

Sermon for Sunday, June 26, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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WHEN BARABBAS IS THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE
St. Luke 23: 1-18

Text: "But they all cried out together, 'Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas.'"

St. Lukes 23:18

Adjectives can hardly describe the scene in our scripture for this morning. Fantastic! Incredible! 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 motion which bring Jesus 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 - the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the children of those men and women who bravely crossed the Red Sea - who dwelt in the wilderness and received manna from God on high. That hearty band of men and women who had crossed the Jordan River at Jericho and had seen God deliver the city into their hands. These, God's own people, stand now before the tribunal of the Roman Judge, and these, the descendants of the mighty men of God, are they crying out for righteousness? Do they demand justice and mercy? Are they crying out in indignant outrage over abuse of sacred things? Are they demanding freedom from the Romans to serve God? No! Shame upon sorry shame, they are crying out for the blood of the Son of God. Away with this man, give us Barabbas instead.

Well, perhaps it is an honest mistake. Perhaps Barabbas is a just and holy man. Perhaps he is a wise priest of the temple who has been unjustly accused. Perhaps he is some innocent man, the victim of circumstance. But no! The Bible tells us he is a seditionist, a revolutionary and a murderer, and so on that fateful day as the history of the world hung in precarious balance, these the people of God make their choice - they chose between Jesus, the Son of God, and Barabbas, the son of revolution. Jesus, who had opened God's word to them who when they were hungry had broken bread and fed the multitudes. Jesus, who had reached out to touch the sick and the lame and to heal them, Jesus, who had spoken to them the beatitudes of God, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Jesus who had opened God's word and said this is the bread of life. And Barabbas--Barabbas who had endangered the whole nation by his rash acts of treason and sedition against Rome; Barabbas who we are told was a thief and a murderer. That day as the Jews chose between Jesus and Barabbas, they chose Barabbas.

Well, surely something is missing here. If they did not chose the wrong man in a terrible mistake, perhaps these people making the choice were not God's people-- they were the wrong people. But picture the multitude in your mind as they gather in the court yard, of Pilate crying for the blood of Jesus. Surely this motley, blood-thirsty mob are renegades, rabble-rousers, friends of Barabbas. Perhaps they, too, are crooks and thieves and murderers. But as our eyes scan the faces of the multitudes we see instead men from every level of Jewish society. Over there are priests from the temple and over there are the guards from the holy place. And there--the merchants of Jerusalem and back at the fringe of the crowd, the shepherds have gathered and scattered through the crowd--we see the fashions from all over the world for the Jews have gathered from everywhere for this holy feast day. And that is who they were that morning, people from every walk of life, from every social level and all of them have one thing in common, they are crying for the blood of Jesus.

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

Notice in the first place that they chose Barabbas instead of Christ because Jesus insisted on doing God's will. More than anything else the Jews yearned for freedom. They wanted hated chains of bondage to be broken, to be freed. They wanted, above all else, the restoration of the ancient Kingdom of David--the return of those days when the Jews had ruled from the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia all the way down to the Nile River. The Bible says Barabbas was a seditionist - a revolutionary. He was a hero and he was out doing something about Roman bondage. He wasn't sitting on his hands preaching non-violence, peace, non-aggression and brotherly love. The Jews had waited for centuries for God to intervene in some miraculous way in Jewish history, but Barabbas was tired of waiting.

But don't think the Jews hadn't 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 to make him king until Jesus slipped away. "My kingdom is not of this world," He 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 you become the people of God, that you take up your cross and follow me." Time and time again he had said it to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." He said, "He who gains his life shall lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake and the gospel shall find it." And that wasn't what the Jews wanted to hear. They didn't want to sacrifice their dreams of 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 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 those decisions that will affect your whole life--are you getting down on your knees and asking God, "Father, what is your will for my life?" Are you saying, "God, what will you have me to do with myself?" 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 today. Let me walk in the ways of the Lord this day?"

If we are not in the will of God we are out of God's will. If we are out of the will of God we are choosing Barabbas instead of Jesus. Do you remember our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane? As Pat was singing this morning, "I knelt today where Jesus knelt" I want you to know that on the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane there is a traditional place where our Lord knelt. A place of stone and as he knelt there with the rocks cutting into his knees the Bible says that He prayed and in sweat as it were drops of blood, He prayed about the crucifixion so imminent. He prayed about the agony, and the humiliation that was to be heaped upon Him. And yet in the midst of it, the Bible says he prayed nevertheless, "God, not my will, but Thine 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

in stead 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, release to us Barabbas!"

A second reason the Jews chose Barabbas that day was not only because Jesus tried to do God's will but because Jesus put the emphasis on God's word. The Jews kept the outward form of the law, but Jesus insisted that God's word went deeper than outward appearance. God's word was so important to Jesus, he said, "If your hand offends you, cut it off and throw it from you; if your eye offends you or causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you, for its better you go into heaven maimed than to die and go to hell, because of your sin."

Barabbas didn't think God's word was so 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 somebody stood in the way of what he wanted, he murdered. God's word said, "Love your enemy," and he despised him. God's word said, "Thou shall not kill," and he put his steel into the flesh of his enemy. God's word said, "thou shalt not steal," but he took what he wanted. He did not let God's word stand between him and what he wanted. And that day the Jews chose Barabbas.

Don mentioned our General Assembly. The Bible says that a lot of things are sin. The Bible says adultery is sin. The Bible says that gluttony is a sin. The Bible says that homosexuality is a sin, but there are those today who want to appeal to the world and they want to give the impression that they are open hearted and generous for those who have certain kinds of problems, and that God's word doesn't condemn them. I want to tell you that God's word doesn't condemn anybody, but it condemns sin and it calls sin, sin. When our church refused to say that homosexuality is a sin, we were not being obedient to the word of God. God hates our sin and it is attitudes like this being unwilling and unafraid to stand up to the word of God and immorality is rampant in our country and sin and crime is spiraling. Can you believe that child pornography is sweeping this country? If God doesn't do something about America, He will have to apologize to Sodom.

Do you choose Jesus or do you chose Barabbas? How much emphasis does God's word have in your life? I hear a lot of people complain about young people today and I want to tell you something, there's nothing wrong with young people today that some good adult examples wouldn't help. They think most of us are hypocrites and the fact is, many of us are. God's word is plain, God's word is unequivocal, God's word is uncompromizing and you either chose Christ or you chose Barabbas. As the song used to say, "There ain't no Mr. 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, but Jesus put the emphasis on God's way. The Jews thought they could build the Kingdom of David on old foundations and they thought that the only thing they needed was a historical shot in the arm. But Jesus said to them, "You are wrong." You remember what John the Baptist said to the Jews? He said, "Listen, God is able of these stones to raise up children of Abraham." And Jesus came right behind him and said, "Look, you have to be born again." That is God's way. The Jews said "We've got Abraham for our father and Jesus said "No man comes to the Father but by me." That is God's way. Listen, if you died tonight and you got to heaven, what reason would you give God for letting you in? Would you say "Hey God, look I'm a Presbyterian, or would you say, Father, I've got a college education, and Father do you realize that I have been well thought of in my community, I've got a good name. Would you say, "Father, I'm a loyal American, look here, I wear the flag in my label." Just what would you say to God tonight?

Jesus told us the only thing that is going to get us into the kingdom of God and I believe Him. The Bible says there is only one way and I believe the Bible. The church tells there is only one way and I believe that. All three of them tell us the same thing. The only way is to accept Jesus as your Savior. To accept the fact that he died for your sins, died in your place, and to let him who died your death for you, now live his life through you. By the power of God's Spirit that is God's way and there is simply no other way.

That day so long ago the Jews hoped there was another way, and I see my liberal friends at my denominational level who control the structures of my church and they hope there is another way and they are trying to do it another way. But I want to tell you there is no other way. There are people today choosing Barabbas as they did so long ago. They chose disaster. They chose tragedy. They chose death. Oh, beloved, Jesus or Barabbas. What is your choice?