

Tried
By Jason Huff
Psalm 22:1-11, 1 Peter 3:8-17, Luke 22:63-23:12

Today's third Scripture reading comes from Luke 22:63-23:12. Listen now to God's Word. "The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him. They blindfolded him and demanded, "Prophecy! Who hit you?" And they said many other insulting things to him. At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them. "If you are the Christ," they said, "tell us." Jesus answered, "If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God." They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?" He replied, "You are right in saying I am." Then they said, "Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips." Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king." So Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man." But they insisted, "He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here." On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. That day Herod and Pilate became friends – before this they had been enemies."

This week saw the resignation of Detroit native Helen Thomas, the 89-year-old who covered the White House for nearly 50 years. She was the only member of the White House Press Corps to have a personal seat in the White House Briefing Room. She is so well known that when USA Today interviewed Fidel Castro about the difference between democracy in Cuba and democracy in the United States, he answered, "I don't have to answer questions from Helen Thomas." What's fascinating to me is that as time passed, her questions often became more about her own politics than the issue at hand. I studied journalism in college, and she broke the once cardinal rule – keep your bias out. It's an ideal, not a reality; nobody can be bias-free. But we do need to ask: does our bias say more about us than we think? Do the questions we ask about life and God need answers, or do those questions actually reveal our own hearts?

We run into this situation at the trial of Jesus. Today we're going to study three points in the trial that are surprisingly important for us even now. The first one is the questioning of Jesus. Now in Luke's gospel, Jesus has consistently used one title for Himself: the Son of Man. The Son of Man was a title God gave to prophets like Ezekiel and Daniel. There was exactly one prophecy in the Old Testament concerning the Son of Man found in Daniel 7:13, who is given an everlasting kingdom by God the Father and who is Himself worshipped.

But in Luke, Jesus never calls Himself “Christ.” Peter calls Him Christ and Jesus acknowledges it, but He also warned His disciples not to tell others. He wanted them to realize it for themselves. In Jesus’ time, there were a lot of disturbed people claiming to be the Christ. Jesus didn’t want people to follow Him because of a title; He wanted them to listen to His words and see His actions and experience the miracles and realize it for themselves.

Jesus also never called Himself the Son of God in Luke. Jews never thought that God had a literal son; God’s son in a metaphorical sense was the nation of Israel. You won’t find the phrase “Son of God” in the Old Testament. It was in the 400 years between the Old and the New Testaments that we see the term “Son of God” used to refer to the coming messiah who would rescue Israel. Jesus refers to God as His Father and Himself as the Son a total of once in Luke’s gospel. In fact, the only times He’s called the “Son of God” before this in Luke is by demons wanting to expose Jesus before the right time. Again, while it was true, Jesus desired people to discover that He was the Son of God, not simply to be told.

When the high priest and the other religious leaders start asking questions of Jesus, they want Jesus to admit to something, anything, they can use against Him. They want Him to say to them that He is the messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, so they can charge Him with blasphemy. But this is precisely what He hasn’t done throughout His ministry! He’s never used those words in a crowd, and barely even with the disciples. Jesus’ responses are far more guarded in the Greek text than they appear in our translation. When Jesus responds to the question, “Are you then the Son of God?”, His literal reply is, “You all are saying that I am.” It’s not so clear cut. Now He is implying “yes!”

But there’s a deeper implication at work here. Those who question Him are the ones actually on trial. *They* are the ones who use the terms “Christ” and “Son of God.” *They know the truth.* Jesus clearly has identified Himself with the Son of Man in Daniel. He’s done miracles, healed the sick, and taught the Law in such a way that nobody has been able to correct Him. *They know who He is.* But they hate Him because He threatens their power. He promises the Kingdom of God to prostitutes and thieves when they turn from sin and follow Him! Their questions betray their bias: they know the truth, but they want to twist it to get rid of Jesus.

Pilate too betrays himself by his questions. Now Pilate was not a happy man. To Rome, Israel was a backwater filled with religious zealots. Pilate hated his assignment as the Roman prefect, and in turn he completely disrespected Jewish culture, tradition, and religion. Pilate could care less about the charge that Jesus is subverting their nation. The lie that Jesus forbid paying taxes to Rome is really the only thing Pilate would have to investigate.

At this point, Jesus has been beaten. He is a mess. When Pilate asks Jesus if He is a king, it’s hard to tell if he’s being sarcastic or genuine. But Jesus’ answer is the same as before – “you say so.” The “yes” is implied, but the question is back on the asker. What does Pilate really think? He says, “I see no basis for a charge.” Yet he sends Jesus over to Herod to cover himself. Something about Jesus unnerves him. Somehow, he knows that this battered and bruised peasant really is the king. Once again, the one on trial is the one asking the questions.

I want to take a moment and make clear what Scripture is saying to us here. God wants us to ask questions of Him. Jesus came as a teacher. He wants us to explore our relationship with Him with all our hearts and all our minds. But our questions expose our own prejudices, our own expectations, even our own sins. It's one thing to ask why we must suffer; David and Job and countless other biblical figures did so. But it's something else to call God unjust or unloving because of suffering. Many people have convinced themselves that suffering proves there is no god – or if there is, that god is unfair and unjust and unworthy of respect. But that reveals more about us than it does about God. If we know best how the world should be, we have made ourselves into God, and we have decided to judge the true God of the universe.

Some consider Jesus a good moral teacher and the Bible a guide to living good lives that we can accept piecemeal rather than a standard by which we are measured. But Jesus' words do not give us that option. Jesus taught more about Himself than He did about morality. If we call Jesus a moralist but not Savior and Lord, then we judge Him. But as we do it, we are the ones on trial. Our hearts and thoughts are exposed when we deny the truth of Scripture.

If we don't want to be the ones on trial, if we don't want to find ourselves judged by our own judgments, there is one solution at the very center of the gospel: believe. Trust that Jesus told the truth; trust that Scripture is God's Word given to us. Still ask honest questions...we're starting our Talkback sessions after church this week so you can get answers that help you grow in your love of God. But at the core, believe. The religious leaders, Pilate, Herod – they had proof. Their questions and responses betrayed their knowledge of the truth. Yet their love of power and authority, their love of sin, kept them from belief, and that makes all the difference.

The second striking thing to me is that Jesus is found innocent. Neither Pilate nor Herod condemns him. They can't find anything that Jesus has done wrong or disprove any statement he has made. These were not men of noble character; Pilate was known for his brutality, and Herod had John the Baptist arrested (and eventually killed) for calling him out for adultery with his brother's wife. They didn't respect the law; what did they care if they called an innocent man guilty? Now Pilate may have found Jesus innocent to annoy the Jewish leaders; that would have been like him. But as the Jewish ruling authority over Galilee, Herod had nothing to lose by making friends with Jerusalem's religious elite. He mocks and curses Jesus, sending Him away in a kingly robe as an insult, but he cannot find Jesus guilty. In the moment when it would have been politically expedient for both Herod and Pilate to do so, they can't.

This speaks to Jesus' very nature. The central charge of the Jewish authorities was blasphemy, that Jesus had declared Himself equal to God. The other charges were elaborations for Pilate's sake. But not only can they not prove that Jesus endangers Rome, they can't prove that He blasphemed God. They can't disprove the miracles. They can't find Him guilty of any sin. The outcry grows louder only because the evidence all points to the truth...Jesus is innocent of blasphemy because He is, in fact, the messiah. Jesus' innocence goes beyond just character. He is *the* innocent one. It changes everything around Him. By Jewish law, touching unclean things people made you unclean. But when Jesus touched something unclean – a dead man or a leper – the unclean became clean! Jesus hung around with the undesirables in society, those who were guilty of significant sins, yet He was not brought down by them. Instead, He showed them a new way, a new life, and raised them up. His innocence can be mocked, but not denied.

But what in the world does this have to do with us? It's this: when we give our lives over to Christ, when we let Him wash us clean in His blood shed on Calvary, we are declared righteous. We are declared innocent. And innocence is what allows us to be a witness in the unfriendly, un-Christian, un-spiritual parts of life and show that God is there. Some faith traditions say we should stay far away from anything that might be considered worldly. Other faith traditions accept culture just as it is. But the Christian tradition's call throughout history has been to transform culture. We engage it, critique it, and use it to bring others to Christ without letting ourselves be defiled by it.

How might this work? I recently read about a church that set up a tent out at the Burning Man festival giving out water just to start up conversations and let people know about the love of God. Now if you want any prime example of a place that is dedicated to New Age thought and debauchery and other stuff contrary to the Bible, the Burning Man festival is it. And yet that tent was voted by attendees as the place with the "best karma" – not exactly a Christian concept, but they knew that these people cared about them enough to sit out in the middle of nowhere and give them water just because they loved Jesus.

Maybe ministering to a bunch of neo-pagans out in the desert isn't what you're called to do. But we need not be afraid of the stranger in our midst. We can reach out. God calls us to do it even in the oddest places. It's because in our salvation, we share in that innocence of Jesus, and through the Holy Spirit, an otherwise secular encounter in a movie theatre lobby or a checkout line or the beauty shop can become a holy moment.

The last fascinating thing about the trial is Jesus' silence in front of Herod. He talks to the religious leaders; He talks to Pilate. But with Herod, He says nothing. At first, we might think that this is a show of disrespect or arrogance, that Jesus won't answer Herod because it's beneath Him, but I don't believe that's the case. Jesus' silence is the *last* thing we might expect. Here's why: if anybody fits the description of sinner, it's Herod. He's the king of Israel, but he's an unrepentant adulterer and murderer. Not only that, but the murder was of John the Baptist, a genuine prophet – and Jesus' cousin. Jesus had every reason to be furious with Herod. If the religious leaders corrupted Israel through false piety, how much more so Herod!

Luke's Greek readers have been waiting for this moment...time for the philosophical showdown. Socrates and other noble Greek philosophers explaining their beliefs in front of their greatest enemies at trial. Herod is full of questions, and he's wanted to meet Jesus for some time. He'd love to see a miracle. Now is the time for a good old-fashioned tongue-lashing! And yet, Jesus does nothing. He doesn't berate Herod, He doesn't explain or defend Himself. He stands there and takes abuse. The Greek audience would have been flabbergasted. Why isn't the messiah, the great teacher/prophet, rebuking his accusers?

There are a few reasons I see that Jesus remains silent. One is simple: His destiny is to be crucified for the sins of the world. He is ready for it, and remaining silent angers Herod so that he doesn't set Jesus free. Second is the fulfillment of prophecy; Isaiah 53 talks about the savior going like a silent lamb to the slaughter. But third, and the one that I think resonates for us most today, is that He refuses to engage in the anger and hatred the world expects.

As we think about it, Jesus had every right to lay into Herod. Herod's sins were against Jesus' own family. Jesus could have dressed down Herod backwards and forwards and been totally justified. Yet He doesn't do that. He refuses to rage at this man who dresses Him up as a joke and personally ridicules Him. Herod is a man not to be berated for his sinfulness but pitied for his emptiness. Jesus' silence speaks to His own character. Even when it is justified, He will not lash out. He modeled what our reading from 1 Peter this morning said: "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing."

It would be easy for us to sum this up in the old proverb, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." But Jesus will later ask the Father to forgive those who crucify Him. He isn't seething on the inside; He is letting go of anger and letting the silence work. In our evening Bible study, we've talked about how some people have a difficult time forgiving the driver in front of them, let alone friends and family members that have hurt them. But we as Christians have a different way we should react. When we are angry and upset – even for very legitimate reasons – the Holy Spirit is there calling us to peace, to calm, to silence ourselves before the God who is the true judge. We'll talk more about justice and injustice next week. But for now, I want to think about this...when we silence ourselves when we are harmed, when we are wronged, instead of lashing out...when we do that, we allow God to be the judge. We do not put ourselves on trial with our responses. We allow God to handle it. That allows us to live with an inner calm that no outside circumstances can take away.

But even greater than that, silence is often the best response in a hurting world. Though there are times that we must speak out against sin – Jesus certainly did – we are not called to point out everyone else's flaws all the time. There is a time and a place to gently restore someone who has sinned, as Galatians 6:1 tells us. Our main purpose in life is also not to give advice. In the book of Job, when Job is suffering, the best thing his friends do in the entire book is simply to sit with him in silence as he grieves. We can explain the Bible and who Jesus is and talk theology for days, but sometimes the best ministry we can do is simply one of presence. Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still and know that I am God." Stillness and silence can lead us to peace in the midst of suffering, and it can keep us from words we may later regret.

The trial of Jesus is obviously jam-packed with things that make us think, that make us question. We've just scratched the surface. But in the midst of the most terrible day of His life, Jesus modeled the peace of the Holy Spirit and an innocent heart. Now we must decide...will we judge Jesus, as the authorities and Pilate and Herod did, or will we let Jesus be the judge of our hearts and wash them clean in His mercy and grace? Will we continue to follow in the ways of the world, or will we follow in the graceful steps of our savior, even as they lead to the cross?