

“I Am Barabbas” Matthew 27:15-23 Passion Sunday 4-9-17

“I Am Spartacus”. That has become a catchphrase from the 1960 movie Spartacus, set during the Roman Empire. A Southwest Airlines commercial changed the name to Fenwick, but the idea is the same as in the movie. In the scene a Roman general is addressing captured slaves whose rebellion against Rome was led by the gladiator/slave Spartacus. He tells them that if they will identify which one is Spartacus, they will remain slaves, but they won’t be executed. To spare his fellow slaves, Spartacus stands up to identify himself, but before he can say anything his friend Antonius also stands up and says, “I am Spartacus”. Soon, all the slaves are standing and shouting, “I am Spartacus”. Knowing that one of them is the real Spartacus, the Romans crucify all of them. Perhaps the slaves expected that and preferred death to slavery.

I am not Spartacus, but I am Barabbas. And truth be told, you too are Barabbas. We are all Barabbas. We belong to the band of insurrectionists who rebel against God’s authority.

The Barabbas in our text was not only a rebel, but also a robber and a murderer. If you have been part of the Lenten study of the Ten Commandments, you know we are all rebels, robbers and murderers. From our heart, we do not always respect divinely appointed authority. We rob our employer when our work is not worthy of our pay. In Jesus’ eyes, hatred and bitterness is the same as murder. We are Barabbas, rising up against the authority of God to insert our own will and stand in judgment of others.

There is more bad news about being Barabbas. The Bible tells us that failing to do the good when we have opportunity is also sin. And if we keep 99 % of the law, but fail in just small part, we are guilty of the whole law. The standard is perfection, not an A for effort.

More bad news. We don’t have to be rebels, robbers or murderers to be Barabbas. We can also earn that name also by lust, greed, covetousness, dishonesty, profanity, neglect of worship, and fearing, loving and trusting other things and people more than God. That’s a broad net that none of us can avoid. As I said, we are all Barabbas.

But the Passion story tells us that there is good news in being Barabbas. Jesus had been arrested and was on trial before Pontius Pilate. The Jews had a list of charges against Jesus. Ironically, in the case of Barabbas, rebellion against Rome was one of those charges. He claimed to be a King, which would be treason, since Rome already had one in Caesar. Surely, Pilate would agree that he deserved death.

They also accused him of blasphemy claiming to be the Son of God. But even Pilate knew their real motive was envy, since Jesus had drawn much support of the people away from the Jews.

There was a tradition then that Rome would release one prisoner on the eve of the Passover each year. It appeared as a good will gesture, but it was also politically expedient to placate the Jews when they could. Pilate presented Barabbas, the worst criminal he had at the time, as an alternative to Jesus, whom he deemed innocent. He reckoned that they would ask for Jesus to be released. Pilate sorely underestimated the hatred of the Jewish leaders toward Jesus. He had an affect on the Jewish commoners similar to the one Luther had on the German peasants. Religious change in Rome, as in Germany would bring with it social and political upheaval. The Jews didn't like Rome any more than Barabbas did, but they had a cozy coexistence with them that Jesus would certainly upset.

So when given the choice which one Pilate was to release to them, the Jews incited the crowd to ask for Barabbas. I am sure that was OK with Barabbas. What man wouldn't want someone else to take his punishment, especially if the punishment was death?

Like Spartacus, Jesus rose up against the evil forces that enslave people to sin and punishment. He rose up, boldly declaring himself the Son of His Father in heaven. But unlike Spartacus, he alone died, not for his own rebellion against God, but because he obeyed God, in dying for the sins of the world.

He died for Barabbas, for all of us. The upside to being Barabbas is that we when we confess who we are as sinners, together with all the others rebels, we do not get crucified. We have the substitute, Jesus. We get forgiven because of Him.

Forgiveness is what we need. "Barabbas" means, "Son of the father", but he was a wayward son, playing our role as wayward sheep who go our own way. Jesus was the obedient Son of the Father, forgiving through this obedience even unto death.

Pilate made the offer and the crowd chose Barabbas to go free. But the choice was made thousands of years before. When sin came into the world, God had already chosen Jesus to die to redeem sinners from death. The prophets foretold it. After the raising of Lazarus, even the High Priest Caiaphas, unwittingly did too, when he said, "*it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.*" He unwittingly proclaimed the Gospel, while justifying the plans to have Jesus executed.

That Barabbas, a notorious criminal was set free from punishment and Jesus was not is at the core of Holy Week. On Thursday, as every Sunday, we celebrate and proclaim with bread and wine the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. Friday we ponder at the cross how the Father's scandalous love took our place in death. Sunday we celebrate the Resurrection. It confirms that while we are indeed Barabbas in our sin, we are also, like him, set free from death.

Neither Pilate nor the Jews could set the sinner free. God made us his children and give us a new name: Christian. We are His by faith and by faith, forgiven. Amen.