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Series: Power of Moments

Title: Power on Trial

Text(s): Matt 26:50,56; Jn 11:45-48, 53; Matt 21:9; Jn 12:19; Matt 26:14-15, 26:59-64; Lk 23:2, 5, 13-16, 18-25, 39-44, 47-48; 2 Cor 5:21

A few weeks ago, I went to the mailbox when I got home from work and as I was thumbing through the mail, I saw a card with bold letters that read "**JURY SUMMONS**." Two immediate thoughts came to my mind - "Oh no, I don't have time for this!" and immediately following, "Wait, this could be really cool!" After all, most of my favorite shows have been in a court room!

When I arrived on my assigned date, we were all escorted into the courtroom as we learned that we would be selected to sit on a jury where we would hear the case for a first-degree felony charge. As we settled into the morning, both the prosecution and the defense got up and made their case. As they were doing so, I learned something I hadn't really thought about - the defense attorney made it clear that it is the responsibility of the prosecution to prove, beyond reasonable doubt, that this person is guilty. If you think about it, that is a pretty tall order - to prove beyond reasonable doubt that the person on trial is guilty. It is the responsibility of the defense to sow seeds of doubt in the minds of the jury.

I am sharing this because this morning we have all been invited to sit in on the most powerful trial that has ever been tried in court; a trial that has transformed all of human history.

You may remember from a couple of weeks ago, Jesus and His disciples are in the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus prepares for what is ahead. Moments later, a mob of soldiers led by Judas entered the Garden and Matthew 26:50 says, "*They came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him.*" V. 56 says just after His arrest, "*All the disciples left him and fled.*"

From the Garden, Jesus is going to stand trial before three groups of people. He is going to stand trial before the Jerusalem Council. He will stand trial before the Roman government, and He will stand trial before crowds gathered in Jerusalem.

Let's stop right here and make sure we know all the facts. Why is it that Jesus has been arrested at this point?

The moment when Jesus began His earthly ministry, He was on the radar of the Jewish leaders. Jesus just didn't fit in their tiny little box. He performed miracles they had never seen

before. He seemed to teach as one who had divine authority, yet was a carpenter. There were times in His teaching that seemed to suggest He was the Messiah. Of course, it didn't help that He had a great following who seemed to believe He really was the Jewish Messiah, all of which angered the Jewish leaders.

Because they didn't understand Jesus nor could they control Him or those following Him, they were left with one conclusion – He must die. Just after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, John writes in 11:45, *“Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, ‘What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.’”* Fearful of what they didn't understand and of what they may lose, *“So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.”* (v. 53)

Now, keep that in mind as we build up to the moment that Jesus mounts the back of a donkey and rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Crowds gathered to receive Him and as He entered Jerusalem. The people celebrated Him as they laid their cloaks on the ground paving His way into the city. They waved palm branches in the air as Matthew records the crowds calling out, *“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”* (Matthew 21:9) Matthew says as Jesus came into Jerusalem, the “whole crowd” was stirred up. It was like an earthquake was set off in the city.

As the Pharisees hear the roar of the crowd, John says they said to one another, *“Look, the world has gone after him.”* (John 12:19) This is a pretty dramatic phrase – but captures the weight of the moment. To the Pharisees, it seemed as though the entire cosmos was celebrating the arrival of this man whom they believed to be a false prophet. Imagine their anger – the whole cosmos is celebrating their enemy.

On top of that, Jesus goes straight to the Temple, referring to it as His house and the Pharisees as ones who have desecrated it. He condemned the very ones who were the leaders of Israel, and in Matthew 23 Jesus calls them hypocrites, blind guides, whitewashed tombs, and wicked servants.

Can you feel the anger boiling? Running out of time and feeling the weight of public embarrassment, the Pharisees gathered in a room only to hear a knock on the door. As they opened it, they are greeted by one of Jesus' own, Judas. Matthew records this moment in 26:14, *“Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, ‘What will you give me if I deliver Jesus over to you?’ And they paid him thirty pieces of silver.”*

You can probably feel their relief - finally, we have Him. Up to this point, it seemed as though Jesus had put them on trial, now the tables have turned as they enter the Garden, arrest Jesus, and take Him to stand trial before the chief priests.

As all of this is happening, the chief priests are working to gather witnesses against Jesus. Matthew writes in 26:59, *"Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward."* As Jesus stands silently before him, two people came forward and said (v. 61), *"This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and rebuild it in three days.'" Frustrated by His lack of response, Caiaphas questions Jesus, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."* Refusing to answer his question, Jesus tells him in response, *"You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

Filled with rage, Caiaphas throws a fit and yells out, *"He has uttered blasphemy! What further witnesses to we need?"* Just so we are on the same page, "blasphemy" is to make oneself equal with God. As a result, based on what they have heard, the council rules against Jesus and sentences Him to death.

Because of their anger and wanting to put an end to the Jesus Movement, let's call it, they wanted a public execution of Jesus. So, the chief priests took Jesus to Pilate to stand trial. However, knowing that Pilate would care nothing about blasphemy against their religious code, they twist the story to make Jesus out to be the leader of an insurrection. Luke records this in 23:2, *"And they began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.'" In other words, they are saying that Jesus is telling them to not pay taxes to Caesar and revolt against the Roman government thinking that will get him upset enough to kill Him. When they sense he is not going to go their way, they desperately say, "But he stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place (Luke 23:5)."*

As a result, Pilate sends Him to Herod. Despite the fact that Herod and his soldiers treat Jesus with contempt, beating and mocking Him, they seem to find no guilt in Him. In fact, Herod sends Him back to Pilate.

Luke records in 23:13, *"Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him.'"*

Fearing Pilate would do as he said, the chief priests began to lead the crowds in a chant, *"Crucify Him, crucify Him."* As the crowds got louder and louder, fearing a revolt, despite his

belief that Jesus was innocent, Pilate gave the people what they wanted; he released Barabbas, a murderer and insurrectionist, and sent Jesus to be crucified.

Feel the weight of this moment in Luke 23:18, *“But they all cried out together, ‘Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas’ – a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, but they kept shouting, ‘Crucify him, crucify him!’ A third time he said to them, ‘Why? What evil has he done? I have found no guilt in him deserving of death. But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. Pilate released the man who has been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.”*

At that moment, Jesus was taken and crucified. In the first century, the most shameful way to die was by crucifixion. In fact, it was reserved only for the lowest of the low – slaves, rebels, foreigners, and violent criminals. Because of their view of crucifixion, Roman citizens were almost never crucified; it was considered too disgraceful – it was public humiliation, torture, and a deterrent. To the Jews, the Torah didn’t mention anything about crucifixion, but being “hanged on a tree” was a sign of being cursed by God.

On the cross, Jesus experienced the most humiliating and painful death thought humanly possible. To the Jews, as sign not only of public humiliation but also as one who was cursed by God.

So, let’s talk about something interesting – while the Jews found Him guilty of these crimes, the evidence suggests otherwise. We know from Matthew 26 that the Jews had no evidence that Jesus did the things they brought against Him. And, most who heard the case ruled in favor of innocence. In Luke 23, three different groups ruled Jesus as innocent of the crimes charged against Him. You have already heard of Pilate and Herod’s ruling - both found Him innocent. But there were two other instances where groups of people recognized His innocence. In v. 39, hanging between two criminals, *“One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”*

Shortly thereafter, v. 44 says, *“It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.”* Matthew records that, in this moment, the earth shook, thunder gasped, and many miracles began to happen as Jesus breathed His last on the cross. In this moment, Luke writes, *“Now when the Centurion and those standing with him saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, ‘Certainly this man was innocent!’ And all the crowds that had assembled for the spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts.”* They left “beating

their breasts” because they, too, realized they had just gathered for entertainment to watch a man be killed whom they now realize to be the innocent Son of God.

So, if Jesus was really innocent, how then did God, who is the faithful and just judge, allow an innocent man be wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death for crimes He didn’t commit?

Paul answers this question in 2 Corinthians 5:21, *“For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

While the Pharisees thought they were doing God a favor, on this Passover eve, God used their wickedness as a tool to sacrifice the final and perfect Passover Lamb. When sinful humanity deserved death, God sacrificed His perfect son, that for all who would receive Him as their substitute would be covered by His death – forgiven by God, made right with Him, and set free from sin and shame. Because of the sacrifice of Jesus, God no longer looks at His children as sinners, but as sons and daughters saved by grace dressed in the perfection of Jesus.

During my brief time as a juror before I was dismissed, I couldn’t help but wonder, *“Who in the world would choose to represent the kind of person accused the kind of crimes that were being presented?”* Then, as the attorney representing the defendant was giving his presentation, he mentioned at one time he was a prosecutor. I thought, *“I wonder why he is now a defense attorney?”* So, I looked him up. Turns out he was the prosecutor of a first-degree felony case where the defendant was charged and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. Turns out, a few years later he was proven innocent and wrongly convicted. As you can imagine, all those involved were impacted – for better or worse, their lives were changed.

Here is the point – the cross stands today as a reminder that one was wrongfully sentenced to death, so that the guilty may go free. It is a reminder that each day we must choose to live in light of the cross recognizing that there we were purchased and set free from our sin, shame, and guilt, never to return. Today, the cross stands as a faithful symbol of transformation.