually in the spirit of your mind,** <sup>24</sup> **and to put on the new self, which has been created to be like God in righteousness and true holiness.**” (Ephesians 4:22-24 EHV).

Martin Luther put it this way in his catechism when he wrote about the meaning of our baptism into Christ:

*It means that the old Adam [our sinful flesh] in us should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance and die with all sins and evil desires. It also means that a new Man should daily appear and arise, who lives eternally before God in righteousness and purity. Saint Paul says in the sixth chapter of Romans: “**Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life**” (Romans 6:4).*

Thank God that He chose us “**Barabbases**” over Jesus! May He continue to move us through His Holy Spirit to always “choose” Jesus, so that we may say with God’s servant Joshua, “**But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD!**” (Joshua 24:15). Amen.