John 18:37
Midweek Lent 4 • March 21, 2007
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho
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The King

I. The Trial

The Word of the Lord from John 18: "Pilate therefore said to Him, 'Are You a king then?' Jesus answered, 'You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice'" (John 18:37). This is the Word of the Lord.

You only respect what you fear. Pilate knows that. Kings have to rule in this world with fear—they have to have the big stick to back up the soft speech, or else they'll be undermined or overthrown in no time. There's a reason why Pilate's era is known as the *Pax Romana*, the "Peace of Rome:" Roman law is brutal towards criminals and rebels. Perverse as it sounds, scourging and crucifixion have done a lot to discourage misbehavior. The Empire is relatively peaceful not because people love Caesar, but because they fear him.

You only respect what you fear. Pilate knows that. He also knows that the chief priests neither respect nor fear him. He's tried to demonstrate his authority with the sword and with bloodshed, but there's more to ruling than that. In response, the Jewish leaders have sent delegations to Rome, complaining about Pilate. They've been effective, too, to the point that Caesar has warned Pilate that one more slip-up could cost him his position, if not his life.

So the chief priests aren't afraid of Pilate, and they sure don't respect him. Likewise, Pilate has no respect for these leaders who have been such a thorn in his side. There's no love lost here. He is, I think, afraid, however, because they've got him over a barrel on this night.

They've brought a Man to stand trial in the middle of the night, a suspicious beginning to what follows. The crowd is agitated, the Man badly beaten. Their leaders have a simple demand: condemn the Man to death and crucify Him. The charge they bring against the Man is treason: He has declared Himself a king, they claim, and so he is a traitor against Caesar and deserves to die. Now, it's a strange time when the Jewish leaders are going out of their way to stick up for the Emperor of Rome; and it becomes even stranger when the crowds call for this Man's death and declare, "We have no king but Caesar."

At any rate, while Pilate isn't the sharpest tool in the shed, he's not stupid, either. He knows what's going on in Jerusalem, and he's no doubt heard about this man named Jesus. He's known as a wandering rabbi and said to perform miracles; and while witnesses tonight have claimed Him to be seditious, He's shown no animosity toward

Rome or the Emperor. The idea that this Jesus is a rival or threat to Caesar is simply ludicrous. So while Pilate has shown little concern for spilling blood in the past, he declares Jesus to be innocent.

The crowd will have none of it. Whipped up by the chief priests, they call for His death. Again and again that night, Pilate declares Jesus not guilty, but his opponents only turn the screws and turn up the threats. They want Jesus dead; and if Pilate won't do it, then they'll complain to Caesar and it might be Pilate who dies. In one last effort, Pilate attempts to set Jesus free by declaring Him innocent and having Him scourged, abusing Him to play up the sympathy vote with the mob. But there is no sympathy to be found. The mob has no respect for Pilate's verdict, and the chief priests have no fear. Pilate has no respect for their pressure, but he's fearful. So he makes the political calculation and decides that it's better for Jesus to die than risk his own life. This King of the Jews inspires no fear that night, and kings who are not feared are quickly overthrown.

Throughout this ghastly excuse for a trial, there is one who operates with both respect and love: Jesus. The all-powerful King of kings and Lord of lords stands before a weasel of a ruler and respects the authority that Pilate holds. When Pilate tells Jesus that he has the power to crucify or free Him, Jesus agrees; and then He respectfully speaks the truth that Pilate only has this power because Jesus has given it to him. Despite all appearances, Jesus is not a helpless prisoner; He could destroy His enemies and free Himself with one Word. Jesus doesn't fear Pilate, but He respects him because he has a position of authority, and such positions are given by God. Thus Jesus is no rival to Caesar because He is not after secular power—He is the One who has given it to Caesar! Instead, He is the King who gathers His people to eternal life by warning of sin and speaking His saving grace. He is working by sacrificial love, not coercive power.

There is another reason why Jesus submits. Despite all the treachery and deceit of those who scheme His death, He is going to the cross willingly for a purpose. He is going to the cross to die for the sins of the world. For the sins of those who crucify Him, that they might believe and be forgiven and be saved. For your sins, that you might believe and be forgiven and be saved. He does this all out of love for you.

II. Fear and Love

Fear and love are both present as Jesus stands before Pilate: they are also present in the Small Catechism: at least ten times, "We should fear and love God" as we recite our way through the Ten Commandments. In my experience, we are far more comfortable with speaking about loving God than fearing Him. In fact, more than once I've heard it said that to "fear" God simply means that we should be respectful towards Him—but not be afraid.

That isn't what the Small Catechism says. In the Close of the Ten Commandments, Luther writes, "God threatens to punish all who transgress these commandments. Therefore we should fear His wrath and not act contrary to them." That's not talking about just talking about deference to a superior: that's talking about fear.

As you contemplate the Passion of our Lord this week, do not let this escape you: on the cross, Jesus suffers the wrath of God for your sin. The cross is not the result of angry chief priests and sadistic Roman soldiers: although they act out of all sorts of sinful motives, God is at work behind the scenes to carry out His judgment for sin upon His Son. Likewise, the cross is not the devil's doing: while we don't know Satan's mind that day, we don't assume that he is purely gleeful—it could well be that he delights in Jesus' suffering, but knows that the same destroys his power forever. It is certain the cross is not the devil getting in his licks; it's the wrath of God for sin. It's the wrath of God for your sin, and Jesus steps in and steps up to take it in your place.

If you attribute the cross ultimately to anyone but God, then you are on your way to denying that Jesus suffers the judgment for your sin. If you deny that it is God's wrath which Jesus suffers, then you may be on your way either to denying that God's wrath for your sin has been appeased—in which case, His wrath for your sin remains, and you still face judgment. More likely thought, today, you're on the way to denying that God punishes sin. And if you deny that God punishes sin, then you will see no need to take forgiveness seriously. Therefore, hear God's Law and fear God's wrath. Jesus Himself warns, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28) "Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" is the Lord, no one else. The cross is deadly serious business: there you see the wrath that God has for sin, and you ought rightly fear His wrath. As a Christian, you should obey the commandments in fear. But there you also see God step into your shoes and suffer that judgment in your place, so that you might have eternal life. Thus God with His Law invokes fear. God with His Gospel loves you so much that He has endured His own wrath for your sins, that He might pronounce you holy and alive.

He gives that life to you by His means of grace. They may appear no more powerful than the Lord as He stands battered before Pilate. God's Word and Sacrament inspire no fear to the world, and so they receive very little respect. But by faith, you know different. These are means of grace because they are the means by which your King comes to you in love, that you might have forgiveness, life and salvation to you forever.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen