

Sermon for Sunday, March 22, 2026

John 19:1-16a

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Over the last few Sundays we have read texts from the gospel of John describing Jesus' arrest and trial. There are characters that play significant roles in this narrative. The list includes:

- Judas
- Peter
- Soldiers and the religious police
- Annas and the religious elite
- Pilate

Today's sermon will recap some of these characters and lead us to consider whether they reflect a unique situation in time from 2000 years ago or if they reflect us as modern people.

**Judas:** Many have speculated why Judas made the decision to betray Jesus. Some think he did it for the money. Others think that the betrayal was an effort to force Jesus into action; into leading an armed insurrection. John's gospel says that "Satan entered him." Whatever Judas' motive/impetus, he acted and the gospel names him as the one "who brought a detachment of soldiers and police from the chief priests." Judas showed the members of law enforcement (both civil and religious) where Jesus was.

**Peter:** Peter is a complex character. He was a fisherman—a hard working guy but probably not highly educated. He was impetuous—demonstrated when he named Jesus as the Messiah of God. This was a declaration of his understanding of Jesus' identity and he did so well before the other disciples. There is a place in this gospel where Jesus speaks of his departure. This is the moment when Peter declares that he will lay down his life for Jesus. Sadly, not many hours later and shortly after Jesus is arrested, Peter denies that he is a follower of Jesus. Once again we can speculate why he denies. Is it because he is afraid? Is it because he thinks that denial will allow him to enter into the courtyard and thus become physically closer to Jesus, perhaps to rescue him? We can say little except that he denied.

**The Roman soldiers and the religious police:** As far as we know these law enforcement folks are present throughout the entire narrative. Most scholars believe that they are present at the arrest

in the garden, in the courtyard near the charcoal fire, and in Pilate's headquarters. In all likelihood, the soldiers that arrest Jesus are the same soldiers that scourge him in today's reading. Notice that Pilate orders Jesus to be flogged—to be whipped. But the soldiers go further when they make a crown of thorns and place it on his head, put a purple robe on his shoulders (signifying royalty) and slap his face. These efforts were not part of Pilate's orders to them, but the soldiers acted in a manner that is consistent with the accusations that they heard in those various locations. They ridicule someone they understand to be claiming to be king. They act with cruelty and derision.

**Annas:** Last week's sermon spoke about Annas—the former high priest and the father-in-law of the current high priest: Caiaphas. Why does he get involved in Jesus' trial? Perhaps because he still wields a certain amount of power and respect within the religious community. Perhaps because Caiaphas the high priest was busy with pressing matters in preparation for Passover. But let's be honest, when someone has a position of power and authority, it can be difficult to give it up—to walk away.

**Religious elite:** Which brings me to the religious elite. I use that term to refer to folks who have acquired positions of responsibility within the Temple precincts. Remember that there were all kinds of people who served in and around the Temple: it would be similar to our communion assistants, ushers, the people who make coffee, and count the offering. Listen carefully: faithful congregations need these workers! The Temple needed these workers. And what I'm about to say IS NOT true here at Vasa. But there are folks who hang on to these positions because it feeds their need for power. They gain respect as a result of their position. As I said before, it can be difficult to give up these positions and to walk away or allow someone else to take over. Everyone likes to have power. No one wants to give it up. Annas and the religious elite represent this type of person.

**Pilate:** Pilate is a government official tasked with maintaining order in the Roman province of Palestine. Historical records indicate that he was very cruel and ruthless. Human lives meant nothing to him so long as peace is maintained. Pilate is politically savvy. His ultimate obligation is to protect Rome, and Roman authority. When the religious leaders accuse him of disloyalty to the emperor, Pilate knows that he has been out-manuevered. Like others in this narrative Pilate's primary concern is maintaining power. *(Pause)*

After my nine+ years of preaching here at Vasa you know that I strive to take the Scriptures and make them speak to our current life and situation. While we may not be every character in this long narrative, we almost certainly recognize ourselves within one or more of them.

No, we aren't Judas the betrayer. But perhaps we think that we can manipulate God into doing what WE think is best. "God, this is the best possible outcome and I want you to make it happen...." I'm going to set it up so that you are forced to act the way I think you should....

No we aren't Peter the denier, but let's be candid, it's easy to say, "I will always follow Jesus...until it gets really, really hard."

No, we aren't soldiers or the religious police. We can claim that we would never do anything as cruel as what is recorded, but I remind you of the humiliations experienced by prisoners at Abu Gharib prison at the hands of U.S. soldiers. I remind you of the atrocities and deaths occurring at the hands of ICE earlier this year and say, "we humans haven't changed all that much."

No, we aren't Annas the former high priest nor the religious elite as they interrogate Jesus. But maybe we should consider why we spend so much time judging others as unworthy of God's grace, love, and mercy. Is it possible that we are afraid of losing power? Is it because we think we are defending God when really what we are doing is sustaining our religious power?

My friends, it is important for us to think carefully about the story of Jesus' arrest and trial. Rather than sitting in judgement on any of these characters I'm challenging you to consider where or how

you might fail: where or how you might succumb to one or several of the temptations to which these characters succumb for none of us is immune.

If we had no knowledge of the end of this story we would be left after today's reading with little hope. Jesus is about to go to the cross. There isn't much good news in that verdict.

But I say to you; remember what John's gospel told us from the very first verse: Jesus is the Word and the Word was with God and the word WAS God. The powers of this world (all of the ones I have listed in this sermon) cannot overcome God.

Lent is a time for self-examination. When we do that difficult work we are forced to admit our failings.

Rev. Shannon Rodenberg put it this way, "We know our own stories; we spend both time and heart to claim them, the rough edges and the smooth. [But here's the good news:] Jesus also knows our stories—each mundane chaotic, beautiful, heartbreaking moment. He could tell us everything that we have ever done, but he does not use our actions against us or manipulate them beyond recognition. Instead as he did with the woman at the well, he offers us living water and helps us see that our stories are intermingled with the light and life of his story." <sup>i</sup>

Jesus goes to the cross to demonstrate the depth of God's love for all of humanity including the betrayers, the deniers, the abusers, and the power hungry. Jesus goes to the cross to demonstrate the depth of God's love for us. There is amazing grace, love, and mercy in this story: and it is demonstrated by Jesus as he walks to the cross. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *We Pray with Her*, a book of devotions published by Abingdon Press, Nashville TN in 2018. Page 86.