

What have we done?

John 19:1-16a

We didn't set out for this. Our motivation was pure, once. Love God. Honor God. We had to stand up for purity—had to stand up for what was right. We had to protect God's reputation . . . and ours. Which meant he had to be stopped. That was just the way of it. Better to sacrifice one man's life, as they say, to save the others.

We didn't set out for this, though—the shouting, the angry mob. It's just that things went wrong at every turn, no matter what we tried. The whole world was going after him, like they were all bewitched. He had to be stopped. And he was so infuriatingly calm. And Pilate, who loves violence, was so infuriatingly hesitant. It seemed we would lose. It seemed we would lose, and God's name would forever be co-opted by this blasphemer.

I suppose we got carried away. A monstrous thing—the yelling, the hate. “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

But if it's for the right cause, don't the ends justify the means? Won't anything we have to do or say be worth it, if it rids our community of this danger? “We have no king but the emperor!” we declared.

And with that, we won. Pilate conceded. We won, and the man who claimed to be God was officially out of the picture.

But we knew, deep down, with a horrible, sinking certainty, that we could feel in our bones . . . we also lost. No matter how right or wrong we were about that man, we lost the bigger game.

Love God. Honor God. “You shall have no other gods before me.”
What have we done?

Every Lenten season pastors may choose to preach from two different lectionary choices for Palm Sunday. We can choose the upbeat, celebratory, triumphant entry into Jerusalem, or we can choose to speak about Jesus’ passion – his betrayal, mock trial, and death on a cross. Personally, I’m more inclined to go with the upbeat entry into Jerusalem, but if that is all we focus on I think we miss a good deal of what Holy Week is about. Let’s face it folks, in our hearts, we want to skip from Palm Sunday to Easter. Our temptation is to seek relief from the uncertainty of life as we get caught up in forces beyond our control. We live in the dissonance of life. We all have moments of courage and fear, self-protection and solidarity with others, compassion and denial. Today’s Scripture shows us how this dissonance plays out on multiple levels in Jesus’ journey to the cross, from the Roman governor to the religious leaders, to the crowd gathered to witness what happens to him. On the surface, it seems easy to tell who the guilty parties are and who are the innocents in this story. Pilate, the religious leaders, and the crowd immediately are deemed guilty and, of course, Jesus, is innocent.

But is that true? No, I'm not going to condemn Jesus. He remains innocent throughout this story. However, the roles played by the other characters aren't so clear cut. Let's look a little closer.

Pilate, the Roman governor, had a penchant for violence. The roads to Jerusalem were lined with the crucified bodies of revolutionaries, sending the message that Roman justice (read punishment) would be swift and terrible. All of these were at Pilate's command. So why does he struggle to hand down a death sentence to Jesus? We see him try several times to dissuade the religious leaders from their murderous bent. Yet ultimately, in fear of the crowd and his political future, he acquiesces to handing Jesus over for crucifixion. Despite his penchant for violence, Pilate tried to do the right thing and release an innocent man.

The religious leaders felt threatened by Jesus' popularity with the masses. They feared for their positions of power and the uneasy peace they had forged with their Roman occupiers. Jesus had forced them to look at the structures they had established and challenged them to see how they had strayed from God's original plan for his people. They found themselves caught between tradition and truth. They well knew the fifth commandment given to them by God— Thou shalt not kill. Yet they convinced themselves that the solution to their Jesus problem would be his death. Fear was the motivating factor in making the religious leaders violate God's Law.

The crowd that had hailed Jesus with choruses of “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday, now stood disillusioned that the military takeover they expected had not happened. They witnessed a beaten, bloody, and silent Savior and likely feared retribution from the Romans if they were to continue to call for his release. We know that in fear, even Peter, called the Rock by Jesus, disavowed any connection with Jesus. When the crowd made the shift from “Hosanna” to “crucify him,” many were caught up in a mob mentality, afraid to go against the crowd and so betrayed their own core beliefs.

Would we do any better? I know we like to think we would hold fast to our beliefs and not be swayed by circumstances beyond our control, but in a world of growing division can we be sure? In 1940’s Germany, during the rise of Hitler, many Christian leaders gave their support to his vision. For many their thinking was along the lines of - “This doesn’t apply to me – I’m not a (fill in the blank of the groups that Hitler attacked).” As time went on and his atrocities increased, those same leaders began to speak out against what Hitler was doing and would find themselves being consigned to concentration camps and facing death in the gas chambers. Martin Niemoller, a Lutheran pastor and theologian who was interred in a concentration camp himself, would pen these words following his release by the Allies:

First they came for the Communists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a Communist
Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew
Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me

Where do we see ourselves in today's story? Are we like Pilate, bowing to pressure to protect our position in society? Are we like the religious leaders, willing to transgress long held beliefs for expediency? Are we a member of the crowd having switched our allegiance out of fear for our own safety and security?

As we look at the various actors in this story, we can see that their responses might be different were the situation changed. What we see as a common factor among all the actors is *fear*. Fear is a great motivator, but not always for good. Knowing this, God in His Word has repeatedly addressed fear. Hear these words from the prophet Isaiah:

For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, do not fear; I will help you. (Isaiah 41:13)

“Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have taken my instruction to heart: Do not fear the reproach of mere mortals or be terrified by their insults. (Isaiah 51:7)

In every case, fear of people, whether it was Caesar, the Sanhedrin, or the surrounding mob, was the motivating factor in causing these actors to behave as they did. Today’s world finds us in similar circumstances as our society becomes more and more divided. It doesn’t matter which side of the aisle you sit on, the question we each need to ask ourselves is this, “Who do I fear?” Unless our answer is the Lord God Almighty, we need to take a closer look at what is on our hearts.

How do we avoid succumbing to the roar of the crowd? We are to stay grounded in the Word of God given to us by his Son, Jesus. We are not to fear people who cannot snatch us from the hands of our loving God. Secure in who we are in Christ, we reflect on these words found in 1 Peter:

¹³ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” ¹⁵ But in your hearts

revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, (1 Peter 3:13-15)

What do we do, though, when we have succumbed to fear? What do we do when we have betrayed our most closely held beliefs? Where do we turn? We humble ourselves before God much like King David did with these words from Psalm 51:

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

² Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. ⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge...

⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. ⁹ Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. ¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

God knows we live in the dissonance of life, of good versus evil, of our best intentions versus our baser instincts, of our desire to be strong versus our human frailty. He understands that there will be times when we fail because we are overwhelmed with fear. Just as Jesus was silent before Pilate, because he knew who truly held the power over life and death, may we also continue to fear God alone, while continuing to do good, with gentleness and respect. May His Kingdom come here on earth as it is in heaven. AMEN

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March 22, 2026 Souderton Mennonite Homes

March 29, 2026 Hatfield Church of the Brethren