



From the Pulpit: March 26, 2023

Fifth Sunday in Lent—Spring Break

Squire Prince

Matthew 27:11–26

The Unnamed, XI: Pilate's Wife

During the seasons of Epiphany and Lent, Rev. Bill and Rev. Christine have been preaching a sermon series on those characters from our scriptural storybook that have gone through the years of Christendom without a name. You recognize who I'm talking about when I mention King David, Moses, King Solomon, Abraham, John the Baptist, even Balaam is known for his talking donkey in the book of Numbers. But yet there are so many whose names go unsaid, identities left unearthened, and who's stories seemingly left unclaimed. We've been exploring and unearthening these stories and identities. Today we will seek the voice of God in this next unnamed personality. This pericope comes from the Gospel of Matthew, entering into the climax of the passion story.

Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But

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they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" So he released Barabbas for them, and after flogging Jesus he handed him over to be crucified.

When it came to what could be seen as my debut sermon for Kenilworth Union, I felt a bit of weariness for the approach and content of this sermon. When preaching against such blessed and anointed theologians and preachers like Bill, Katie, and Christine, in the shadow of the anointing of such ministerial pioneers like Gill Bowen, you can't help but feel a bit of

trepidation. One might say, fear covers your backside, and anxiety covers your front. A spirit of fear creeps into every thought, revelation, and moment of judgment, and as you type this sermon after months of antagonizing angst and excitement, you question every word, punctuation, and clause. Causing you to overlook every word choice, secretly looking for more eloquent sounding synonyms.

Fear has a way of captivating us and enslaving our actions to the point where we don't even recognize ourselves. Fear likes to present itself in terrifying and daunting shapes and forms of uncertainties and what if's that drive us mad, questioning next steps, motives, and forming escape plans. Fear is what arrests many of the characters in this passion play. Fear drives the disciples out of the garden for the safety of their own lives. Like Scooby-Doo after turning to see yet another ghost, ghoul, or goblin, the disciples scurry away in a frenzy with one thing on their mind "we gotta get out of here."

Fear is even what arrests Pilate, this cruel and stubborn ruler. In John's Gospel we find Pilate saying "I find no case against him." But fear infiltrates this Roman ruler. But there was one, who in the face of fear, in the face of oppression, in the face of pure evil, spoke out. Here we find our unnamed saint for the day. Pilate's Wife.

The only verse in the canonical text given to her depicts her not directly, but a note, delivered by a messenger, or servant. While her husband paces back and forth, caught in a moral dilemma, weak in himself, young in his rule, efficient but cruel in his leadership, deceptive and stubborn, known for his quickness and severity of punishment. Pilate was known for his youth and short fuse. We get to know Pilate by several lines of text of questioning, but the love of his life, we get one indirect verse. The yin to his yang, and the toast to her butter. I want us to park ourselves for a second right in the middle of this marriage. Because the juxtaposition of these two in this moment is critical for us.

Pilate is faced with a dilemma. Ann Wroe in her book *Pontius Pilate* writes "If Jesus was just, and Pilate condemned him, he would offend the gods and the reputation of Rome. Yet if he did not give the crowd what it wanted, things might get out of hand and he might be reported to Tiberius and lose his job of course." (Wroe, 257)

Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent of any possible charges that remotely deserve death. Pilate can see it in his countenance. In his answers. It says Pilate "wondered greatly." He asks "What evil has he done." Pilate knows the answer to his own question. So what stands in the way of him releasing Jesus? The religious leaders who have brought Jesus before him. The members of the Sanhedrin and the Elders who have had enough of the rogue preacher. They go as far as to question Pilate's loyalty to Caesar, to duty, to Rome. The fear of losing his own station, his status, his place, of being dethroned from his place in the world takes place over his moral backbone. He overlooks the innocence of the accused in place of his seat in society.

But yet we have a voice that cries out in the wilderness of despair and fear. A voice that speaks out against the misuse of justice and power. A voice that speaks with compassion,

love, and mercy. Pilate's wife, stored away in some room, sends a note to her husband. Let's not glaze over the importance of her presence. It would be important to remember that this is all happening around the time of Passover, and it was customary for the governors to take up residences in their provinces of governance during these high holy times in an attempt to squash any type of revolt or rebellion against Roman power. Typically wives weren't even allowed because their presence was seen to weaken the look of Roman authority on patrol. But the love and connection between her and her ancient Napoleon place her in the center of this ecclesiastical duel.

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Some have speculated that she was actually interested in Judaism and was curious about Jesus of whom she heard stories of. Some have suggested that she had seen him on the road at one of his stops on his international sermon crusade. She had heard about Jesus, and she became intrigued.

In the midst of this malaise of chaos, guards entering in and out, Jesus being dragged from Pilate, to Herod, and back to Pilate, here is Pilate's wife, and she awakes from a dream. In a post-haste she has a messenger grab her a ballpoint pen and a scratch sheet of paper, and she scribbles the note "have nothing to do with this man, for I have suffered a great deal over him because of a dream." What was the dream? Many people have tried to fantasize what the dream was.

Seventh Day Adventist theologian Ellen G. White speculates: "Pilate's wife was not a Jew, but as she looked upon Jesus in her dream, she had no doubt of his character or mission. She knew him to be the Prince of God. She saw him on trial in the judgment hall. She saw the hands tightly bound as the hands of a criminal. She saw Herod and his soldiers doing their dreadful work. She heard the priest and rulers, filled with envy and malice, madly accusing. She heard the words 'we have a law, and by our law he ought to die.'"

She saw Pilate give Jesus to the scourging, after he declared, "I find no fault in him." She heard the condemnation pronounced by Pilate and saw him give Christ up to his murderers. She saw the cross uplifted on Calvary. She saw the earth wrapped in darkness, and heard the mysterious cry, "it is finished." (*Desire of Ages*, White 732)

This is speculation, but what we can be certain is, the dream that she had left her with certainty of the innocence of Jesus, and any judgment other than Christ release to be injustice, and it bothered her to the core. At this moment, as her husband was being bent by the will of hypocritical and envious religious leaders of power, Pilate's wife stands for what is right, and holy. She stands up against a system of violence and tyranny. She stands up against a system of exclusion and power plays.

Pilate's wife in this moment channels the courage of Shiphrah and Puah from Exodus; the Hebrew midwives who faced off with Pharaoh by hiding the Hebrew baby boys instead of killing them, Rahab who faces off with Jericho patrol authority by housing two Hebrew spies before their invasion in the city of Canaan, and Esther who faced off against Haman, who was unrighteously hell bent on destroying her race because of his own pride.

In this moment, we see the wife of Pilate, in a moment of divine strength, courage, and beauty standing up against a system of oppression, cruelty, and suffering. And my question is, what if we became more like Pilate's wife, instead of Pilate. What if the suffering of others bothered us so much to the core that it caused us to leave our station and speak out? What if the oppression and put down of God's beloved drove us to action? What if the pain and despair of God's creation drove us to be the hands and feet of Jesus and participate in the suffering, not as a surveyor and spectator, but as an agent of change? What if seeing the cries of help caused to speak out, act out, and move out?

Too often, we are so comfortable in our spaces, places, and races that we turn blind eyes to our siblings of humanity who are crying out for relief. We turn our heads to paradise while many, purposely outside of our gaze, are stomped upon by systems of oppression, violence, and hate. We focus on our bubbles of comfort and safety, while many just blocks away from us starve, giving up whatever items they can to have just one more meal, and a moment of warmth. How often are we captivated in fear by how others feel about us? Fear about losing friends or losing social status?

So much so that we don't speak out when others use their power or influence for wrong. We silence ourselves and allow ourselves to be a part of the problem because "that's not our fight" or to save face and space. Living like Pilate, captivated by the fear of our circumstance, instead of speaking out in love as Christ has called us to by righteously upturning tables of injustice and manipulation. What if we took upon ourselves truly the yoke of Jesus that is light and easy, but drives us not away from the sufferer, but towards the

sufferer, not in pity, but in loving compassion to say "I'm with you, I'm here beloved"? We are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus, and we are called to look at ourselves and ask yourself, am I doing all I can to....

"Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute." (Psalm 82:3)

"Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, and please the widow's cause." (Isaiah 1:17)

"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

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Living a Galatians 6:2 life that "bears the burdens of others", putting the cares of another before our own. Loving God with all of our being and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Karl Barth, a notable 20th century theologian, commented about his entrance into the social-democratic party by saying, "it was no longer possible for me personally to remain suspended in the clouds above the present evil world but rather it had to be demonstrated here and now that faith in the greatest does not exclude but rather includes within it work and suffering in the realm of the imperfect". The faith that manifests within us, the love that is poured into us drives us to participate in this broken realm with those who suffer and cry out for relief. We are pulled, by love, to bring relief, comfort, and peace. We are, by God's grace, inclined to live with, love on, and lavish upon our neighbors' great joy, assistance, and support.

Love is an action word. The love of Christ that lies within you, awakes a passion, a fire, and a tenderness for those of God's beloved who have been put down, stamped on, and rolled over. The responsibility of the believer is their "response" ability. Our job is to allow the Holy Spirit to live within us, to drive us to action when we come across suffering and pain, driving us to correct misuse of power and to retain justice.

I know of another great dream that also was a cosmic disturbance in which the tides of social change hinged. This dream was based on the ideas of equity and community. This dream was based on unity and togetherness. A dream based on the love of Christ being shared. A dream based on the unity of shared humanity instead of the exclusion of indifference and division.

Reinhold Niebuhr tells us "justice is love in realizable action". What dream has the Holy Spirit put on your heart today? For what cause has the Holy Spirit called you to speak out? How are you being called to love someone in a new way? How are you called to speak out in a world changing way? How are you called to use your privilege and power to ease the burden and pains of your neighbor? Who's voice can you listen to today, so that you can love across lines of division and tension?

How are you called to the hands and feet of Jesus? How are you called to be a Pilate's Wife in a world full of Pilates?

2nd Timothy 1:7 *For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.*

By the way, Christendom has given her a name. The Apocryphal writers referred to her as Claudia Procula.

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—The Prayers of the People— The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Great God of Glory and Grace, in the strong name of Jesus hear our prayers of praise and petition.

We give thanks for the gift of this unique new day, which has never been and will never be again. Help us to put it to good use in your service. May we find on this seventh day: recreation for the labors of the coming week, the vivid nearness of your presence, communion with our companions along the way into Christ.

We give thanks for the subtlest hints of spring, even if they are a bit subtle for our impatient tastes. For the lengthening day, the sharper light, the warmer sun, the greener earth, the fragile flowers of early spring, the bracing breeze off the lake, the reliable rhythms of the flying stars and worlds, we give you thanks.

With our thanksgivings, we bring our petitions.

For our nation, that peace and unity might prevail in a divisive day. That understanding and collegiality might wax as bitterness and enmity wane. That opposing political parties might work together and begin to realize that you need the other side to do anything worth doing, that abusive rhetoric might fade as smarter, kinder statesmanship takes its place.

For our neighbors in need of the full measure of your healing grace. For those bereft of those they've loved and lost. For the heartbroken who can sing only sad songs in a land where there is always one too few. For the lonely, the confused, the misunderstood. For those known better to you than to us, In the name of Jesus, who taught to pray: Our Father...Amen.