

“The Defense Rests”

Isaiah 53:1-9
Mark 15:1-5

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One of my favorite westerns is “Hang ‘Em High” with Clint Eastwood and Pat Hingle. It’s set in the Oklahoma Territory pre-statehood, wild, wild, west. Eastwood has been mistaken for a cattle rustler and is lynched by a mob of local businessmen and town leaders...but he survives. Hingle is the judge for the whole territory and he deputizes Eastwood to round up the men who took the law into their own hands. And with cool, calm steely resolve he goes after these men to bring them to justice.

But he doesn’t like the way justice always works. The judge hangs people every day and the deputy criticizes him for the way he judges them in the morning and hangs ‘em in the afternoon. Very little defense if any is offered.

He responds, “You think I judged him too harshly? Used him for kindling my fire of justice? Well, maybe that's inevitable when there's only one man, one court, with the power of final justice over a territory that's five times the size of most states. Mistakes? Oh, I've made 'em, Cooper. Don't you doubt about that. Don't you doubt, either, there are times sitting up there in that judgment seat I wished, I prayed, that there was someone standing between me and God Almighty - someone with the power to say, "You're wrong, Fenton. You've made an error in law - that this man deserves another trial, this man here a reprieve, this man is innocent.”

Perhaps this gives us some insight into Pilate’s position. The Roman territory he governed was on the outer reaches of the empire. He had a very limited number of troops and police. His government was very vulnerable to the masses. His only power to rule was in his power to kill, and kill brutally and publicly. The fear of crucifixion was the source of his power. He had a very awesome responsibility and no one to pass the buck to.

He stood between the accused and God Almighty.

This day was even tougher. Passover surely made Pilate more nervous than a cat on a hot tin roof. Hundreds of thousands if not millions were passing through Jerusalem for this Jewish celebration. And if he knew anything about what it celebrated, he was even more nervous. Passover celebrates Israel’s liberation from the great empire Egypt led by Moses. The last thing Pilate wanted was for another Moses to spring up and incite the people to revolution.

And here before him first thing in the morning, barely had time to finish his breakfast stands Jesus. The Jewish authorities who delivered him there are yelling all kinds of accusations. It seems whatever this Jesus has done he’s really made these people furious. And these people can really cause problems for Pilate if they want. It’s clear they want him dead. Finally, they come up with an accusation that interests him. He’s

seeking the Jewish throne.

Pilate could care less about religious blasphemies, but a person seeking political power, the kind of power that only Caesar, his boss, can give, that concerns him greatly. That's the kind of stuff that could cause him problems. That's the kind of thing that could set fire to the whole province.

Now Pilate has dealt with revolutionaries and so called messiahs. They were flung into his court ranting and raving about judgment and flames, spitting in his direction, but not this guy. He was eerily calm. He had the look of absolute resolve in his eyes.

Pilate had surely heard of this man. He had heard how he was impossible to trap. He could disarm any argument and turn any accusation on its head. Surely, he would not be trapped here.

But he said nothing. He pled no contest, *nolo contendere*. It was the last thing Pilate could have expected. He was amazed, dumbfounded. Pilate held this man's life in his hands, or so he thought, he expect perhaps at least some begging and pleading. Nothing. He was like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, like a sheep that before its shearers is silent; he did not open his mouth.

He held no power of this man. He couldn't affect him. All he could do was sentence him to death, but even that seemed to be out of his control. It seemed that Jesus was surrendering. But to whom? Not the council. Not to Pilate.

Jesus was indeed resolved. He had made his peace in the garden the night before. He did not beg for his life from Pilate because his life was not in Pilate's hands. He was in his Father's hands. And he pleaded for his life. *Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet...yet...and this is what is amazing...this is what is dumbfounding...yet, not what I will, but what thou wilt.* He surrendered his will to God. He submitted to God. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death- even death on a cross.

There is a scene in the movie *Star Wars: A New Hope* where Obi Wan Kenobi is dueling the evil Darth Vader. Vader says, "Your powers are weak old man." Obi-Wan responds, "You can't win, Darth. If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you could possibly imagine." He drops his defense and allows Vader to strike him down.

The power of Jesus is in his submission to God and God alone. This disarms all other earthly power. Pilate cannot defeat one who has totally put himself in the hands of God. He cannot take anything of true value. He cannot kill anything that is eternal. The flesh, yes. The soul, no.

And we are called to do the same. We are called to say like Jesus, "Yet, not what

I will, but what thou wilt.” We are called to surrender our will. We talk about free will. But if we do not freely give it to God, then we will become subject to the will of the Pilates of this world. We will be judged by this world. We will be enslaved by a world that only has the power to harm our flesh. That is only able to take from us that which is temporary.

Once we are resolved to this, then we will fear nothing earthly. We will stand before the powers of this world and feel no need to defend, to justify. We simply say, “So you say.” It rolls off of our back into the dirt from which it has come.

When we surrender to God, the world cannot win. God’s cause cannot be defeated. It cannot be thwarted. But it wins, not through force, but its perseverance. Not by striking back, but by absorbing the hate with forgiveness. Not by defending, or offending, but by ascending to a higher level of engagement with the world: loving.

Perhaps, Jesus did not judge Pilate too harshly. Perhaps he perfectly understood his predicament. If he judges him innocent, he answers to the mob. If he judges him guilty, he must answer to his own conscience and to God. If Pilate had submitted to God like Jesus, this would be a clear choice. But all he can see with his earthly eyes is the mob. They’re here. They’re real.

But Jesus takes the choice from him. He doesn’t defend himself. He takes the judgment from the judge by giving Pilate no grounds to acquit him. He took the wrath of the mob upon himself and gave Pilate a way out from this impossible choice.

While I was working as a hospital chaplain, there was a young woman, a girl really. She was pregnant with triplets. She had developed preeclampsia which raises the blood pressure and can lead to a stroke. The condition goes away when the pregnancy is over. The problem was that the babies were only 21 weeks. At least 3 weeks from any chance of life outside of the womb. She would not live another 3 weeks. She had an impossible choice. To save her own life she would have to abort her three babies. Her faith told her that abortion was not an option. The doctors were at a loss. I was at a loss. She was at a loss.

I prayed the only thing I could think of, “Lord, take away this decision from her. Let this be your decision not her decision. Let your will be done.” That night the babies came naturally...a miscarriage. Still painful. Still tragic. Still a great loss. But God made it his loss. God took away the decision from that poor girl.

Because Jesus submitted to God, Jesus made his death God’s loss. He took away the judgment. He took away the impossible decision. And ultimately he took away the sin of the world, our sin, even Pilate’s sin, even the Jewish leaders’ sin. He took it all away and plunged into the depths of hell with it and burned it up so that all the accusations would be gone. The prosecution will be silent and the defense shall rest.

My friends, our Savior does not out to round us up or anybody else and bring

sinners to justice. But he is seeking sinners. He is not a judge whose only power is brutal death. He himself took the brutal death upon himself. And so hear the words we hear many Sundays:

Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life has gone; a new life has begun. Know that you are forgiven and be at peace. Amen.