

Telling God's Story, Part II: Handle With Care  
The Rev. Amy Spagna  
Good Friday – March 29, 2024  
John 18:1-19:42

Everything about this week comes back to the story: the story of who Jesus was, and is; the story of how God chose to interact with humanity through him; and what humanity has, in turn, chosen to do with that gift. That this story continues to be told, and not only in communities like this one, is a witness not only to the compelling nature of its characters, but also its underlying power both to transform lives for the better and to inspire people to engage in acts of violence. Especially on this day, how we tell it matters, as do what pieces of it we choose to emphasize, and why.

Good Friday defies attempts to describe it with any sort of objectivity, and has since the very beginning. That is one of the many reasons why there are four different Gospel accounts describing it and hundreds translations of each besides. It's history, for sure. However, "history" in the ancient world did not meet the same academic or even journalistic standards as we expect it to nowadays. There's always the author's, or their patron's, agenda to consider, as well as their particular biases. Regardless of those issues, all four versions of this event share the same basic contours :

- Jesus knew that what he said and did would be deeply offensive, and deeply threatening to all the authorities in Jerusalem, not just the ones who ran the Jerusalem Temple.
- Those authorities gave in to their fears about "losing theirs," and the whims of the crowds, and did the only thing they thought was right in order to maintain the *status quo*: condemn him to a death the Romans reserved for slaves and other non-citizens, as a warning: mess with us at your own risk.

- Knowing this was going to be exactly what awaited him when he arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus kept teaching and debating anyway, and he paid the price.

There are subtle variations among the four accounts of this event. Mark's is probably the most matter-of-fact of all of them, and does the least amount of trying to explain everything as it goes along. Matthew takes Mark and builds on it by reminding readers that if they just go back and read their prophets, they'll understand what is happening here. Luke also builds on Mark, though his take is that the power of evil is what's operative, and it's evident if readers just look closely enough. And John, the last of the four to be recorded, takes it one step further. He takes what all the others did, adds some explanation to certain things, and then emphasizes how the Temple authorities were the ones who successfully manipulated the Romans into silencing Jesus for them.

Traditionally, John's version is the one that's used on this day. More so than the others, it attempts to point the finger of blame squarely at the Jewish people for basically eating one of their own. Given the long and sad history of violence that's been perpetrated against the Jewish people as a result, we have to tell the story with care. That starts with naming the subtle nuances that either don't come across in translation, or aren't obvious from the "surface" type of reading Christians have often done of this text over the centuries. The political reality around the Temple in Jesus' time was likely far more complicated than John tries to make it out to be in terms of who was in charge, who was "in", who was "out," and who was winning what theological arguments. That kind of subtlety doesn't always come across in translation. One way we are attempting

to clarify it with it is by using the phrase "the Judeans" used in place of "the Jews" that we're all quite used to hearing. It's the same phrase, *hoi Ioudaioi*, for both in Greek, but the former actually A) acknowledges that the situation was way more complicated than just pitting the Temple authorities against Jesus; and B) it attempts to avoid tarring an entire group of people for the actions of just a few.

What we've chosen to render as the "Judeans" refers specifically to the people in authority within the Temple establishment. They counted among their numbers the chief priests, the scribes, and anyone else those groups of highly educated elites managed to persuade to go along with them. The Romans are... the Romans. They were the powerful occupiers of Jerusalem who, while they were largely content to let conquered people go about their business as long as they paid their taxes, were not keen on those people challenging their authority. Jesus stands in direct contrast to them. He's not "from there". Nor does the authority he bears in any way resemble the earthly authority of either the Temple crowd or the Romans. As a rabbi from the backwater town of Nazareth, he's like a flatlander to them – so who was he to tell them that they needed to do better, much less convince the people that he was the guy to follow?

If we think of it that way – that the story is in part about how the powerful respond when the decidedly un-powerful speak God's truth to them – it shifts the focus away from the who and the what, and more toward the direction of why. All of the authority figures in the story, be they associated with the Temple group or the Roman occupiers, have one thing in common, and that's the fear of the crowds. All of them are afraid of what the man from Galilee is saying and doing, and how it could turn those crowds against them. The Temple group didn't want to give the Romans any incentives to do

more damage. The Romans, represented by the governor Pontius Pilate, did not want their superiors to punish him for being unable to keep the peace, and its tax money, flowing. So they had to have someone to blame if they wanted to ease their anxiety. So they made Jesus into their chief rival and scapegoat, and the rest is history.

Fr. Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest and teacher, writes about the practice of scapegoating:

*"Human nature, when seeking power, wants either to play the victim or to create victims of others. In fact, the second follows from the first. Once we start feeling sorry for ourselves, we will soon find someone else to blame, accuse, or attack—and with impunity! It settles the dust quickly, and takes away any immediate shame, guilt, or anxiety. In other words, it works—at least for a while.*

*"When we read today's news, we realize the pattern hasn't changed much in all of history. Hating, fearing, or diminishing someone else holds us together for some reason. Scapegoating, or the creating of victims, is in our hard wiring... The sequence, without being too clever, goes something like this: we compare, we copy, we compete, we conflict, we conspire, we condemn, and we crucify...*

*"It's hard for us religious people to hear, but the most persistent violence in human history has been 'sacralized violence - violence that we treated as sacred, but which was, in fact, not. Human beings have found a most effective way to legitimate their instinct toward fear and hatred. They imagine they are fearing and hating on behalf of something holy and noble: God, religion, truth, morality, their children, or love of country. It takes away all guilt, and one can even think of oneself as representing the moral high ground or being responsible*

*and prudent as a result. It never occurs to most people that they are becoming what they fear and hate...*

*"Jesus walked willingly into a human world defined—as it still is today—by violence and dependence on scapegoats.... He was murdered not because God wanted or needed his sacrificial death but because as humans, when the stakes are high, we determine who is in and who is out through violence and death."<sup>1</sup>*

No matter the editorializing that's done by the gospel writers themselves, and 2000 years of interpretation, the truth of today is this: driven by our fear, we will stop at nothing to get our way, no matter how much destruction we cause along the way, or whom it hurts. Today, that fear has killed someone. Cruelly. Publicly. Traumatically. And the only thing left to ask – and to be answered - is what exactly God is going to do about it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, "A Painful Pattern." <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-painful-pattern/> [Accessed March 26, 2024].