

Were You There sermon series  
Caiaphas, Herod, Pilate  
March 9, 2025  
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Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, which began this past week on Ash Wednesday with a Spirit-filled worship with our brothers and sisters from East Second Street Christian Church. Lent is an interesting season in the church year. It's not biblical; it first showed up in the church a few centuries after Christ. Lent began as a time of preparation, study, and fasting for people who were going to be baptized on Easter Sunday. I wrote that sentence about fasting while eating a chocolate-iced donut. Save me from myself, Lord Jesus!

That's actually part of the purpose of Lent, to remind us that we need a savior. Lent is a time for us to regain an awareness of our humanity. It starts on Ash Wednesday, with the ashes on our forehead reminding us of our mortality. "From dust you have come, and to dust you shall return." During Lent, Christians are called to do some self-examination, to see the ways that sin has infiltrated our lives. Despite our general goodness as human beings, Lent is a time to remember that we have fallen short of God's glory.

But we aren't called to remain in that place. That's what Easter is all about. If Lent is a time to remember that we are sinners, then Easter is a time to remember we are forgiven. Now, there's a part of me that would like to skip Lent and go right to Easter. But we can't. If we don't take time to understand our human condition, then we won't understand the significance of Easter. Easter doesn't make sense without Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. If we don't think we need to be saved, then we won't celebrate a risen Savior. If we acknowledge our brokenness, then we understand the magnitude of the sacrifice made on Good Friday and we understand the joy of Easter, that Christ has defeated death so that we no longer have to fear anything. Because he died on the cross and was resurrected, we're not just dust that will return to dust. We are eternal through our faith in Christ.

Coming to this understanding about ourselves and about Christ is a journey, which is why Lent is a six-week time period. To best understand it, we are called to walk with Jesus as he prepares to go to the cross. For our sermon series this Lent, we'll be looking at a number of people who were with Jesus during his final days on earth. As we hear their stories, I believe we'll see a little bit of ourselves in them.

We're going to start today with three men who were key figures in Jesus' journey to the cross: Caiaphas, the high priest who had Jesus arrested and put on trial; Herod, the Jewish king who judged him; and Pilate, the Roman governor of Jerusalem who ultimately sentenced him to be crucified. On the surface, all three of these guys have been villains of the story, and not without merit. But each of them faces a crisis of conscience because of Jesus and must decide where their loyalties lie. These men are more than names on a page; they are human beings who have to balance their enormous political power with their own sense of morality.

But I want to start in 1887, a few years after Jesus's death. Lord Acton, a really smart English guy, was asked if political and religious leaders should be held to different moral standards than regular people, or if they should be allowed to get away with more because of their authority. He wrote, "I cannot accept your words that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favorable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption it is the other way against holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility. Power tends to corrupt and absolute power

corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority. There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it.” Remember when Nixon said, “When the president does it, that means it’s not illegal?” Lord Acton would offer a terse “tut tut” to that idea.

Ok, let’s rewind about 1850 years to meet our characters in this episode of “Law and Order: SVU,” Savior Victim Unit. Caiaphas was the high priest of Jewish temple. Herod was the quasi-Jewish king of Judea. Pilate was the Roman governor of Jerusalem. All of them enjoyed almost unlimited power. And all of them had a vested interest in keeping the peace and avoiding catching the eye of the Roman emperor.

As the high priest, Caiaphas was in charge of everything related to the temple, which the most religious location for all Jews. That gave him both enormous religious and political influence. That also means if there was any corruption going on in the temple – and Jesus turned over a few tables to show that there was – Caiaphas knew about it and probably benefitted from it. He was making money of the extortion taking place in God’s house. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

And, I would add, religious power can be especially dangerous because of the influence it gives the power-holder. A few weeks ago, I was in Dallas for a conference and we visited University Christian Church in Fort Worth, one of the largest churches in our denomination. Their sanctuary feels like a cathedral, with long rows of pews and a balcony and flying buttresses and buttresses that just sit there doing nothing. And I did what I always do when I’m in a sanctuary, I went and stood in the pulpit, which was this elevated wooden fortress that projected out toward the congregation. I didn’t know whether to preach or proclaim, “I’m the king of the world!” Because you feel that way standing there! Thankfully, I know their pastor, Russ, and he has the perfect humble temperament to preach there each Sunday.

Caiaphas not only had unchallenged religious power, he was also in charge of keeping the Jewish people in line politically. Rome was just fine with the Jewish people practicing their religion as long as it stayed peaceful and didn’t threaten the Roman rule. So, Caiaphas has a relationship of tense convenience with the Roman leaders. And then along comes this Jesus guy who is healing lepers and challenging religious leaders and stirring up the crowd. He’s a threat to the way of life Caiaphas has created for himself and the Jewish people. Something had to be done.

When Jesus doesn’t fall for the trick questions he’s asked by the chief priests and scribes, Caiaphas has him arrested in order to try and trap him. Let’s pick up the story in Matthew 26: *<sup>57</sup> Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, <sup>60</sup> but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward <sup>61</sup> and said, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.’” <sup>62</sup> Caiaphas stood up and said, “Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?” <sup>63</sup> But Jesus was silent. Then Caiaphas said to him, “I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, <sup>[k]</sup> the Son of God.” <sup>64</sup> Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then Caiaphas tore his clothes and said, “He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What do you think?” They answered, “He deserves death.”*

So, Caiaphas sends Jesus to meet with Pilate, because the Jewish leaders didn't have the power to execute someone. Pilate is such a fascinating character. He's been given charge of a fairly insignificant territory in the Roman empire and told all he has to do is keep it quiet. So, the last thing he wants to do is get into the middle of a family squabble among the Jewish people. Jesus is their problem, not his, so initially Pilate kicks the can down the road.

He sends Jesus to meet with King Herod, who is the one who should decide what to do with this rabble-rouser. Herod is almost universally hated, a half-Jewish man who inherited his kingship from his dad and has no interest in ruling benevolently. He hates Jesus because he fears him and envies him. Luke's gospel says, *"When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. <sup>9</sup> He questioned him at some length, but Jesus<sup>[c]</sup> gave him no answer. Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him and sent him back to Pilate. <sup>12</sup> That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies."* Jesus does the worst thing he could do to Herod. When Herod questions him, Jesus stays silent. Ignores him. Doesn't say a word. Herod is used to people being scared of him, of getting his way. When Herod realizes he can't intimidate Jesus, when Jesus is not afraid of his bullying, he gives up and sends Jesus back to Pilate.

So, Pilate faces the ultimate existential dilemma: betray his conscience and condemn an innocent man or do the right thing and risk losing his job? What would you do? Easy for us to say on this side of history, right? But given the choice, would you stand up to unethical practices in your company, or turn a blind eye to make sure you can still pay the bills? Would you challenge the powers that be and expose yourself to punishment or just keep your head down and hope someone else says something? John's gospel tells us, *"Pilate said to Jesus, 'Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you?' From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, 'If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against Caesar'."* The people have sold out, turning their allegiance from their faith in God to the political leaders of the day.

So, Pilate capitulates to the crowd. Matthew's gospel tells us, *"When Pilate saw that he could do nothing but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' <sup>25</sup> Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' <sup>26</sup> So he released Barabbas for them, and after flogging Jesus he handed him over to be crucified."*

All three of these men have been corrupted by the power given them and history has held them accountable. But I don't know that we've learned from this lesson, because down through the centuries there have been counterfeit kings and queens who serve their own selfish desires rather than the people under their rule. Wherever power exists, it is susceptible to being corrupted.

But, as he usually does, Jesus shows us the way to deal with corrupted leaders. His words and actions tell us to have courage when speaking out against power that has been corrupted. He encourages us to be strong when power is aligned against us or against those who can't be strong for themselves. He shows us not to be intimidated when power tries to bend our will or weaken our resolve. He reminds us that, while the power of faith may not make all situations acceptable, it can make them endurable.

Jesus is arrested, falsely accused, wrongly convicted, spat upon, beaten, called names, and ultimately crucified. And yet, he never stops being the person God created him to be, maintaining his dignity and integrity to the very end. No matter what conflicts we find ourselves in, be they in relationships, at work, or on social media, we must never stop being ourselves. We can't allow ourselves to be corrupted. Be true to who you are, to who God created you to be. And trust that God is at work in this world, seeking to bring about peace and truth and justice and reconciliation. If God can bring resurrection out of the corruption of power in Jesus's day, there is always reason to have hope.