

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

March 29, 2024

Good Friday

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Did you catch the scapegoating in our narrative reading today? I'd be impressed if you did! It's found in one lonely verse out of the numerous verses we just read. But it's an important one! John 18:14 says this, "Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people."¹ There it is, the consummate, practical, political thought...find a scapegoat.

Later in the Passion narrative we will hear two other accusations leveled against Jesus. The temple leaders first accuse Jesus of claiming kingship², a direct challenge to the authority of Rome. Then, a few verses later, the charge is switched to a religious one, rather than political: "according to [our] law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."³ So which is it? Must Jesus die because others have called him a King? Or is it because of the "Son of God" label? Well...both...and neither.

Let me remind you of the context of all of this. Palestine is an occupied territory. And it has been, at the time of Christ, for almost 700 years. Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome have all claimed sovereignty over the land promised to the Israelites. Others, like Egypt and Assyria, were variously allies and enemies too.

The people of Israel were never particularly pleased with this reality (and why would they be?). In the 200 years or so before the birth of Christ there are several attempted revolutions in Jerusalem and Palestine. In 167 BCE we find the Maccabees having some success, eventually restoring Temple worship in Jerusalem. This establishes the kingdom of Judea which will last roughly 100 years until the Herod dynasty, with Roman help, will conquer Judea and in 6 CE it will be made a Roman province with Herod as a puppet-king.

¹ John 18:14 (NRSVue)

² cf John 18:33; 18:37; 19:12

³ John 18:7c

Over the next decades there will be several more attempts to revolt against Rome and tensions will rise precipitously. By the time of Christ's Passion things between Israel and Rome are close to a boiling point. At this point none of the leaders in Jerusalem, Roman or Jewish, are happy with the tenseness of the situation and the potential it has to lead to violence.⁴

“Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.”⁵ Let's look back at when he did that in John 11:47-50: “So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council and said, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation. But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.””

Sounds like Caiaphas is looking for a scapegoat, doesn't it? He wants someone to blame for the tension, violence, and distrust that overshadows Israel. And, once identified, that victim must die as a way to release some of the pent-up violence simmering below the surface. Perhaps then the people will calm down and the threat of revolution (and the accompanying Roman oppression) will subside. All of this will preserve the status quo which greatly benefits Caiaphas and the other leaders.

This is a scene that has played out in human history more times than we can count; in the distant past, sure...but more recently as well. And unfortunately, America's history with scapegoating is particularly heinous. The examples are numerous: the mistreatment and oppression of Indigenous peoples, Japanese internment camps during WWII, the red scare of the Cold War, the racist War on Drugs policies of the 80s, and many, many more. But to really drive this home I want to share with you a passage from *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James Cone:

“By the 1890s, lynching fever gripped the South, spreading like cholera, as white communities made blacks their primary target, and torture their focus. Burning the black victim slowly for hours was the chief method of torture. Lynching became a white media spectacle, in which prominent newspapers, like the Atlanta Constitution, announced to the public the place, date, and time of the expected hanging and burning of black victims. Often as many as ten to twenty thousand men, women, and children attended the event. It was a family affair, a ritual celebration of white

⁴ Just two decades after Christ's death, in 66 CE, the tipping point will be reached, and revolution will break out. This revolution was crushed by Rome through a brutal five-month siege of Jerusalem during which the Temple was destroyed.

⁵ John 18:14

supremacy, where women and children were often given the first opportunity to torture black victims—burning black flesh and cutting off genitals, fingers, toes, and ears as souvenirs. Postcards were made from the photographs taken of black victims with white lynchers and onlookers smiling as they struck a pose for the camera.”⁶

Human history is one cycle of violence after another. One scapegoat killed after another. One group targeted for oppression and exclusion after another. This is not the good creation that God created. This is not the life humanity was created to live. This perpetual cycle of violence and oppression is unrighteous and grieves God deeply. As I have been preaching on a fair amount lately, the Scapegoat theory of Atonement suggests that Christ’s crucifixion was God identifying with every scapegoat humanity has ever murdered and trying to break this perpetual-seeming cycle.

René Girard illustrates this powerfully in his work, *The Scapegoat*: “Jesus is constantly compared with and compares himself with all the scapegoats of the Old Testament, all the prophets that were assassinated or persecuted by their communities: Abel, Joseph, Moses, the Servant of Yahweh, and so on. Whether he is chosen by others or self-appointed, his role as a despised victim, inasmuch as he is innocent, inspires the designation. He is the stone rejected by the builders that will become the cornerstone. He is also the millstone of scandal that will bring down even the wisest because of his ambiguous role which is easily confused with the old-style gods. Everything down to the title of king contains a reference to the "victimary" character of sacred royalty. Those who demand an unequivocal sign should be content with the sign of Jonah.

What is the sign of Jonah? The reference to the whale, in Matthew's text, is not very revealing; Luke’s silence and that of all the exegetes is preferable. But nothing prevents us from trying to provide a better answer than Matthew to the question that was probably left unanswered by Jesus himself. In the very first lines we are given the information. During a storm Jonah is chosen by lot to be the victim thrown overboard by the sailors to save their ship in distress. The sign of Jonah is yet another sign of the collective victim.”⁷

We are gathered here this evening to make Jesus the scapegoat again. We are gathered to identify him with everyone in human history who has been the victim of mob violence and oppression. We see in Christ, this night especially: the hundreds who died on the trail of tears, the children beaten to death in Indian boarding schools,

⁶ Cone, J. H. (2011). *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB1423507X>

⁷ Girard, R. (1986). *The Scapegoat*. In Johns Hopkins University Press eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.98235>

the black men, women and children lynched and tortured by our forebearers, the transgender teens kicked out of their homes and families, the nonbinary children bullied to the point of suicide, the starving people of Gaza and the victims of Putin's imperial aggression. These victims of collective violence are who Christ identifies with, who Christ came to stand in solidarity with.

On this Good Friday may we see what God understands to be good: an end to violence and oppression. On this Good Friday, as we contemplate the cross, may we see the lynching tree and the noose. May we see Christ in the world's victims and commit ourselves to ending the perpetual cycles of violence. May we say this night, no more! No more injustice and oppression. No more hatred and violence. It is enough...no more. May God's will be done on earth as in heaven. Amen.