



Central Peninsula Church

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The Weasel, The Fox, and the Lamb

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

There's a story about a shoplifter who had turned a corner in his life and wanted to make amends so he wrote a note to one department store and said. "I've just become a Christian, and I can't sleep at night because I feel guilty. So here's \$100 that I owe you." Then he signs his name, and in a little postscript at the bottom he adds, "And if I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest of the money."

The human conscience is an amazing thing. When it is working well it has tremendous power to produce change in our lives. But it never comes without a battle. In his book, *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller writes about the wrestling match he had with his conscience as a young boy. "This was a different sort of guilt from anything I had previously experienced. It was a heavy guilt, not the sort of guilt that I could do anything about. It was a haunting feeling, the sort of sensation you get when you wonder whether you are two people, the other of which does things you can't explain, bad and terrible things.

"The guilt was so heavy that I fell out of bed onto my knees and begged, not a slot-machine God, but a living, feeling God, to stop the pain. I crawled out of my room and into the hallway by my mother's door and lay on my elbows and face for an hour or so, going sometimes to sleep, before finally the burden lifted and I was able to return to my room."

There is a lot in our culture today that tries to deaden the conscience, or at least mute its volume; but its purpose is to point us to the truth, alert us to the presence of moral danger, and to sensitize us to the reality of God.

Well, it's early Friday morning in the book of Luke, and as we'll see in our text today the human conscience is having a hard time waking up. Let's turn together to Luke chapter 23 beginning with verse 1.

I. Jesus Before Pilate: A Conscience Deferred.

"Then the whole body of them got up and brought Him before Pilate. And they began to accuse Him, saying, 'We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.' So Pilate asked Him, saying, 'Are You the King of the Jews?' And He answered him and said, 'It is as you say.' Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds,

'I find no guilt in this man.' But they kept on insisting, saying, 'He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee even as far as this place.' When Pilate heard it, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that He belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who himself also was in Jerusalem at that time" (Luke 23:1-7).

On Thursday Jesus was arrested and condemned by the Sanhedrin. But because the Jews no longer had the power to execute a condemned man they dragged him before the Roman officials and the political trials now begin in chapter 23. It's very early Friday morning when the governor of Judea gets an unexpected and unappreciated wake up call from a crowd of very vocal and pushy Jews. Pontius Pilate was a political weasel, who was constantly watching his backside. Within the order of Roman politics, Pilate wasn't particularly powerful. He had made his way up the military ranks of Rome and been given this unimpressive province of Judea to govern. He was the 5th governor of the province and he'd done a pretty good job of stirring up political trouble for himself and making life miserable particularly for the Jews. One of his first acts as governor was to parade through the streets with shields that had Roman symbols on them. This was extremely offensive to the Jews. Pilate was finally forced by pressures in Judea and from Rome to take down the shields. That's how things began for governor Pontius Pilate and they had not gotten better over time.

Historians tell us later that Pilate seized the money from the Temple treasury to use to build an aqueduct. But when the workers began to build, crowds of angry Jews gathered in protest. Pilate sent in his troops and hundreds of people were slaughtered on the spot. This is quite possibly the event that Luke refers to in chapter 13 where he tells us about "the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." Philo, who was a contemporary Jewish historian, said that Pilate was afraid that the Jews would rise up and go to the Emperor to have him impeached because of his "corruptions, his acts of insolence... his habit of insulting people, his cruelty, and his continual murders of people untried and uncondemned ... his never-ending, gratuitous and most grievous inhumanity."

So this is the man who finds himself facing

another crowd of angry Jews early Friday morning. Only this time they brought along some poor slob they had beaten and dragged to his door like a stray dog. They were all talking at once. Yelling, pointing, accusing. They charged this man Jesus with three things: The first charge was that he was a political rebel who should be tried for sedition against the state of Rome. This is an incredible charge because it's exactly what they wanted their Messiah to be. Someone who would be a military power who would overthrow Rome. And in part they rejected Jesus because he wasn't a political threat. But now when it works to their advantage they say "we find this man misleading," literally "subverting" our nation! Suddenly they sound so patriotic and so concerned with the welfare of Rome. But hunched over in pain at Pilate's door Jesus sure didn't look like a seditious leader or a military force. Then they say he's encouraging people to not pay their taxes to Caesar. This could have alarmed Pilate since he was responsible for collecting the taxes for Rome. But these charges have no basis in reality. Jesus had openly taught to give to Caesar what was due Caesar. The Roman IRS had no charge against him. So it's the third charge that Pilate engages: the charge that he claimed to be Christ, a king of the Jews.

This claim to royalty was clearly the most serious charge of the three. So Pilate asks Jesus: "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answers like he did the Sanhedrin; literally, "You say so," meaning "Yes I am." You would expect that Pilate would go ballistic. "Oh my goodness, this guy is the King of the Jews! If he gains popular support or if he incites the people there's no telling the kind of upheaval this could lead to. This is huge!" But Pilate is completely unmoved and unimpressed.

It reminds me of a time when I approached a guy who was sitting under a tree talking to himself in a sort of agitated way. When I asked him if he needed help, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "No thanks, I'm Jesus and I'm talking to the angels." It took me a moment to realize that he was dead serious.

I think that's how Pilate must have thought about Jesus. This beat up dragged around Jew couldn't possibly be a threat to anybody. He's just another mixed up religious kook and there were plenty of them in Jerusalem. So Pilate becomes a one man judge and jury right on the spot. He pronounces his verdict: "I find no guilt in this man. He's innocent of everything you've charged him with." Pilate made the announcement and he had the authority to be a hero, to have Jesus released on the spot. And he came so close. But his conscience was having a hard time waking up on Friday morning. And of course he did have his political future to

consider. Things weren't going that well with the Jews and his reputation back in Rome had become a little tarnished over his mismanagement of this aqueduct thing. He really couldn't afford another scandal. If only there was a way to appease these crazy Jews who were now extremely agitated and just wouldn't let it go. "I find no guilt in this man; but I do have my political future to consider." So what Pilate hears next must have seemed to him like an amazing piece of good fortune. The crowds press him and say: No, you don't understand. This man has been stirring up trouble all around Judea even up to Galilee. And the lights go on for Pilate when he finds out that Jesus belongs to Herod's jurisdiction. What great news, because Herod is here in Jerusalem for the passover celebration. A good politician always knows when to be seen at church. Pilate might have been known to us as the man who freed the Son of God. But instead of acting he deferred. Pilate couldn't make the hard call. It was a messy situation. "I find no guilt in this man" but let Herod make the call. If it backfires it's his skin not mine. So I think Pilate sat down to his morning cup of coffee feeling pretty relieved. He had found a way out.

Have you ever deferred to someone else when you knew it was your time to act? Maybe you're a Dad and you've been standing by letting Mom battle it out with the kids when you know it's your place to speak up and set the boundaries. Or you've been avoiding the tangle of personalities at work; letting others deal with the mess. Your strategy is to keep a low profile because you don't want to say something that's going to be hard for others to hear, even though you know what's needed. Passing the buck may gain you a little momentary relief over your morning cup of coffee. Believe me, I've had to learn this the hard way; a conscience deferred will come back to haunt you in the end just like it did Pilate. But Pilate sees his chance and Jesus is dragged away to Herod. Let's pick it up in verse 8.

II. Jesus before Herod: A Conscience Denied.

"Now Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him. And he questioned Him at some length; but He answered him nothing. And the chief priests and the scribes were standing there, accusing Him vehemently. And Herod with his soldiers, after treating Him with contempt and mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate. Now Herod and Pilate became friends with one another that very day; for before they had been enemies with each other" (vv. 8-12).

This is Herod Antipas, one of three sons of Herod the Great, who is best known to us as the King who ordered the slaughter of every baby boy in Judea under the age of two because he was threatened by the news of the Messiah's coming. But like father like son, and this Herod, Herod

Antipas, shows all the characteristic flaws of his dad. But he was also a shrewd and successful politician. He built the city of Tiberias on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee in honor of the Emperor. And he managed a steady stream of tax revenues for Rome. But he kept his Jewish constituents appeased by helping to fund a Temple restoration project. He knew how to read the polls and posture for success.

Antipas was the Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. He was known throughout for his lavish living and ruthless rule, and though he was half Jewish he was Roman to the core. If Pilate was a weasel then Herod was a fox, a shrewd political veteran. In fact when Jesus was on his final journey to Jerusalem he sent word to Herod saying: "Go tell that fox, that I'll continue to heal the sick and cast out demons until I've finished my work and return to Jerusalem to die." Well, that day had finally come. And in a strange twist Herod Antipas now faces the man his father failed to exterminate.

The text says that Herod was excited to see Jesus because he was hoping to see him perform some miracle. You know, heal the sick, raise the dead, that sort of thing. He'd have some great stories to tell at his next party at the palace. Herod had no interest in the truth; he only wanted to be entertained. He's like some sort of spiritual tourist who will flock to any religious celebrity if it has some entertainment value.

Did you all know that Amma the miracle hug lady was here in San Francisco a few weeks ago? Amma is an Indian Hindu mystic that some call a saint. People came by the thousands and waited in line for hours just to feel a hug from Amma. I think Herod would have been first in line. And he'd quickly tell his buddies what a fantastic religious experience it was. We Christians have our own version of this of course. We have Christian super stars, media giants, best selling authors, we even have our own Christian pop music icons. We buy our tickets, we wait in line, we're attentive to the message and we tap in time to the music but what is the cumulative effect on our hearts. Now I'm all for good entertainment, don't get me wrong. But there are times we really need to be asking ourselves, "Am I here to be changed by the truth or entertained by the talent?" If we aren't asking those kinds of questions it's possible that the culture of entertainment will take its toll on our conscience and our response to the living God.

For Herod at least his encounter with Jesus had been reduced to pure spiritual entertainment. So when Jesus refused to perform, verse 8 says that Herod "questioned him at length...as the chief priests and scribes vehemently accused him." What a wild scene this is. Luke's description is very sparse but the Greek tense indicates that this went on for a long time. Question after question Herod hammered away while the angry mob keeps up the trash talking. The whole thing looks completely out of control. Like a hockey game gone crazy. Except of course for Jesus who didn't say a word. Have you ever talked to someone

who wouldn't even give you an answer? How maddening! Can you imagine how red in the face mighty Herod must have been when this beat up Jew refused to give him the time of day?

So it says they mocked him. And as a final joke they put a gorgeous robe on this pitiful specimen of a king and sent him back to Pilate. Luke doesn't record Herod's verdict but he apparently didn't find Jesus to be a significant threat to Roman rule. Jesus is yet to be formally charged. He remains the innocent and now silent Lamb of God. Verse 12 is an interesting political footnote—apparently over this incident with Jesus—the weasel and the fox become friends. Luke wants us to know that everyone seems to be buddies when it comes to condemning the Prince of Peace.

But what do we make of this silence? Jesus rebuked Judas in the garden; he confronted the mob at his arrest; he challenged the Jewish leaders who condemned him; he even dignified Pilate with an answer. But here Herod questioned him at length and Jesus answered him nothing! Not even a word. Maybe it's because Herod's day of grace had already come and gone. Pilate's conscience was deferred this Friday morning but Herod's conscience was denied long before this.

Luke tells us in chapter 3 that John the Baptist had made an all out assault on Herod's conscience when he rebuked him for seducing and marrying his brother's wife. But instead of responding to the truth Herod avoided the message by throwing the messenger in jail. That's one way to silence the conscience. But there's this amazing account in the gospel of Mark that tells us that Herod's heart wasn't completely hard. At least not then. In fact it tells us that Herod feared John and he protected him in prison because he knew he was a "righteous and holy man."

Apparently King Herod would come in his fine robes to listen to John in his camel hair shirt. Mark says, "When he heard him he was greatly perplexed (a better translation might be that he listened with great difficulty); and yet he heard him gladly." Have you ever been there? I know I have. When you just know someone is speaking the painful truth that you desperately need to hear? It's just so hard to listen and yet you keep coming back for more. Someone has said, "you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free; but first it will make you miserable." Well, that's right where Herod was; insulted and attracted at the same time. Maybe that describes you this morning and you can't even explain it; you've been hearing about how broken and needy you are at your Bible study, or here on Sunday morning. It hurts so much but you keep coming back; you can't stay away. Or you're listening to the painful truth about yourself from a counselor, an accountability partner or a friend. You want so much to

run because it cuts so deep. But you keep coming back no matter how hard it is. You need to know that is such a great place to be. Because it's a sure sign that the conscience is still alive and kicking. A sign that there is still a chance to hear. You still have a chance to respond to the promptings of God.

But Herod's day had come and gone. We all know the story. Herod's wife Herodias has it in for John so at the opportune time she devises a plan to trap the King. It's a brilliant move on her part because she knows that his greatest weakness is his ego. So at an all male birthday party after the wine had been flowing for a while, in dances her daughter. We can only guess what sort of dance this was but we can be pretty sure it wasn't ballet. It greatly pleased the King and his guests. So much so that he promises her whatever her heart desires; up to half his kingdom. The daughter consults with the mother. "What shall I ask for?" She knew Herod wouldn't back down in front of his guests; she had him where she wanted him. "Ask him for the head of John the Baptist." So the daughter returns to the King and adds her own little twist. "I want the head of John the Baptist on a platter." So John's head is served up for the palate of the King that night.

We don't know what happened next in Herod's life. We don't know if he wept that night or simply crawled into bed. It's not clear how the heart grows completely cold and unresponsive. We just know that it can happen. It happened to Herod. Once he was a seeker, intrigued by the truth. But on this Friday, as he stands before the innocent "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," he just wants to be entertained. Jesus is silent. The voice of God has nothing more to say. What a tragic picture this is. But it's also a challenge for each one of us to be attentive to the stirring up of our conscience, to ask ourselves, "What am I going to do with the truth God has spoken to me today? How can I be changed? How will I respond? Every time I read his word, or listen to it preached, or sing praises to the King... is my heart truly engaged? Or am I just here for the entertainment value of Christian religion?"

Kent Hughes says: "The silence of Jesus is an extreme and dramatic warning not to trifle with holy things, not to suppress the private appeals and suggestions of the Holy Spirit." Psalm 95 puts it this way: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." If you are not a believer and today you sense the impulse and tug on your heart to respond to Christ, don't put it off because as we see here, today's conscience deferred may be tomorrow's conscience denied.

But I wonder too about us long time followers

of Christ. George Fox was the founder of the Quaker movement, and at one point he was in high demand as a speaker on the outdoor preaching circuit of his day. There is a story that he once went to an event where there was a large gathering of people who had all come to hear what he had to say. He walked to the pulpit and stood in silence for a minute... for five minutes... for 20 minutes... the crowd started to boo and shout. Fox stood there silent for two hours until the crowd finally dispersed in frustration. When they later asked him what that was about he said, "I famished them for words because all they wanted was words and not the power of the Spirit!"

I wonder at times about us. About myself. We're so well fed. Volumes of biblical wisdom have been spoken on the corner of Shell and Catamaran throughout the years. Whole song books have been sung to the glory of God. But we need to ask CPC; does it still move our hearts? Is our conscience still stirred? Do we come to meet with the Living God who wants to redeem us, heal us, fill us for his purpose in our homes, in the workplace and on this Peninsula? Do we come to hear words or do we come to be changed by the power of the Spirit? Are we curious tourists who want to be religiously entertained or devoted disciples who want to be radically transformed?

We'll see Pilate the weasel next week. Herod the political fox reigned for an impressive 40 years before his fortunes changed under the rule of Agrippa and he was banished to spend the rest of his life in exile. But this passage is not really about Herod or Pilate. It's not about the angry mob. It's about the man who quietly stands before them. The one of whom John the Baptist said: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." Do you hear his voice today?

This week I've realized again that even though I've been forgiven and cleansed by the Lamb's sacrifice for me, and my eternity is sealed in him, there's still a lot more work for this Lamb to do in my life. I still have more sins for him to take away. Don't you? And one of the primary ways he works is in the uncomfortable stirring up of our conscience when God speaks to us about those areas that he wants to change. That judging attitude. That ugly jealousy that keeps getting in the way. That issue of anger that keeps popping up. That struggle with internet porn. Those fears that keep holding me back. And it's so easy to tune it out. To put it off. To leave it for tomorrow. We want so much to be left alone in our sin. But this Lamb won't leave us alone. He loves us too much to let us remain where we are. So he speaks to us in his word. He stirs up our conscience by his Spirit. So today if you hear his voice, respond to him with a soft and humble heart as you say, yes Lord, I know it's so painful to hear and so hard to respond. But I want to change. I want to walk Lord in obedience to you, Sweet Lamb of God. Do not be silent in my life, please take away my sins. © 2006 Central Peninsula Church,