

The Passion of Our Lord, Part III: The Trial before Caiaphas  
Lent 3 Midweek + March 27, 2019  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
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"On Trial"

The heart of tonight's Passion Reading is Jesus on trial before the Jewish religious leaders. Let's begin by considering our assumptions about what it means to be "on trial." Whether the final determination will be made by a judge or a jury, we assume that there will be an honest attempt to determine the accused person's guilt or innocence based on the factual evidence. The accused will have a defense attorney representing them, and the state will have a prosecuting attorney trying to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. A pursuit of the truth should be the starting point in any system of legal justice. But we can also safely assume that human institutions will never reach perfect justice because all those involved are sinners, governed by self-interest and tempted to deny or cover-up the truth.

The trial of Jesus before the scribes and elders violated many of our assumptions. The chief priests and the whole council were seeking evidence, but not with the goal of finding the truth, rather with arriving at their pre-determined outcome, that Jesus must die. He was disrupting the religious system that had them in positions of power, causing all sorts of uncertainty about their future, and attracting a following with His undeniable miracles, so He had to go. They had no truthful evidence against the sinless Christ, so they brought in false witnesses.

Jesus had no one there speaking in His defense, and even more surprising was that He didn't even answer the false charges! But when the high priest put the question to Him and asked, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus gave a clear and truthful answer. Jesus said, "I am. You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God's power and coming with the clouds of heaven." There was no self-interest in that response. Instead, it was self-incriminating. For those truthful words, the high priest pronounced Jesus guilty of blasphemy and deserving of death.

Not every trial occurs before a judge, jury, or tribunal. In one way or another, we are on trial constantly as others hear our words and observe our actions and form their opinions about our character and identity. Peter was put on trial that night by the questions of the maidservants and bystanders. The cross examination was unrelenting and he failed the test. His usual boldness melted away in fear and self-interest. He too gave a false witness and denied his identity as a follower of Christ.

Almost daily we are confronted with opportunities to confess our identity as a follower of Christ. No one can boast that they handle those situations perfectly every time. Like Peter, our sinful nature often causes us to react with self-interest and fear, to compromise or cover up our identity as baptized believers. In those instances, the accusing question might be addressed to us: "If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Our conscience and those who measure Christianity by good works would answer no. Thankfully, the Judge who makes the determination doesn't judge by outward appearance; but looks on the heart and sees the faith put there by the Holy Spirit. That faith receives the forgiveness earned by Christ and offered in the Gospel. Our identity remains secure.

While the sham trial in the high priest's house moved to its preordained outcome, a much greater trial was taking place. God the Father, a truly, holy and righteous Judge was passing judgment on the sin of all humanity and time. What a difficult dilemma! How can He possibly be true to all His divine characteristics? God is holy, sinless and hating sin. He is fair and just, always doing what is right. He can't overlook sin or pretend that it's not a big deal. The grievous offenses of human sin must be punished by death.

But God is also good and kind, merciful and compassionate, gracious and loving toward the crown of His creation, despite our evident sinfulness. Would God be true to all of His characteristics? The answer is evident in the Passion of our Lord. He would. That's why Jesus is standing there on trial. He is the stand-in for all sinful humanity. His role as substitute and Savior was preordained from before the creation of the world.

We easily recognize the treachery and injustice rendered by the Jewish court. Jesus was sinless! He was innocent! But those flawed judges and Pilate the next day did not pronounce the final verdict. That role belongs to God, the creator and Ruler of heaven and earth. In an unfathomable balance of heavenly justice and mercy for sinners, Jesus is pronounced deserving of death, because He was carrying the sins of all.

Human courts are an institution of law. When the truth is made evident, the accused gets what he or she deserves, declared either guilty or innocent, receiving either punishment or release. Grace is not in play. Mercy and compassion might be shown in the sentence, but you won't hear a black-robed judge say, "You are forgiven."

Thankfully the heavenly court displays a balance of law and gospel. Sin is rightfully punished, but in an amazing display of self-sacrifice, the sinless Son takes the punishment for us and pays the price of blood and death and hell. The undeserving sinners are freed from sin's guilt and punishment to live at peace with God.

The two disciples in tonight's reading show how that peace is received through repentance or lost through despair. When Jesus looked on Peter after his denial, it affected Peter profoundly. He realized his guilt and wept bitterly. Those were tears of repentance, including both sorrow for sin and trust in His forgiving Savior and Lord. After Jesus' resurrection, He asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Upon Peter's reply, "Lord you know that I love you," Jesus instructed him, "Feed my sheep." Peter was graciously forgiven and restored as a follower and witness.

Judas had sorrow for his betrayal, but Satan had entered him and trust in Jesus as a forgiving Savior wasn't present. He fell victim to hopeless despair. His end was tragic. It need not happen. By hearing God's Word and believing the gospel, our faith is kept strong and alive to a blessed end.

Now, back to us. Often in this life we find ourselves on trial in the courtroom of our conscience. The devil as prosecuting attorney accuses us of grievous sins and tries to overwhelm us with the lie that God couldn't possibly forgive such horrible sins or want any part of us. But the Holy Spirit points to the finished redeeming work of Jesus, reminds us of our Baptism and the faith that receives His gifts, and we can be certain that we are forgiven and at peace with God.

When we transition from this life to the next, we are again on trial, but the outcome is never in doubt. The full complement of participants is there. The devil gives it one last try, charging us with all the ways we've failed, condemning us as deserving of death. But Jesus our defense attorney is not silent. With a voice of powerful authority He proclaims, "I have paid the price of blood, death, and hell for the accused. He is one of ours. His sins are gone. Devil, you have no evidence. Your case has fallen apart. Be gone.

Earthly trials can be threatening. We know that we won't always give a good account of our identity. Sometimes we might be judged unfairly by others. But the trial that really counts was settled long ago at the cross and empty tomb. The verdict is pronounced continually for repentant sinners. Eternal life is yours as a free gift, for you are forgiven for all your sins. Amen.