

Matthew 27:15-26

For Barabbas, this was it. There was no way out. His fate was sealed. Death by crucifixion. And it was the eleventh hour. Today was the day. He was about to pay the price for his life of crime. There would be no reprieve given by the governor. Yes, the governor's custom was to release one prisoner during the feast, but it would not be him. He was a notorious criminal; a menace to society. The people would never ask for his release. A hundred other prisoners would be let go before him. No, today he would hang from a cross until he was dead.

When the soldiers came to his cell, Barabbas surely thought that his time was up. The moment of his execution was at hand. But that's not why they had come. The governor had other plans in mind. Pilate was going to use Barabbas first. He was a shrewd governor, that one. He wanted Jesus released. And so who did he pick to stand up with Him? The worst of the worst. The criminal whose name was synonymous with brutality and murder—Barabbas. Pilate knew there was no way—ever—that the people would ask for his release. Pilate was sure he was safe with Barabbas. Any other criminal standing with Jesus and the mob might ask for their release, but not Barabbas...never...of this Pilate was quite sure.

And so the stage is set. Barabbas and Jesus. One will be released; one will go to his execution. The worst of the worst against the very best. The brutal criminal against Him who had done no wrong to anyone. "Whom shall I release for you?" asked Pilate. This was his shining moment. He had outwitted the Jews. He had beaten them at their own game. They would never ask for Barabbas. Jesus would go free. But they did. "Barabbas!" they cried, "Release Barabbas to us!" They wanted a murderer to be set free; a brutal criminal. "Then what shall I do with Jesus?" asked a surprised Pilate. "Let Him be crucified!" they all said.

Probably more than any other figure in the Passion story, you and I resemble Barabbas most of all. Barabbas was the worst of the worst. Waiting in his prison cell for justice to be served; waiting for his impending death...you and I are Barabbas. You and I are not just charged with every crime in the book; we, like Barabbas, are guilty. To sin in one place is to break the whole Law. This we have done. And justice must be served. The punishment must fit the crime. Since every sin is a rejection of God, the punishment is God's rejection of us. Separation from God in hell is the punishment we await. As Barabbas, we are born to wait for our impending execution in hell.

And you and I have no defense to offer. We meet Barabbas in Matthew, in Mark, in Luke, and in John. All four Gospel writers tell us of Barabbas. But do you know that we never once hear from Barabbas? Not one word. Pilate brings him out, stands him before the people; his life is on the line, and he says nothing! What can he say? He is guilty! He has nothing to say in his defense. He knows the mob will pick Jesus. This innocent Jesus will be set free. He will go to his execution

We are Barabbas. Our mouths are closed just like his. The Law justly accuses us and we have nothing to utter in our defense. We are guilty as charged. Even though we like to blame others; even though we like to believe that we're not all that bad—the Law says otherwise. "Every mouth must remain silent" it says. You and I are guilty as charged.

But friend, Barabbas goes free. You are released from your punishment. No execution for you. The charges are all dropped. Why? Because the voice of the people is the voice of God. They chose Barabbas, and God chooses you. It's you against Jesus. The worst of the worst against the very best. The rebellious sinner against the innocent Son of God. And you are set free. God in His mercy declares that His Son must go to the cross in your place.

The only reason Barabbas was released that day—the only reason—is Jesus. Barabbas wasn't released because he was a nice guy. He wasn't released because he had done works of love for others. Barabbas wasn't released because he promised to live better in the future. It wasn't because he was sorry for what he had done. None of that was a factor in his release that day. The only reason Barabbas went free is because the mob wanted Jesus to go to the cross.

And that is why you are free of sin, death, and hell. It has nothing to do with you. Your works, your pleadings, your good intentions do not cause God to forgive you. God declares you forgiven for one reason—Jesus went to the cross for you. Jesus suffered hell for you. Jesus was rejected for you. Jesus died for you. And as Pilate said to Barabbas, God now says to you: You are free to go.

Did Barabbas go out and continue a life of crime? We don't know. We're not told. But that really did not matter. He was free; free to live as he pleased. Jesus went to the cross in his place. Barabbas was set free. Friend, you are free to live as you please. And so I ask you, "What pleases you?" You, dear forgiven child of God, baptized into Christ, who has been given faith in your Savior Jesus Christ...what pleases you? To live a life of sin? Does that please you? To cheat on your wife, on your taxes? To skip church? To get drunk? How can you want to continue in sin any longer—you who have been set free from sin through Jesus Christ?

I don't know about the other Barabbas—how he then lived; how he used his freedom...but you dear Barabbas in Christ—you for whom Christ died—you are not just Barabbas anymore. You are one whose life is now shaped by Him who died for you, and who now lives within you through Word and Sacrament. So you are not just a Barabbas who has been set free...you are free in Christ; free to live for Him who loved you and gave Himself for you. Amen.