**HOW IS THIS “GOOD” FRIDAY? MT. 27:32-44, 45-56, JN. 18:1-14-19-38, FRI. MAR. 29/24.**

 We’re closing in on the end of the 40 day period when we set aside time for self-examination & preparation for our Lord’s death, resurrection & ascension for us. We do this because right after His own baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus went into the wilderness where He fasted for 40 days, preparing for what was to come. Whenever the # 40 appears in the Bible, it signals a time of transformation—the 40 days of the Great Flood, when Noah’s family ushered in a new humanity, or when the Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness before entering their new life in the Promised Land. Jesus was about to change our lives dramatically. Lord, may we be transformed during this, our time of preparation.

As we gather on this Good Friday, I want us to consider just how isolated & how alone Jesus was—even abandoned by His disciples. Peter, who was present at the Transfiguration, who was invited to be with Jesus at Gethsemane, who walked on water—sort of, who declared Jesus to be the Christ, & who was present to attest to many healings & miracles. When he walked on water, he took his eyes off Jesus & started to sink, leading to his summary of the Gospel in 3 words: “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out His hand & caught him. Have you been caught by Jesus, saved by Him? Have you moved out boldly for Him, only to completely stumble—then once again be picked up by Jesus, totally rescued? At the Last Supper Peter insisted he would never deny Jesus. He was prepared to die for Him. But Jesus knew & had already prayed for him, when Satan had asked to sift the disciples like wheat. Satan wants to sift all of us if we are faithfully serving the Lord. Be ready for that, expect that. We all fail Jesus at some point. Peter denied even knowing Jesus 3 X & called curses down on himself. We’ve all denied Jesus 1 way or another. Devastating though that is, there’s good news. Jesus was already out in front of Peter: “When you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” After Jesus’ resurrection He had breakfast ready for the disciples 1 morning as they concluded a fruitless night of fishing on the lake. In the place of Peter’s 3 denials, Jesus asked Peter 3 X to affirm his love for Jesus and told him, “Feed my sheep.” Peter did. **No matter how ugly your sin has been or your denial of Jesus has been you aren’t beyond the forgiving & redemptive reach of Jesus! Transforming grace at work! God has a Kingdom assignment for you!** Jesus was already about restoring Peter, even before his denial. That’s the way with Jesus. He’s always in front of all our situations & circumstances & **already about restoring us**. Self-sufficiency will always let you down when you depend on it. Peter swore he'd be there for Jesus. **Only Jesus can truly say, “I’ll be there” & deliver on the promise 24/7**.

It helps to see Jesus’ 3 year ministry as 1 of preparation, 1 of popularity and 1 of hostility. The Pharisees had been committed to killing Jesus for some time. 6 months earlier they’d sent temple guards to arrest Him while He was teaching in the Temple but the soldiers were so impressed with Him they didn’t carry out their orders. Subsequently, Jesus withdrew from their jurisdiction. When He returned to their area, they tried to trap Him with questions—“Should we pay taxes to Caesar?” “Whose wife will this be (of 7 brothers) at the Resurrection?” etc. **They were trying to expose Jesus as a heretic or rebel so the crowds would reject Him or Rome would arrest Him. But His answers embarrassed them & added to His reputation**. At night He would return to Bethany, again outside their area, so they couldn’t arrest Him.

Jesus—alone & isolated. Annas, Caiaphas’ father-in-law, was the high priest before Caiaphas, but he’d been deposed by Rome. Still he was the most influential voice in the Sanhedrin. In political & religious power he was like the medieval popes. What he said goes. He was intent on killing Jesus. It’s bizarre, but after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead & people were flocking to Jesus, the response from the Pharisees wasn’t “Praise the Lord!” but “If we let [Jesus] go on [performing many miraculous signs] like this, everyone will believe in Him; then the Romans will come & take away both our place & our nation.” Caiaphas believed Jesus’ death would unify Is-rael against the threat of Rome. In spite of the fact that Jesus’ growing popularity would bring people from all over the world to Jerusalem for the Passover, as the Messiah was expected to do, Caiaphas just couldn’t wrap his head around Jesus being Messiah.

When Jesus went to Gethsemane, He knew, & the temple authorities knew—because of Judas’ betrayal—they had their chance. This time Pilate gave them a detachment of soldiers—that’s 400-600 men! Wow! **Jesus would have seen them coming with their torches & would have had 30-45 minutes to escape if He’d chosen to**. He **could have lived rather than dying on a cross**. **Now the bigger problem. They had to justify their arrest before the crowds became aware of it. It was imperative to be able to convict Him of a capital crime so the crowds would turn against Him & Rome would execute Him**.

**They took Him to Annas**. Virtually everything that happened to Jesus Thursday night was illegal. No one could be deposed in private; a public assembled court was required. Judges must preside objectively. But the religious authorities participated in Jesus’ arrest then served as His “impartial” judges. Jesus was bound—another illegal action. If a prisoner didn’t attempt to flee, he couldn’t be bound. Jesus stayed there for you & me & He would do the same today. Trials couldn’t be conducted at night, testimonies had to agree since a person couldn’t be convicted on the basis of 1 witness, no one could be convicted by his own testimony, a conviction could not be rendered on the same day as a trial. Every one of those conditions was violated.

While Annas questioned, it gave Caiaphas time to assemble a quorum. They collected witnesses & coached them to give false testimony. Even then their testimonies didn’t agree. So Caiaphas was in trouble. In desperation he pleaded for Jesus to betray Himself. **His arrival at the cross was no accident**. If He’d kept silent when Caiaphas charged Him under oath, “Are You the Christ, the Son of God?” he would have been acquitted. But He didn’t. Caiaphas & the court found Him guilty of blasphemy. **His arrival at the cross was no accident**.

**Caiaphas** reconvened the court in daytime to ratify what already had been decided. But they needed Rome to convey the death penalty. **Who are the Caiaphas’ of today, so desperate to reject the Lord**. **How effective are the rejections**? **Our beliefs do not change Jesus’ reality**. **How does that sound for justice?**

**Pilate was the only man** who had the power to execute Jesus. Pilate had only been the curator for 2 years before this time & he’d already made some serious mistakes. At his 1st entry into Jerusalem he insisted his soldiers carry the image of the emperor on their ensigns, though earlier rulers had removed them out of deference to the Jewish horror of idolatry. After 5 days of protest he allowed them entry, only to surround them with soldiers threatening to kill them if they didn’t drop the issue. The Jews bared their necks to the soldiers’ swords. Pilate blinked. He used money from the temple treasury for aqueducts & that led to a riot. Again he dedicated shields with names on them in honour of Caesar, idolatrous to Jews. They appealed to Emperor Tiberius who agreed with them and not Pilate. In yet another event Pilate had killed some Galilean Jews who had come to Jerusalem to make their sacrifices.

**Caiaphas got to Pilate by asserting that Jesus claimed to be Christ, a king**. Pilate had to deal with that. Sedition was an unpardonable crime against Rome. Pilate asked Jesus if He was the King of the Jews. **To answer affirmatively would have made Him guilty of insurrection against Rome**. **Jesus asked** if that was his own idea or from others, then went on to say that His Kingdom was not of this world; otherwise His servants would have fought to prevent His arrest by the Jews. **So Jesus posed no threat to Pilate or Rome. That picture was very bad for the Sanhedrin**. They’d illegally changed their accusation to gain a trial from Pilate, only to hear him **declare the prisoner not guilty. So they pulled the “stirring up people all over Judea” card** & **Pilate sent Him to Herod. But Herod, like Pilate, found Him innocent. On each of those pronouncements, Jesus should have been released. Has anyone seen justice yet?**

Pilate was in a pickle. Even his wife warned him to have nothing to do with that innocent man, based on a troubling dream she had. Pilate, as was custom, offered to release a criminal —Jesus or Barabbas. **Barabbas became the 1st person for whom Jesus died. Barabbas is described as a Robin Hood-like character** who stole from the rich to give to the poor, perhaps explaining his popularity among the people, 1 who would stand up against Rome in a way that Jesus didn’t. **The cross that Jesus died on** was the 1 prepared for Barabbas. Jesus died for Barabbas before Barabbas could ask Him to. Barabbas’ debt was paid in full. Just like yours & mine.

Pilate tried again to free Jesus, but **the trump card** came: “If you let this man go you are no friend of Caesar. **Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar**.” Pilate could himself be executed if reported, so he caved in. **Jesus was flogged so severely** that Simon of Cyrene needed to carry His cross. **Then** Jesus was mocked & tortured further by the soldiers **repeatedly**.

**Pilate found Jesus innocent twice; Herod found Him innocent; Pilate’s wife considered** Him innocent. **So why** did Pilate crucify Him? To save himself. **Why do we** deny Jesus? To save ourselves. **Why do we** fail Him? To benefit ourselves. Why do we lie & gossip & slander? To help ourselves. **Why do we** sin privately? To please ourselves. **Why do we** sin publicly? To advance ourselves. **There is no sin we cannot commit. What tempted Pilate still tempts us. You & I face Pilate’s dilemma every time we must choose between Christ & ourselves**. **When we choose ourselves**, others find nothing different about us. **When we choose Jesus**, others may see the transforming difference the risen Christ still makes today. **Which will you choose?**

If you saw *The Passion of Christ* starring Mel Gibson some years ago, you don’t need to be reminded how graphic it was in showing the agony & suffering that Christ endured on our behalf. **Scripture** says nothing about the crucifixion itself. Although the sub-title is “The Crucifixion”, it’s about who, where & what happened around it, not with any details about how. The Romans brought him to Golgotha (the place of the Skull), offered Him wine to drink to dull the pain—which Jesus refused. The next verse is, “When they had crucified Him…”

The fact that there’s nothing in the Scriptures about crucifixion tells us it was common in the day. Sadly, it was not an unfamiliar sight. The Romans ensured it was given high profile to strike fear into the very heart of the subjects they ruled over to ensure compliance.

**So far, how could anyone think any of this is good news?** Going back to the Christmas accounts of Jesus’ birth, remember the Wise Men gave Jesus myrrh, a burial spice. Simeon, who had been promised by God that he wouldn’t die until he had seen the Lord’s Christ, told Jesus’ Mother, Mary, that a sword would pierce her own soul, too—this, when Jesus was 8 days old. The promise was there from the beginning. In Genesis 3, God tells the devil that Jesus will crush his head, but that Satan will strike His (Jesus’ heel). Right from the get-go. Psalm 22 is written by David, 750 years before Jesus’ earthly life. It describes death by crucifixion, even though the practice was never invented until centuries after David penned it. The same psalm also begins with Jesus’ haunting words on the cross: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” & prophesies that those around Jesus will cast lots for His clothing, rather than tearing it.

He was taunted on the cross to come down—then people would believe in Him. He came to save others, they chided, “He can’t even save Himself.” It’s specifically because He wouldn’t give in to that temptation, that He would not come down, that we finally start to grasp that this is the best news ever. This is the good news of the Gospel. **This is what makes this Friday good**. Really that’s a lie. It should be called “Great Friday” or “The Best Friday ever.”

**We’re there at the foot of the cross. It’s our sins that nailed Him there. But no human strength, no force, no brutality, no scheming can keep Christ down. Not even our sin. Beloved, this is a day we need to reflect on what each of us cost Jesus.** It was the only time that God the Father turned His back on God the Son. It was the only way the heart of God could manage to carry through what needed to be done through Jesus. That’s why the Father had forsaken Jesus; where there was pain infinitely greater than any physical pain could cause. **For there’s no greater pain than separation from God**. Jesus took the sins of the world & was forsaken by His Father. **Carry that thought through the** weekend. That’s what it cost Jesus. That 1st Friday look-ed very bleak. Only from this side of the cross can we know the hope, the eternal hope, the goodness of God that is relentless, that will prevail.

Ps. 34 says not 1 of His bones would be broken, & though the Roman soldiers came & broke the legs of the thieves on either side of Him to speed their deaths since no body could be left on the cross at Passover, when they came to Jesus He was already dead. A soldier speared Him in the side & water flowed, separate from the plasma, a sure sign of death even today.

Among Jesus’ last words: “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.” So His separation, His being forsaken by His Father, was temporary, but it was through to death. He also said, “It’s finished.” Though breathed quietly, it is a victor’s cry. **His purpose from 1st breath was to die as a righteous, holy substitute, for each of us & do what we could never do for ourselves.**

At the moment Jesus died, the curtain in the Temple was torn in 2 from top to bottom, the earth shook, rocks split, tombs broke open & the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. After Jesus’ resurrection they went into Jerusalem & appeared to many people. While the centurion in charge of Jesus’ crucifixion didn’t see that part, he saw enough—mainly the character of Jesus--& declared, “Surely He was the Son of God.” That’s as convincing a proof as I can think of. This trained professional, who would have presided over other crucifixions & whose job was to remain detached & maintain order, personally met the Son of God, at His worst, or should we say at His best, & believed. What about you? Have you encountered Jesus, whose hands, feet & side were pierced for you? Who died for you—for us all?