

# “Barabbas”

John 18:33-40

Our Lenten Series this year is Witnesses to Christ – People of the Passion. This sermon directs our attention to Barabbas. He directs our attention to Jesus with the words, guilty, innocent and free.

April 26, 2018 Bill Cosby was found guilty. On September 25, 2018 he was sentenced to 10 years in prison. On June 30, 2021, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court overturned Cosby's conviction. On March 7th the Supreme Court refused to review a lower court decision that made Bill Cosby a free man.

That is the story of a guilty man set free. It is the story for Bill Cosby, Barabbas and you and me.

As we journey to and through Holy Week there's a trial going on and, as in any trial, there are three key ideas—innocent, guilty, and free.

Two times in John 18:28, the Gospel writer calls Pontius Pilate “the governor.” As Judea's governor, Pilate sits on the judgment seat. Pilate has supreme power or absolute dominion. In Judea, Pilate decides death-penalty cases. You live or die according to Pilate. Lent & Holy Week are all about the

One with absolute authority deciding whether we live or die.

Innocent—that's Jesus. Pilate tells the crowd, "I find no guilt in Him" (John 18:38). He does so again in John 19:4, 6. The rest of the New Testament makes clear that Jesus is absolutely and perfectly innocent. Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus was "without sin"; 2 Corinthians 5:21 says of Jesus, "[He] knew no sin." Innocent. That's Jesus.

Guilty—that's Barabbas. John 18:40 concludes with these words: "Now Barabbas was a robber [lestes]."

Lestes is the same word used in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30, where Jesus says, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers [lestais is the plural of lestes], who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead." Put John 18:40 and Luke 10:30 together, and what do we learn? We learn that a lestes is the worst kind of outlaw. A lestes won't just rob you. A lestes will rob you and kill you!

Mark 15:7 tells us more: "Among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas." Insurrectionists were anti-Roman rioters who belonged to a political group called Zealots. Zealots had one agenda: get the Romans out of Judea. And Zealots were ready to slit throats to make it happen.

Rome wouldn't condemn a small-time criminal to crucifixion. Barabbas was judged guilty and condemned to die. His only future was a cross, three nails, and an awful death.

Pilate poses this question: "Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" "They cried out, "Not this man, but Barabbas" (John 18:39-40).

Barabbas is a murderer, a leader of an insurrection, a rebel. There is no comparison. There is a man who deserves to be on death row and one Who is innocent.

Who do you prefer? Every time we sin we prefer someone or something to Jesus. Every time we sin it is a reason why Jesus was crucified.

Innocent—that's Jesus. Guilty—that's Barabbas. Guilty—that's us. What is it you deserve? We're all born "dead in the trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). We are blinded by the god of this world (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4) and hopeless (cf. Ephesians 2:12). Our finest deeds are unclean rags (cf. Isaiah 64:6). Just call us "Barabbas."

Paul says as much in Romans 7:24: "Wretched man that I am!" Not "I was a wretch." No. "I am a wretch!" Present tense! Right now, today, as a believer, truth be told—I'm still a wretch.

We have robbed God of His glory; we have been traitors against the government of heaven Since Scripture says, "He who hates his brother is a murderer" we are guilty of murder. What's His sentence? "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Innocent—that's Jesus. Guilty—that's Barabbas. Guilty—that's us.

The custom of delivering a prisoner upon the day of the Passover was intended as an act of grace on the part of the Roman authorities towards the Jews. The Jews may have seen it as a significant compliment to their Passover. Since on that day they were delivered out of the land of Egypt, it was fitting that some imprisoned person should be set free.

It comes down to this, Barabbas must die or Christ must die; you the sinner must perish or Christ, Immanuel must die. He dies that we may be delivered.

Listen! It's the Roman guard with the key! He unlocks the prison door, swings it open, and shouts, "Barabbas! You're free." Barabbas stumbles into the light of day—shackles gone, crimes pardoned. Free!

Free—that's Barabbas. Free—that's us. How so? Christ endured not just the Roman nails, the mockery, and the spear, but also God's justice. God doesn't overlook sin. God doesn't say, "Hey, no big deal." God is holy, righteous, and perfect. God must punish sin.

God placed all of our sin on Jesus. It's accurate to say, "Christ substituted Himself for the world." "Christ substituted Himself for me." My sins? They are many. God's mercy is more. I'm free!"

Psalms 146:7 says, "The Lord sets the prisoners free." Revelation 1:5 says, Jesus "has freed us from our sins by His blood." There are a million ways to become a prisoner. There is only one way to be free. Jesus.

The Savior's liberating power sets us free from the condemnation of our sin, free from the pain of our past, free from worry about our future. No one can take this freedom from us. No law can stop it. And no power on earth or hell can destroy it.

The Father treated Jesus like Barabbas so that He could treat Barabbas like Jesus. Jesus walks to the cross we deserve so that we might be free.

"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). Amen.