



## MORRISON ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Midweek Lenten Service  
Pastor Randy Ott

### **Pontius Pilate, the Thinker**

We don't often recite a list of the people of the Passion. We might look at them every year during the Midweek Lenten Services, but we don't recite them, except for one man, right? Every time we speak the Apostles Creed, we say "Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate." Every time we confess our faith with those words, the name of Pilate lives on in infamy, which is probably not what he had in mind for himself when he was a young Roman politician. From what we read from outside history at the time, he was kind of an ambitious man. He wanted to be a senator or whatever the case may be in Rome, but to get to that point at this time in his life, he had to be the governor of Judea and serve well in Judea and handle at times the delicate situations there with the people that did not like Roman rule and had religious reasons for not liking Roman rule. So it was quite a challenge.

Knowing what people with political aspirations are like and how they lay out and plot a course and seek to follow a course to get to the objective where they want to be, the series that we're following this year has labeled Pontius Pilate as "the Thinker." It makes sense. A man who had these kind of ambitions had probably thought through everything. And a Roman politician, even in a place like Judea, would have his finger to the political winds because his future was at stake, and he'd be well aware of what was going on.

Which makes you think that when Jesus is arrested and brought before Pilate during the festival, it isn't the first time you would think that Pilate had heard about him. As someone who had to make sure that the crowd didn't revolt, he would have his finger on the pulse of anyone who has such a following like Jesus did. When the crowd started to get bigger and bigger and people talked more and more, you have to believe Pilate would have looked into this to see who this Jesus was and if this was a threat he needed to put down right now or if it was a possible threat to keep tabs on or what it might be. Yes, Jesus spent a lot of his time outside of his jurisdiction in Galilee, but he was in Jerusalem every year always at those festivals. So Pilate no doubt would have been familiar with him.

But I think probably also no doubt, Pilate, being the man who would want to know what is going on, didn't view Jesus as a threat. He wasn't saying "I'm here to get rid of the Romans." He was there talking about "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near." And this kingdom of God did not seem about to be established by the sword or by the horse

or by the chariot or by a revolution. So you have to think that Pilate had probably evaluated Jesus and not saw him as a threat but just saw him as another one of the religious nuts that Judea seemed to percolate with.

You wonder if it was a surprise though when these people arrested Jesus and brought him to Pilate. And on the day of the festival, when they didn't want to come into Pilate's palace because they didn't want to be ceremonially unclean for the celebration of the festival. So if he knew how obsessive they were about these outward rituals, he had to know this is something big going on here now. And although he didn't think of him as a threat, I have to think that Pilate would have had no difficulty with just sending him off to be killed and rubber stamping it for political reasons, religious reasons, it didn't matter to him. But the guy that had his finger to the wind probably noticed that the groups that were bringing Jesus to him were groups that normally butted heads. And now all of a sudden they are gathering together to attack this Jesus, and these charges they were making, he knew that they were just bologna. They weren't anything that had any substance. But he stopped and wanted to hear them because I think his radar probably went off when these two groups were coming together and saying, "Oh, great and mighty Pilate, we're really concerned. Someone wants to start a revolution against Rome." That's all these people wanted to do. If that's what he really wanted to do, they would have been leading the charge behind Jesus.

So when he sees these people that he knows are lying through their teeth because their lips are moving, and he hears it, he decides to try the case again. So he listens to the testimony. He asks Jesus about it. Usually someone is always there professing their innocence. Jesus isn't saying a word. That had to be a little creepy for him I would think.

Then finally he asks him, "They're calling you a king and saying you want to lead a revolt. Are you the king of the Jews?" Then Jesus says those words that seem to cause Pilate some confusion. "My kingdom is not of this world and I have come to testify to the truth." "What is truth?" Pilate mockingly asks. That's just a tool in a politician's arsenal. That's something to be used or not used as it benefits you. Pilate, the modern man, had no use for absolute truth. So he kind of thought this is a king that's harmless. He knows it's innocence. He knows it's envy. Maybe he decides to hear the case because he thinks if he overturns this case, the people will be on his side and turn against their leaders and he'll be able to control the mobs a little better. Maybe he didn't want to kill Jesus right away because Herod got into a little trouble because he killed John the Baptist and the people didn't like that. He didn't want to be known as another prophet killer. So he is hoping to really kill a couple of birds with one stone I think here by being able to set Jesus free. Turn the people against the leaders. Turn the people to his side. It might make his life as governor a little bit easier.

So he tells them again and again, "I find no basis for the charges against this man." They don't care. They keep yelling. He has him beaten and things like that. They don't care. He finds out Herod is in town and he sends him off to Herod thinking that will get it out of his hair, and Herod sends him back. Finally, he gets to the point where

he comes to his last straw. “Barabbas, this lousy guy, or Jesus, the one you call your Messiah, the Christ,” thinking they would say Jesus to be released. But no, the leaders were that determined to see Jesus die. They convinced the crowd to yell crucify. And that’s what they do. Pilate finally sees that the mob is getting unruly and now I suppose he thinks to himself, “I don’t want the people turning against me.” So he washes his hands in front of the people and says, “The guilt of this innocent man is not on my head, it’s on yours. I know he’s not guilty but let him be crucified.” Then that’s what happened. For that reason, Pilate’s name lives on in infamy as each time we say the Apostles Creed we talk about him as the one that presided over Jesus’ suffering and death.

I wonder what Pilate would think if he came back today and saw how Christianity has spread over the globe. History tells us Pilate had more problems. One of the reasons he didn’t want to pursue releasing this innocent man is because they had said, “If you do this, you’re no friend of Caesar,” and he wore this cool-looking ring on his finger that had the image of Caesar on it and marked him as a friend of Caesar, one of the inner circle. This accusation was basically as much as saying, “We’re going to make your life with Caesar really difficult because anyone who lets someone who claims they are a king go free is no friend of Caesar.” So for the political reasons, he let it go. And he had to think that’s probably where it would stop. His career also pretty much stopped at this point in time. Tradition tells us his wife became a Christian. Only a couple of sources say that. Whether that’s true or not, we don’t really know. But you have to wonder if Pilate would come back and see crosses everywhere today...everywhere he drives he sees a cross on a steeple, he sees crosses on jewelry, he sees crosses everywhere...you wonder what he would think.

You also have to wonder what he would think if he spent some time going around with Christians, “little Christs” today. If he spent time going with us to our workplace, sat around with us at our family dinner table, sat with us as we entertained ourselves and went about our daily lives, you wonder what he would think. You think he might come to the conclusion, “You know what? You guys claim to be Christians? You’re not a whole lot different than I am. You’re not a whole lot different than what I did. I knew he was innocent and I killed him. You know you shouldn’t lie and cheat and steal and backstab, but you say that’s the only way to get ahead in the workplace, so you go ahead and do it.” You say “I know it’s wrong to use that kind of entertainment, but I don’t want to look like a stick in the mud, so I’m going to go along with my friends. You seem to really enjoy it even though you say that your God doesn’t like it. I know it’s wrong, but...you attack one another. You devour one another. You see your friends and family caught up in a sin and you don’t admonish them. You go talk to someone else about it or go wonder why someone else isn’t talking about it, but you don’t do it because you don’t want to lose a friend. You don’t want to lose that relationship. I know it’s wrong, but”...I think Pilate could look us in the face and say “You guys sound exactly like I did during the trial of Jesus. I know it’s wrong, but let’s kill him.”

Do you think Pilate might ask for a month’s reprieve? “How about you guys? Next month, every time you speak this Apostles Creed that you guys talk about, how about

for the next month, every time you say it, instead of saying 'suffered under Pontius Pilate,' stick your own name in there for a little while. You aren't any different than me." Wouldn't that kind of stink? Every week, Christians around the world using your name instead of Pilate's? I know it's wrong, but...we live quite often in "I know it's wrong, but."

I wonder if Pilate came back if he would understand why we stay with Jesus even though we so often fail him. Do you think he'd find out by being with us or listening to us or talking to us or seeing us that we know we are sinners just like he was? And we know that we killed Jesus but we stay with him because we know he lived in our place and died in our place to take away our sins. And we know what makes us right with God is not anything that we do. It's what our Savior did for us. That's why we cling to him. That's why we have the cross around us. That's why we rejoice to hear our God say to us "I love you because that's what I am. That's what I do. That's what I will always do." Do you think he'd get the impression that we cling to Jesus and we treasure his Word? We treasure our baptism? We treasure the Lord's Supper? Because that's where the Lord says to us, "You are forgiven. Heaven is yours." And do you think he'd seeing us then going forward and seeking to live more for Jesus and seeking more frequently to do what we know is right even if it means we are going to suffer for doing it, that we would be willing to take up our cross and follow him like he called us to do?

I certainly don't know if Pilate would ever understand why we do what we do. But by the grace of God, I understand why we want to do it. By the grace of God, you understand why we want to do it. And by the grace of God, he will help us to remain in faith in Jesus until that day he calls us to our heavenly home. Because by God's grace, we believe and are saved.