



Villains of Holy Week

the gift of redemption

Weekly Lenten Devotional

*Sermon Series begins the First Sunday of Lent,
February 21 and continues to Easter.
Use this guide to dive deeper into each weekly lesson.*

This series seeks to explore the issues of othering and villainizing in our life through the characters of Holy Week we often write off as “the bad guys”. This series will seek to humanize these characters, identify how we are like them, and explore the hope of redemption in Christ offered to them (and if to them, then also to us).

Why Villains?

Scripture is setting us on a path, and this path is a guide to how we live. We might say Jesus was giving us a particular path on how to live, after all, he did say he was “the way”. In scripture, one word for this path is “fulfillment.” New Testament writers looked at Jesus as a fulfillment of the scriptures. What does that mean? It’s not the same as prediction. We might have been told that Jesus fulfilled scripture because it was predicted that he’d do so. As in, ancient prophets were predicting it the whole time. As in, if they said I would stub my toe at 2:53 PM on Tuesday next week, and then that happened – voila: fulfillment.

But there’s a better way to think of fulfillment when it comes to Jesus and scripture. Many could say Jesus was not explicitly expected from the Old Testament, but in light of Jesus’ life, we can look back and see how he’s a fulfillment of what God was doing in it. What’s the difference? Fulfillment is about bringing something to its fullest potential. It’s a word of trajectory and path. Here’s an example.

Jesus’ final commandment to his disciples was that they would love as Jesus has loved them. This might sound familiar. Earlier Jesus states a commandment that we often call the “golden rule”: Love your neighbor as yourself. But Jesus was going to take this further. The guide for loving wasn’t just going to be how I loved myself.

Now, Jesus says, it will be how Jesus has loved us. Jesus became the bar, standard, and trajectory for loving others. A trajectory of love that he applied even to his enemies. It’s one reason the story of Jesus is so challenging because in the end he would rather lay down his life than kill his enemy.

As we read the scriptures, we’ll notice that it’s easy to create an enemy in the narrative. Whether it’s Judas, Pilate, Jewish leaders, or the criminals who are crucified alongside Jesus. These people play a role for us to see the “wrong way” and to know what defiance, idolatry, pride, and sin look like.

Therefore, as we read about these villains, we must let Jesus’ words of loving the enemy guide us. As we seek to understand them, we must also ask – what does it mean to love the enemy? That love won’t predict what you will do, but it will guide you as you fulfill that love.

It's important that we see the villains in the story and not separate ourselves from them. We are to enter the story through them as well. As we understand them it becomes a way for us to understand ourselves. Are they stuck as villains? Or maybe in light of what we read, can we enter into the story, identify with the villains, grieve their fall, identify with their sin, and then allow for God to restore, renew, and even resurrect what has been lost?

People like Pilate and Judas are assumed to be beyond any redemption. But what if that assumption is wrong. What if even the villains of the story are not beyond restoration? What if as we identify with the villains and our own sinfulness, we need to be reminded that we are not fully lost either? What if God's love, which conquered death at Easter, was truly as powerful as what we hope?

That's the hope of scripture being fulfilled. We play a part. As we read, we also join the story of God that is happening in our midst right now. Might there be a Judas, Pilate, or Crucified Criminal in you? Might there be one in your midst? God's grace is active and working now so we must take what we read in these scriptures and let them come to life in our presence. That's the point. That's why we read. That's why we wrestle. That's why they are still powerful, and useful, and good for us.

Judas Iscariot—The Betrayer

We begin this Lenten season with Judas. He was one of Jesus's 12 disciples and the treasurer of the group. Each gospel introduces Judas as the one who betrays Jesus with each portraying him in variously villainous ways. He won't be the only close disciples to turn on Jesus, but his fall from grace is perhaps the most well-known and universally condemned.

We are left to ponder why Judas handed Jesus over to the religious authorities. Was he doomed to betray Jesus or did his motivation to betray Jesus come later? Was it because of greed? Was it because he had lost faith in Jesus' teachings? Or was he trying to prod Jesus into action? We are left to wrestle with these questions as we consider that perhaps we are like Judas as well: loved and chosen by God, but capable of betraying God's purpose and plans.

SCRIPTURE: John 13:21-32, Luke 22:1-6; Matthew 26:47-50

SELF-REFLECTION: What if Judas was trying to help?

Consider why Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss. What if Judas wasn't trying to get Jesus killed but trying to force Jesus' hand into action? That is one way we can understand his betrayal with a kiss. The kiss was to signify to Jesus that Judas still believed in him, but he also thought that Jesus had been too reserved in bringing in the kingdom of God. By bringing the authorities to him, perhaps Judas hoped he could force Jesus' hand into a violent revolution.

As misguided as it may have been, how does it change how I think about Judas if he was trying to help?

In what ways have I sought to direct God when I didn't like God's direction?

REDEMPTIVE HOPE: Is Judas doomed or redeemed?

Is there hope for Judas? Or is his story tragic to the end? Both Matthew and Luke (Acts) tell us that Judas died by suicide, but there seems to be a sense of remorse or repentance in him as well.

While there is no biblical story of Judas being restored in relationship with Jesus on earth, we can consider the grace of God which goes beyond this life. The 19th century Scottish preacher, George MacDonald once wrote: “I think, when Judas fled from his hanged and fallen body, he fled to the tender help of Jesus, and found it—I say not how. I believe Jesus loved Judas even when he was kissing him with the traitor’s kiss, and I believe that he was his Savior still.”

Do I believe that everyone deserves grace?

If God loves the worst in Judas, what does God love in me?

What can I learn from Judas’ tragic story that guides me to a more faithful following of Jesus?

PRAYER:

You chose Judas as your own, and he chose to betray you. He was not just a disciple but a friend. You loved him. You taught him. You shared bread with him. You revealed your glory by humbly serving the one who would betray you. Shower us with your mercy, Lord, and grow us up to be merciful. Amen.

Peter — The Deserter

Peter is not usually considered a villain in the Holy Week story, but rather an exemplary disciple who had a “bad night”. Like Judas, Jesus knows that Peter will betray him by denying him three times. Also like Judas, it seems that Peter does not fully understand the way of Jesus yet and works against the kingdom of God. (i.e. cutting of the man’s ear or when Jesus says to him, ‘Get behind me Satan’)

What we must wrestle with in Peter’s story is his quick abandonment of Jesus. Were the stakes so high that Peter feared guilt by association? Or perhaps Peter being so disappointed in Jesus’ lack of fighting back, he too lost confidence in Jesus being the Messiah he had hoped he would be? If Judas was a sin of commission by handing over Jesus, was Peter’s a sin of omission by not standing up, or in the least, standing by Jesus when he was being arrested and crucified?

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 16:21-23; Matthew 26:31-35, 50-56, 69-75; John 21:15-19

SELF-REFLECTION: Deserting Jesus

Though Peter’s deserting of Jesus is focused upon, eventually all the disciples fell away as well. Perhaps you know well this distancing from God. Maybe it was because of a fear of being associated with God? Maybe it’s a distancing because you’ve lost faith in God. Or maybe it’s a distancing from God because you no longer believe in the same things as you once did. As you reflect upon Peter’s deserting of Jesus, consider what makes you pull away or turn from God.

In what ways have I sought to distance myself from God in fear of being associated with God?

When am I prone to pull away from God? What triggers this distance?

What do I read about Peter that sounds like me?

REDEMPTIVE HOPE: Love that remains steadfast

In our communion liturgy, there is a line that says: “When we turned away, and our love failed, your love remained steadfast.” As we recall the last supper, arrest, and crucifixion of Christ, this line puts us with Peter that night and reminds us of the hope of God’s redemptive love.

In many ways, Peter and Judas are to be held together. Both betray Jesus in different ways, but each has a different path back to Jesus. Though we have no reconciled ending with Judas, Peter is restored to relationship with him. His restoration story helps us know that God’s love toward us is not conditional on our faithfulness to God. It is a reminder that God always extends the opportunity to say “yes” again.

Do I believe that my faithfulness determines God’s love for me?

What does it mean that God is faithful even when I am unfaithful?

Where do I need to say yes to God where I have turned away?

PRAYER:

Though our love failed, your love remained steadfast. Though we turn away, you are always with us. Though we are ashamed of you, you are always faithful to us. Give us the grace this week to follow where you lead us and to boldly be your people wherever that may take us. Amen.

Jewish Leaders—The Self-Righteous

This week we focus upon the Jewish leaders, who are variously portrayed in the Scriptures as the nemesis of Jesus. They seem to question him at every point and are the ones plotting his death. This is all done in the name of faithfulness to God. Jesus is a threat to their own power and understanding of God. As we read about them this week, consider reading about them through the assumption that they were trying to be faithful instead of assuming they were trying to be devious. How might this change how you read about their role in Jesus' death?

SCRIPTURE: Mark 14:1-2; 53-65, Luke 22:1-6; 54; 66-71, John 11:47-53

SELF-REFLECTION: Creating the other instead of looking within

It is common for us to see the Jewish leaders as the enemies of Jesus. Whether that be the various sects, such as the Pharisees or Sadducees, or that be of leaders such as, Herod or Caiaphas. It is a tragic reading of these scriptures that have created enemies not only in the pages of the gospels, but also of anti-Semitic rhetoric and actions in real life. This creating of the other keeps us from fully identifying with our own sin that was present in them as well.

The religious leaders thought they were seeking a faithful and righteous way of God, but it turns out they were only seeking to be self-righteous. As we read about these leaders, our invitation is not to set them aside as the antagonists but rather to consider their own self-righteousness as a mirror into our own. What if we come to find out that our religious zeal has been harmful and misguided?

If I assume these Jewish leaders were trying to be faithful, what do I read in these passages that tell me are their real concerns and challenges with Jesus?

Have I ever done anything in the name of God that ended up being harmful for someone else? Have I learned from that wrong? Have I reconciled that wrong?

Is there a group of people that I have turned into an enemy instead of seeking to understand?

REDEMPTIVE HOPE: From Saul to Paul

Though we may think Pharisees to be Jesus’ greatest rival, it may surprise us to read that they were also some of the quickest to be leaders in the early church. The most notable is Saul. At the time of his conversion, Saul was a persecutor of the church until Christ blinds him on the road. Paul’s story is a reminder to us that God’s grace can transform any heart and set us upon a new path of following the way of Jesus.

Does my need to be seen as righteous ever get in the way of being made righteous?

How I have I experienced God transforming my misguided zeal for good?

PRAYER:

Lord, remove the blinders from our eyes of misguided zeal and self-righteous faith. With renewed vision, give us eyes that see the other as our brother and sister. With renewed vision, give us eyes to see you as you are – the crucified and risen Savior. With renewed vision, guide us on the path of Jesus. Amen.

Pilate—The god

Alongside Judas, Pilate is the most well know villain of Holy Week because he is the one who ultimately condemns Jesus to death by crucifixion. There is no easy characterization of Pilate in the scriptures because we get a mixture of depictions of him. In John, he plays both the crowd and Jesus to amplify his own authority and power. In the other gospels, he appears to consider Jesus innocent but appeases the crowd's demands of crucifixion – even washing his hands clean of guilt in Matthew's gospel. And so, we are left wrestling with many questions. Was he truly guilty in his role of Jesus's death? Was Pilate just doing his job as a Roman governor? Or is Pilate an embodiment of something bigger than himself that stands in contrast to Jesus and the kingdom of God?

SCRIPTURE: John 18:28-19:16, Matthew 27:1-26

SELF-REFLECTION: Making gods amongst us.

On one hand, Pilate embodies something bigger than himself: the power of Rome, the ugly marriage of religion to empire, and even the anger and malice of the people. Just as the Kingdom of God is presented in one person of Jesus Christ so too is Pilate the presentation of the Kingdom of the World in one person. He is a making of god amongst the people. A god who controls through political and military power and who determines the fate of people's lives. To see Pilate is to see our own communal complicity in systems of injustice and oppression. Pilate has Jesus crucified as “the King of the Jews”. The deep irony of the cross is that King Jesus does die an enemy of the state. We are confronted with the same question Pilate asks of the crowd: “Shall I crucify your king?”

What do I read that reveals how Pilate is trying to manipulate the crowd or belittle Jesus?

If Pilate embodies something bigger than himself, what does this teach us about how we are to critique and engage with our own leaders?

Imagine being a fly on the wall in Pilate and Jesus' conversation in John 18. What would it be like to experience this conversation?

REDEMPTIVE HOPE: No king, but Jesus

On the other hand, Pilate is a human like anyone else in the story – someone torn between his allegiances to his nation, his job, his people, and the person of Jesus Christ who stands before him. As a government leader, he carries the weight and pressure of keeping order. Because of high tensions in Jerusalem, Jesus's teachings and actions in the Temple may have made him a potential political enemy. He may not have seen a moral dilemma in having a potential rebel leader executed before a riot began in the city. In this tension, Pilate must choose what to do with Jesus.

For all of us, there is a temptation to play god. To seek more power over others. To let our pride get in the way of submitting to the rule and reign of God. It may not carry the weight of a Roman governor, but it may have real impact upon our families, friends, and community. As the resurrected Lord, Jesus offers us a new way in this world where our allegiance to the Lamb of God rescues us from the temptation of playing god. This way of Jesus allows us to lay down the weight of being what we are not, and pick up the freedom of life found in our true King.

If you were Pilate, what would have been the things you wrestled with in deciding what to do?

What do I need to lay down before God that my pride has been making me carry?

PRAYER:

Lord, keep us from following the gods of our own making – of pride, vanity, power, and greed. Free us to follow you along the path of generosity, humility, and love throughout today and every day. Amen.

The Crucified Criminals— The Mockers and the Merciful

This week we will consider the two criminals that were crucified with Jesus. Luke and Matthew give us the most details with only Luke's version inviting us to see that one mocks Jesus while one seeks Jesus' mercy. We don't know much about their crimes, but their death by crucifixion indicates that they were considered threats to be made an example of to the public.

The criminals on the cross are an important point in the story of Holy Week. As we have identified with the other villains of this week, we find that we are forced to make our choice: One criminal stays defiant and mocking God. One seeks mercy and finds paradise. Which are we?

SCRIPTURE: Luke 23:32-43, Matthew 26:55, 27:38-44

SELF-REFLECTION: Common Enemy Intimacy

Consider the criminal who joins in the crowd's mocking of Jesus. There is a form of connection and belonging known as common enemy intimacy. This intimacy is found in shared hatred for someone or something. Author Brené Brown says: "It is counterfeit connection...If the bond we share with others is simply that we hate the same people, the intimacy we experience is often intense, immediately gratifying, and an easy way to discharge outrage and pain." (Braving the Wilderness) Perhaps the criminal, though fleeting and vain as it may be, finds a sense of connection with this crowd by joining the mocking of Jesus. Perhaps the events that have led him to his own cross have hardened his heart and left him desperate for any semblance of belonging. Out of his pain (spiritual, emotional, and physical) he joins the mocking of Jesus.

Is there a form of common enemy intimacy I am experiencing now? Is it satisfying my need for connection?

What might this criminal's mocking of Jesus teach me about how my pain causes me lash out at God?

REDEMPTIVE HOPE: Mercy that hangs with us

The second criminal shows us another way out of our pain, and into a place of true belonging. With one plea of mercy, Jesus offers paradise to his fellow crucified criminal. Adam Hamilton writes: “This man did not understand theology. He did not know the Scripture. He had not recited a creed. He had not joined a church or been baptized. He had not a chance to do anything righteous or to clean up his life. He was hanging on the cross for his crimes when, at some very simple level, he caught the vision of Jesus’ kingdom and asked if he could become part of it; and that was enough.” (24 Hours That Changed The World)

Having identified with the villains of Holy Week thus far, what hope do I find here in the criminal who asks for mercy from Jesus?

Consider the significance of Jesus being crucified with fellow criminals. What does this say to me about God being present with me in my pain?

PRAYER:

Lord, I am both criminals. I am the one who mocks and the one who cries for mercy. Meet me in my most desperate of pain and shame. Just as you hung upon the cross then may I know that you are with me now. Allow me to release my pain and find paradise in you. Amen.

The Crowd and Barabbas

This coming Sunday is Palm Sunday where the crowd praises Jesus as king in his triumphal entry. However, by the end of the week the crowd shouts for a different Jesus known as Jesus-Barabbas. The shift in the crowd's view of Jesus in only a week's time is as astonishing as the cross itself. Perhaps it's the manipulation of the religious leadership or perhaps it's their fear of Jesus causing retribution from Rome. Whatever it is, it's clear a growing resentment and rejection of Jesus spread amongst the people. The challenge for us this week is to see how we are like this crowd as well.

SCRIPTURE: Mark 11:1-11; John 12:12-16; Matthew 27:15-26

SELF-REFLECTION: The problem of group think

When given the choice of who to free, the crowd denies Jesus Christ and blindly call for Jesus Barabbas. Maybe Jesus Christ wasn't the Jesus they wanted. Maybe he wasn't the King they thought they were praising just early that week. We may wonder how they could switch so quickly.

The world of psychology tells us that group think happens when a group of people make irrational or dysfunctional decisions based in a desire for group harmony and conformity. As we consider the crowd's shifting view of Jesus, they are a stark reminder that it is easy for us to get caught in a group think mentality joining the mob that sought to kill Jesus instead of freeing him.

Why do I think the crowd chose Jesus Barabbas instead of Jesus the Christ?

Imagine what it would have been like to be amongst the crowd of Holy Week? What were their hopes and dreams? What were their disappointments?

How difficult must it have been to be a dissenting voice amongst that crowd? What would have been the consequence of speaking against the crowd then? How hard is it to do it now?

REDEMPTIVE HOPE: Creating a different crowd

The power of a group can create great good and great evil. As powerful as the crowd is who called for Jesus' crucifixion, it pales in comparison to the power of the crowd that Jesus brings to life through the resurrection. For all its warts and shortcomings, the church is a people who correct the crowd of Holy Week when it becomes a people who boldly join Jesus in carrying their own cross and who declare the hope found in Christ because of his own cross.

How do I think the cross shaped the mind of the crowd who experienced Jesus' own cross?

What kind of community do I hope the church to be?

PRAYER:

Lord, break the spell of the mob within us and all that deceives our view of you. Awaken us again this week that we may be apart of your body that is to serve and love this world as you have loved us. Amen.

Jesus—The Villain

This whole season of Lent has been an invitation into Holy Week through the lens of its villains - some individuals and some groups in whom we find ourselves. What made them do what they did that week? In answering that question, we find our own sin on display. It is difficult to be honest with ourselves and to see our own sin, but the incredible thing is that as we do, we find God's grace and mercy awaiting us there. As we finish, our final villain is one in whom we stand amazed and join in the hymn that says "See, from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flowing mingled down. Did ever such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?"

SCRIPTURE: John 19:16-30, Luke 23:44-49

SELF-REFLECTION: Jesus—a villain?

As we go to the cross of Good Friday, we must face the scandal of the cross: Jesus died as a villain. But why? On one hand, he's a villain because the crowd and religious leaders accused him of it and Pilate's verdict declared it so. On the other hand, Jesus is a villain because he chose it. He allowed himself to be crucified amongst the two criminals. Greg Boyd writes of the cross: "It allows the faith of believers to see through the ugly sin-mirroring surface of the cross to behold God stooping an infinite distance to enter into solidarity with our sin and to thereby take on an ugly appearance that mirrors our sin." (Cross Vision)

What does it mean to me that Jesus took on the role of a villain on the cross?

How does the cross reflect sin back to us?

REDEMPTIVE HOPE: The end of villains

If Jesus goes to the cross as a villain, then he goes to bear the shame and guilt of all villains – of individuals like Judas, Peter, Pilate, you and me – but also for the sin of the world, of the crowd, and of the leaders who misguided the people. On the cross, Jesus amazingly declares: "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." From the cross, the love of God is shown not in a wrath-filled retribution, but with hand-scarred grace.

When Jesus goes as a villain, he is going to end all villains – the villains in us and the villains that we create of each other. There is no other in Jesus. There is redemption, belonging, and a new humanity that is restored to right relationship with God, creation, and each other.

What have I learned from identifying with the villains of Holy Week?

If Jesus goes to the cross as a villain to end the power of the villainy, how does that impact how I see my own sin? How does it impact those that I consider my enemy?

If God is able to redeem the worst in all of us, what hope does that give me about what God wants to do in me? What hope does that give me in what God is doing in others?

PRAYER:

For the villain in me, for the villain I create of others, for the villain I make of you, forgive me, God. Free me to be redeemed and restored in you that I may love myself, my neighbor, and even my enemy, as you have loved me. Amen.



WORSHIP IN-PERSON & ONLINE
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HOLY WEEK SCHEDULE

Palm Sunday, March 28, Sanctuary 11 AM (In-Person & Online)

Maundy Thursday, April 1, 7PM (Online)

Good Friday, April 2, 7PM (In-Person & Online)

EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 4

Confluence 9AM, Online

Sanctuary 10AM, Online

Drive-in Service at 11AM (Ave. A & 4th Street)



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