

Sermon for Sunday, February 21, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"CHOOSING BETWEEN BARABBAS AND CHRIST"
St. Luke 23:1-25

Text: "But they all cried out together, 'away with this man, and release to us Barabbas.'" St. Luke 23:18

Fantastic! Incredible! Adjectives can hardly describe the scene that our scripture for this morning draws for us. The astounding career of Christ, like a Shakespearean tragedy, is drawing to a sad and desolate conclusion. At the very height of his fame and popularity, dramatic forces have been set in play which bring him to a wretched conclusion upon the bitter and painful cross of Calvary.

Picture the scene before us--the early morning of a Judean dawn as a large crowd of God's chosen people--the children of the patriarchs--of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the descendants of the men and women who passed through the Red Sea--these, God's own people--now stand before the Tribunal of a Roman judge. And are they crying out for the righteousness of God? Do they demand justice and mercy? Are they crying out in indignant outrage over Roman abuse of sacred things? Are they demanding the freedom to serve God? No. Shame upon sorry shame they cry out for the death of God's own son--"away with this man and release to us Barabbas."

Well, perhaps it is an honest mistake. Perhaps Barabbas is a just and wise man. Perhaps he is a priest of the temple who has been unjustly accused. Perhaps he is some innocent man who is the victim of circumstances. But no! The Bible tells us he was a seditionist and a murderer. So on that fateful day as the history of the world hung in the balance, these people of God made their choice--they made their choice between Jesus and Barabbas. Jesus who had opened God's word to them, who had healed their sick, cured their lame, Jesus, who had fed their hungry, comforted the mourning, blessed the poor, and preached God's word. And Barabbas--Barabbas who had endangered the whole nation by his acts of treason and sedition against Rome; Barabbas who we are told was a thief and a murderer. That day the Jews chose between those two men and they chose--Barabbas.

Well, surely something is amiss here. If they did not choose the wrong man in a terrible mistake, perhaps the people who did the choosing were themselves the wrong people. But picture the multitude in your mind as they spread out before the palace of Pilate crying for the blood of Jesus. Surely this motley, blood-thirsty mob are renegades, rabble-rousers, who are friends of Barabbas. Perhaps they, too, are crooks and thieves and murderers. But as our eyes scan the faces of the mob, we see people from every level of Jerusalem's society. Over there are some priests of the temple and over here are some Jewish guards of the temple. And there in the middle are some Jewish merchants. Over there stands the inn-keeper and back there at the edge of the crowd are some shepherds. Scattered through the crowd are fashions from all over the world--Jews who have come back to Jerusalem from distant lands to celebrate the feast of the Passover. That's who was there that morning--people from every walk of life and from every social level. And they are all crying for the blood of Jesus.

No, it is no mistake and no, it is not the renegades crying out for the release of Barabbas. Why are they choosing a revolutionist and a thief and a murderer instead of Jesus? If you had been there that day would you have made that terrible mistake--would you have chosen Barabbas?

Notice in the first place that they chose Barabbas instead of Christ because Jesus always put the emphasis on God's will. More than anything else the Jews

wanted freedom. They wanted the hated yoke of Roman bondage to be broken and destroyed. They wanted, above all else, the restoration of the ancient Kingdom of David--the return of those days when the Jews had ruled the fertile crescent from Mesopotamia to Egypt. And the Bible says Barabbas was a seditionist--a revolutionary. Barabbas was a hero. Barabbas was out doing something about Roman bondage. He wasn't sitting on his hands preaching non-violence and peace and non-aggression and brotherly love. The Jews had waited for centuries for God to intervene in some miraculous way in human history, but Barabbas was tired of waiting.

But don't think the Jews had not been fair to Jesus. They had given him every opportunity to proclaim himself king and the Bible tells us that on one occasion they came to take him by force and make him king until Jesus slipped away. "My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus had said. Jesus had raised the whole question of God's will for the Jews. Did God want a politically strong nation? Did he want a rich and wealthy nation? Did he want powerful armies, great navies and a military juggernaut? Well, that's what the Jews wanted! But Jesus came saying, "That's not God's will. God does not intend to restore the earthly kingdom of David. God's will for Israel is that they become a people of God, that they take up their cross and follow me." Time and time again he had said it to them, "If any man would come after me," he had cried, "let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." He had said, "He who gains his life shall lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake and the gospel's shall save it." That wasn't what the Jews wanted to hear. They didn't want to sacrifice their dreams of material prosperity and national greatness for sacrifice and serving. They could choose Jesus and God's will or they could choose Barabbas--and they chose Barabbas.

Are you choosing Jesus and God's will or are you choosing Barabbas? Do you have any clear idea of what God's will is for you this morning? What does God expect of you, want of you? How about you young people--as you choose your vocation, as you pick your mate, as you make all of those decisions that will affect your whole life, how are you making those decisions? Are you getting down on your knees and asking God, "Father, what is your will for my life?" Are you asking, "Lord, what would you have me to do with myself?" I have been talking to a number of our young people lately about what they are doing with their summer. I want every one of our young people who are eligible to go to Montreat to the youth conference this summer. I say to them, "Pray about this. Ask God if this is his will for your life right now." But how many of us adults get up every morning and commit the day to Jesus. How many of us begin by saying, "Lord, show me your will for me today. Let me walk in your ways."

If we are not in the will of God we are out of God's will. If we are out of God's will we are choosing Barabbas instead of Jesus. Do you remember our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane? The Bible said he was in agony and as he prayed about the crucifixion that was so imminent, sweat fell from him as drops of blood. Yet, he concluded his prayer that awful night, "Thy will be done." At the country club, at your parties, at your social gatherings, are you in the will of God? When you go to work in the morning, will you go in the will of God. In your business dealings, in your family decisions, in the spending of your financial resources, in the use of your time, are you in the will of God? If you are not then you, too, are choosing Barabbas instead of Jesus. If we are not in God's will we are no different from the Jews who stood before Pilate and cried out, "Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas."

I think a second reason the Jews chose Barabbas that day instead of Jesus was because Christ put the emphasis on God's word. The Jews kept the outward form of the law, but Jesus insisted that God's word went much deeper than outward appearance.

God's word was so important to Jesus that he said that if our hand caused us to sin, cut it off; if our eye caused us to fall, pluck it out. God's word was so important that it was better for one member of our body to perish than for the whole body to suffer in hell.

Barabbas didn't think God's word was so all-fired important. He didn't let God's word get in his way. He wanted to be free, so he stirred up rebellion. He wanted to be rich, so he stole. And when someone stood in his way, he murdered. God's word said love your enemy, but he hated him. God's word said, "Thou shalt not kill," but he killed. God's word said, "Thou shalt not steal," but he stole. No, Barabbas did not let God's word stand between him and what he really wanted. And that day the Jews chose Barabbas.

Whom do you choose this morning? Do you choose Jesus or Barabbas? How much emphasis does God's word have in our lives? How often do we let our personal desires and wants break God's word. We live in a world where crime is spiraling, where immorality is rampant, and where we have forgotten God's word. We live in a world that is crying out, "Release unto us Barabbas." I hear a lot of adults today complain about our youth. There is nothing wrong with our young people that some good examples wouldn't help. They think most of us are hypocrites and the fact is, most of us are. God's word is plain. God's word is unequivocal. God's word is uncompromising. But God will not have his word compromised. You either choose Christ or you choose Barabbas. There is no in-between.

I think there is a third reason the Jews chose Barabbas instead of Christ that fateful day. They chose Barabbas because Jesus not only put the emphasis on God's will and God's word, he also insisted on God's way. The Jews thought they could build the Kingdom of David on the old foundations. They thought the old ways needed only a shot in the arm. But Jesus said to them, "You must be born again." That's God's way. The Jews said, "We have Abraham as our father." Jesus said, "No man comes to the Father but by me." That's God's way.

If you died tonight, what reasons would you give God for letting you into his heaven? Would you tell him you were a Presbyterian? Would you say you had a college degree? Would you remind him that you had been recognized in your community as a good man? Would you tell him you were a loyal American? Just what would you say to God tonight if he asked you why he should let you in his heaven?

There is only one way. Jesus told us the way and I believe him. The Bible tells us the way and I believe it. The church teaches us the way and I believe her. And all three tell us the same thing. They all three tell us that the only way is to accept Jesus as your Saviour. To accept the fact that he has died for your sins, died in your place, and to let him who died your death for you now live his life through you. That is God's way and there simply is no other way.

That day so long ago the Jews hoped there was another way. They didn't like God's way because they wanted their way. So they chose Barabbas. They chose disaster. They chose tragedy. They chose death. Whom will you choose--Barabbas or Christ?