

“4<sup>th</sup> Station of the Cross: Barabbas”

Luke 23:13-25

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

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Back in 1953, a 15-year-old black boy named Joe Ligon participated in a spree of robberies and assaults in Philadelphia with a group of drunk teens that would leave two persons dead. Although he didn't kill anyone HIMSELF, because of his involvement with the others which he admitted to, he was sentenced to spend the rest of his life behind bars. A loner by nature, instead of the streets of “the City of Brotherly Love,” he had grown up on a farm in Alabama where he quit school in the third grade because he could not read. He believes to this day that he was scapegoated by the authorities because he was the “new” kid, the outsider of the group.

I relate this story because a week ago, Joe Ligon finally left his Pennsylvania prison cell a free man after 68 years of incarceration- the oldest and longest-serving juvenile lifer in the country. His other defendants had either died or were paroled many years before and yet he alone would remain incarcerated. It's not that he didn't have the opportunity- he had a good chance for clemency back in the 1970's but he never applied for it as he had an aversion to parole, even when other prisoners tried to coax him out into the free world. As he put it: “I like to be free. With parole, you got to see the parole people every so often. You can't leave the city without permission from parole. That's part of freedom for me.” And so a little over a week ago, he was finally granted his freedom AND THERE WERE NO STRINGS ATTACHED. Looking out over the city of Philadelphia for the first time in almost 70 years, he saw a city that had been transformed. Taking in the wonder of it all, he said, “I'm looking at all the tall buildings. This is all new to me; this never existed.”

This morning, we find ourselves spectators to ANOTHER sentencing before yet another tribunal- THIS one held two thousand years ago in a courtroom half-a-world away. It had been a busy night for Jesus and his jail-keepers after he was arrested at the Garden of Gethsemane. First, he was taken straightaway to the palatial home of Annas, the high priest, and his son-in-law Caiaphas. After a brief trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court, he was sentenced to death in what was already a foreordained outcome. From there, Jesus was taken to the Praetorium where he was confronted by the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, who alone had the power to authorize his execution. Not wanting to really get involved in what he considered a “Jewish dispute,” he is transferred to the jurisdiction of King Herod Antipas who appears more interested in his entertainment value, wanting Jesus to perform some miracles before him than in the truth of the charges levelled against him. When Jesus refuses, he is again sent back to Pilate for the final adjudication of this matter. Still not convinced of his guilt, Pilate told the crowd which had gathered in the courtyard that he found this man innocent and not deserving of death. He would have him beaten and then released in the hope that the blood-lust of the Jews would then be satisfied. However, they weren't. In one last effort to have him released, Pilate

referred to an old custom that granted pardon to the guilty as an act of clemency. This is when we come face-to-face with a vicious prisoner- one named Barabbas.

The name “Barabbas” means “the son of the father or master” and it’s been speculated that Barabbas was actually the son of a rabbi, one whose father was a teacher of the Jewish law. Matthew refers to him as a “notorious prisoner.” Mark says that Barabbas “was imprisoned with some rioters, one of who in the riot had committed murder.” Luke mentions him as “one who had been thrown into prison for a certain riot that had occurred in the city, and for murder” and John simply says, ‘Barabbas was a robber.’ Putting those facts together, it could be assumed he was a Zealot, a member of a sect of Jews who were extreme nationalists. They believed that the Jewish people should be subject to no one but God and persuaded the people to refuse to pay tribute to Rome. They burned with a spirit of independence and were guilty of all sorts of political murders, seditions, riots, robberies and other crimes. If I had to name a modern-day counterpart, it would be a leader of al Qaeda, that fierce Muslim terrorist group that was and STILL IS intent in taken over the Middle East. In Barabbas is one with a heart that seethed hatred and war all throughout it.

Now picture, if you can, Barabbas- a cruel, unkempt, disheveled individual; a hardened criminal, murderer, rebel and robber. He is bound with manacles upon his wrists and chains upon his ankles while guarded by soldiers who watch his every move with suspicion. He looks at Pilate with a look of defiance and contempt as he anticipates that which seems to be the only possible reward for all the evil he’d committed and the ruins he left behind. The evidence of his guilt is undeniable, incontrovertible and he knows he will DIE for all his crimes. He now awaits the judgment of the court; his life is in their hands.

But MORE importantly, Barabbas is appearing before ANOTHER Court; MORE than the Tribunal of Rome and MORE than the power of Pilate, he stands before the judgment seat of GOD. Barabbas has broken a GREATER law than the Law which bound the Roman Empire together- he has violated God's MORAL law, a law which says that all life is sacred for it comes from God; a law which declares "'Vengeance is mine' saith the Lord" and not ours to take into our own hands; a law which was summed up in the two Commandments, "You shall love thy God with all thy heart and mind and soul; and you shall love thy neighbor as you love thyself." In these are summed up ALL the Law and the Prophets.

Now there was a privilege granted to the Jews by the Romans every Passover in which one prisoner was allowed to be released. He was granted unconditional freedom with all crimes charged against him completely wiped away. This custom coincided with the Passover festival which celebrated the release of the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt. It also looked back to the sacrificial ceremony described in the Old Testament book of Leviticus in which two goats were brought by the people to the high-priest. After cleansing himself, he would then cast lots upon them in the presence of the Lord. The goat on which the lot fell had the name of "Jehovah" inscribed upon it and it was offered to God as a sin-offering. Representing the sins of the people, it was slain and then carried outside the camp where it was burned and its ashes scattered to the winds. The other goat had the name "Azazel" written on it and was then set free. It was allowed to wander through the fields and woods of Israel, just as the Israelites wandered in their escape from Egypt. It

could pasture where it pleased and enjoy itself wherever it wanted for no hunter could shoot it. It was free as long as it lived.

When Pilate proposed that the people be given the option to decide who should be released, it seemed INCONCEIVABLE that they would ever choose a violent thief and murderer over someone so peace-like as Jesus. He thought he was being CLEVER by choosing a prisoner who was guilty of exactly the same charge they brought against Christ, namely, sedition against Caesar. Thus, side-by-side they stood- a political criminal stained with murder, and a Teacher and Healer who had done nothing but preached love and practiced good. However, when he asked them, "Which of the two do you wish that I release to you?" the answer was one he had not expected. With one voice, the mob exclaimed, "Away with this man and release to us Barabbas!" Whipped into a frenzy by the chief priests and the scribes, the mob wouldn't be satisfied with mere execution- they demanded he be whipped and tortured and humiliated and, ultimately, nailed to a cross. Nothing but the blood of their victim could satisfy their rage now.

Friends, here we see the hardness of people's hearts deliberately set against the ultimate expression of God's love in this world- the life of God's only Son, Jesus. As John says in his gospel, "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil and the light exposed them for what they were." We are finally left with this chilling sentence in Luke which to my mind is one of the most terrifying statements ever written: "So Pilate gave sentence that their demand should be granted. He reluctantly released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, whom they asked for; but JESUS he delivered up to their will."

All four gospels document this event because this scene between Barabbas and Christ is more than just part of the Passion record, it is also a SYMBOL and a PARABLE. Without exception- minister and laity, Baptist and Roman Catholic, Elder and Deacon- we TOO, stand in SIMILAR judgment before our God. As the Apostle Paul tells us, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that everyone may receive the things done in his body, according to that he or she hath done, whether it be good or bad." And if we truly know our hearts, we know we have no reason to boast before God but rather to feel ASHAMED: for the lack of love in our lives, for the insensitivity towards our spouses or our neighbors, for the gossip and back-biting that ruins reputations, for the selfishness and self-aggrandizement that makes us feel superior to others, for the white lies we tell which blossom into great lies, for the temptations we continually give in to which dishonor our minds and our bodies, for the manner in which we make ourselves invisible when somebody comes to us for help, for mood swings which make us happy one second and sullen or depressed or ill-tempered the next. The fact is that ALL of US are on trial from one moment to the next, from the time we get up in the morning till the time we go to bed; each of US stands before God no better nor acceptable than Barabbas was when he stood before that court 2000 years ago.

I can attest that even we Presbyterians are not exempt from the charge. Case in point: Twenty-five years ago, the presbytery I was then a part of asked me to serve on an administrative commission to investigate some serious charges that had been leveled against another minister in the presbytery by one of his church members. Our work would require months of investigation including putting the pastor on administrative leave, speaking to all the parties involved,

disbanding session, and assuming all the day-to-day responsibilities of the church ourselves. After about nine months of this, we were all satisfied that the complaint was groundless and that we should therefore restore the minister to his previous position.

But the Executive Presbyter at the time, who had agreed there was NO BASIS to any of the charges, insisted that we needed to fire him REGARDLESS and find new leadership for the church, that the minister's credibility would be tainted from there on in. The truth was that she was more concerned about how she and the presbytery would look than what the right thing to do was in this instance. Well the committee grew strangely silent until I opened my mouth. I said, "You tell me how after nine months of investigation and having declared the man innocent of any charges, we can in good conscience fire him, even though he's been an excellent minister with no previous problems in this presbytery for more than twenty-five years. Wouldn't we then be no better than Pontius Pilate who declared Jesus to be innocent but then sent him out to be executed ANYWAY?" With that, the rest of the committee agreed with ME instead of the EP, who I assure you wasn't too pleased with me after that. Yes, the same spirit that motivated Annas and Caiaphas, Herod and Pilate is alive and well in 2021 and it infects EVERYONE of us; NO ONE is immune from it!

Barabbas thus represents the human condition. Strip away the dirty rags on his body, take away the death sentence that hangs over his head, and he becomes a picture of you and me. Each one of us is a Barabbas- a rebel, a thief, a murderer or sorts. For Barabbas rebelled, not only against the Imperial power of Rome that ruled with authoritarian measure over Judea, he rebelled even more against a GREATER power- the heart and mind and will of God. He thought that by terrorism he could overthrow the power of Rome and establish his own kingdom in its place. But where violence might bring about an external change, a change in the political structure of a nation, it must ultimately fail unless there is first a MORAL AND SPIRITUAL revolution that begins inwardly, in the human heart. Such a revolution cannot be brought about by fear or force, but by faith and love and principles of justice. Those are the ONLY principles that God's kingdom can ever be erected upon, and any other revolution must be seen as demonic, and in opposition to the purpose and plan of God.

Of course, we might take great offense at the suggestion we have anything in common with this criminal. We protest, "I'm no Barabbas! He was a rebel, a thief, a murderer. I am NONE of these. I'm respectable. I have a fine job and a good family. I'm a member of the Lions Club and an elder in my church." But then so were the priests and scribes that falsely turned Jesus over to the authorities- they TOO held prestigious positions in their churches. But they used all their respectability, their prestige, and their influence to HIDE their evil hearts and to have Jesus FALSELY arrested. Then they incited the crowds to call for his death. If they could fall from such great heights, what makes US think that our position is any more secure than THEIRS was? Jesus said whosoever lusts after another man's wife has committed adultery in his heart; whosoever desires another person's property has as much as stolen it; whosoever hates another individual has committed murder in his heart! I say to you this morning that EVERYONE of us has committed these acts in our thoughts and in our hearts, and as such, prove to ourselves that each one of us is Barabbas. Can anyone here honestly deny it!

If that is the case, are we, too, a people without hope as Barabbas was? If the evidence of our guilt is overwhelming, undeniable, and incontrovertible, is it all over for US as it was for that rebel and murderer, or can we yet still HOPE- HOPE in freedom, HOPE in a new life, HOPE in a fresh start, HOPE to make amends, HOPE to appreciate everything we once held contemptible. Well if the bad news is that ALL of us are Barabbas with the same sins that stained his heart, no less staining OUR hearts AS WELL, then hear now the GOOD! There can be no greater news to our ears than that we are all Barabbas this morning, for if we are INDEED that hard and vicious criminal, the son of a rabbi and child of the synagogue, then we are NO LESS Barabbas, the forgiven offender and pardoned lawbreaker. As unjust and contemptible as the whole proceedings were--an innocent man suffering while a guilty murderer is turned loose--it is a scene that means all the difference in the world for US. For IF WE ARE BARABBAS, then we TOO hear the pronouncement, "You are now free!" IF WE ARE BARABBAS, then as his chains and restraints are removed, so TOO are our OWN. IF WE ARE BARABBAS, then, as all charges are dropped, so TOO is our status unconditionally changed- for Jesus has been exchanged for us; the just one becomes the criminal and criminal is now made just. The innocent man is condemned bearing the murderer's guilt, while the murderer is treated as though he were spotless and unstained. Barabbas was now liberated to go wherever he wanted and no one may harm him or exact vengeance. He was surprisingly and unexpectedly liberated to breathe and smell the fresh air of freedom from that day forward until the day he died.

Friends, this is the greatest news we can ever hear- that we TOO are Barabbas. If you cannot see yourself as that man, as Barabbas the rebel, Barabbas the thief and murderer, Barabbas the sinner, you will NEVER know the joy of liberation he experienced that day! Think of the joy JOE LIGON experienced as he walked out into that fresh air and sun light a free man for the first time in 68 years, a man who refused to leave those prison walls unless he was made UTTERLY AND COMPLETELY free, then know that that same complete and perfect freedom has been extended to you and to me AS WELL. And as he looked out over a city he inhabited but had not really seen in seven decades and discovered how different everything now looked to him, how everything had become NEW AND EXCITING, imagine how different the world now looks to US when WE see the same world WE have inhabited OUR entire lives but with an ENTIRELY NEW SET OF LENSES!

Friends, this is the Good News of the Gospel, that we now know there is no sin great enough to ever separate us from the love and presence of our God, that we have been pardoned and declared completely innocent by JEHOVAH HIMSELF, and thus are able to experience TRUE freedom for the first time in OUR lives. Like "Azazel"--that goat that was allowed to wander through the fields and forests of Israel and no one could shoot it--and like Barabbas--who was free to enjoy the fresh air and sunlight without fear of capture as long as he lived--we TOO have been declared free- free to live in God's presence and experience his joy throughout the remainder of our lives well into eternity. Herein is God's love revealed to us, that Jesus--the innocent one--didn't have to die but he did ANY WAY. As St. Paul explained to his brothers and sisters in Corinth, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" and as a consequence, we TOO have been declared innocent and released from death row; like Barabbas, we TOO are "ready to live now," to discover each day filled with a new-found joy and

gratitude to God for providing us with what we did not deserve nor could ever earn for ourselves. It is through Christ alone and his love that you and I have come to know REAL freedom, ETERNAL freedom, a liberation that NO ONE can ever take from us. Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, we cannot claim to be more holy or righteous than anyone else, not even Barabbas. Like him, we too know what it is to lust or hate or steal or be rebellious. But like him, we ALSO know what it is to receive pardon at your hands, to be forgiven for things that have hurt you deeply. Help us to live each day in the fullness of our new-found freedom and may we experience a fresh and ever-growing love of Christ for this gift HE ALONE made possible. In his name we pray. Amen.*