

Lenten Reflections

four dramatic monologues about
choice, regret, and starting over

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We Had No Choice

A Scribe

As a scribe and spiritual leader in the house of Israel, I am always careful to observe the Law. I do not work on the Sabbath. I tithe even the smallest of herbs. I wash my hands from wrist to fingertip before I eat as prescribed in the tradition of the elders.

Such strict observance of the Law is the only way to preserve our religion, the only faithful way to live before the one true God. The Romans do not understand that, of course. They would have us worship Caesar or any number of other gods they inherited from the Greeks. But for the most part they allow us our own practices—as long as they don't cause them any trouble.

And that was the problem with Jesus. He caused plenty of trouble. First he came to Jerusalem announcing himself as some kind of king. Then he proceeded to take over the temple. He called it a den of robbers. He drove out the moneychangers and those who sold animals. He refused to let anyone carry anything through the temple.

Now I cannot deny that there may have been some irregularities. Some of the moneychangers may have taken a little too much. Some of the animals may not have been in the best condition. And the noise in the courtyard may have disturbed the prayers of the women and the Gentiles. But Jesus had no authority to turn anyone out of the temple. He had no right.

And when he was finally brought before us to explain his actions, he barely spoke to our council. He showed no remorse for what he had done. No humility. No recognition of the council's authority. His only words were about his own authority.

What could we have done? He would only have caused more trouble if we had let him go. The Romans could not help but notice if Jesus continued to call himself a king. They could not help but notice further disturbances in the temple. And we could not have him loose disrupting the temple and breaking the Law and leading our people astray.

Maybe if he had acknowledged the authority of the council. Maybe if he had been able to compromise a little, to go about his religious reforms a little more slowly, a little more quietly.

But no, he was too outspoken. And that made him too dangerous. The high priest said that Jesus had even committed blasphemy. Who was I to disagree with the high priest? I was just one of many on the council. In the end, we had no choice but to seek the death penalty. We really had no choice, you see. We had no choice.

How Was I to Know?

Pontius Pilate

As procurator of Judea, of course I had heard of Jesus long before I met him. The stories that surrounded the man! Miraculous healings, astonishing teaching, the way he answered the Jewish religious leaders with cleverness equal to their own and with an even greater air of authority—why Jesus' name seemed to be on everyone's lips!

Finally the chief priests, elders, and scribes could stand it no longer. They arrested Jesus and sent him to me. I knew they must be jealous of Jesus' popularity with the people and afraid for the preservation of their own religion. But they could hardly tell that to me. No, they only said that Jesus claimed to be a king. They said he was misleading the people and telling them to withhold tribute from Caesar.

I have to admit that when Jesus finally stood before me, I was actually a little disappointed. He was a rather ordinary looking man. He performed no miracles as he stood before me in the praetorium. He made no spectacular claims for himself. In fact, he barely replied to my questions.

“Have you no answers to the accusations of the chief priests?” I asked him. “Don't you understand how serious and how many the charges are against you?”

But Jesus remained silent and almost motionless before me. Was he tired from the long sessions with the Jewish council the night before? Was he being politically shrewd in keeping his thoughts to himself? Was he afraid for his own safety?

I thought not. His hands were steady, his gaze sure. He held his head level and his shoulders square as if he were the commander and his accusers the legion under his authority. He would not answer them.

Well, you can see how I was caught fast in a web of events I could not control. I was not convinced by the charges of the Jewish leaders, but Jesus would not answer them. I did not want a riot among the people, but I could not afford to release a prisoner who set himself up as a king. I did not want to be manipulated by the Jewish leaders, but I needed their support to retain my position. And so I chose the only way out of the web—I let the people decide the fate of their prophet.

How was I to know that they would turn away from him? Was it my fault that they proved fickle in the end? Could I have predicted their calls for his death?

No one could have known. It was an impossible situation. To release Jesus then would have only caused a riot and weakened my own position. I had no choice but to order his execution. I had no choice, you see. I had no choice.

Was That Really Me?

A Woman of Jerusalem

I didn't see Jesus enter Jerusalem myself, but my son came home that day full of the story. He said Jesus entered the city riding on a donkey, with a crowd of people around him waving palm branches and shouting praises. He said they called Jesus the king of Israel.

Another would-be saviour of the people, I said to myself. A dreamer. Another one who will claim the hearts of the people, who will promise us freedom from the Romans, and only end up getting himself killed--while we ourselves suffer great oppression because of him. There had been others before him. There would be others after.

So it was no surprise when my son came home one day with the news that Jesus had been arrested. He said that Jesus had nearly caused a riot in the temple court. He said that Jesus refused to pay tax to Caesar. Yet because of the feast, it looked as if Pilate might actually release him.

I joined the crowd outside the praetorium to see what Pilate would do. Over the shoulders of the crowd I caught a glimpse of Jesus standing on the platform. So this was the man who claimed to be a king. Where was his kingdom? We were still under Roman rule. Our land was still overrun by Roman soldiers. And he himself now stood a prisoner of Pontius Pilate. Like all the other self-appointed Messiahs, he had raised the people's hopes only to let them fall away through his fingers.

Someone in the crowd began shouting, "Crucify him, crucify him!"

And then like a wave the shout moved through the crowd as other voices joined in: "Crucify him, crucify him!" The sound rose around me, and soon I was shouting too, shouting out all the pain of the occupation, all the stress of the broken promises, all my anger at God for leaving us and our land at the mercy of the Romans. We have no more room in Jerusalem for dreamers, no more strength for false hopes, no more patience with empty promises. All the years of pain and anger were let loose at that moment in our cries for Jesus' death.

And then they took him away to be crucified.

Some days I look in the mirror now, and I wonder: Was that really me, shouting in the crowd for Jesus' death? Is his blood on my hands even today?

I was only part of the crowd, you know. Our leaders had spoken. The people had spoken. What was my voice among so many? Could I have swayed the crowd? Could I have challenged the judgement of the chief priests and the scribes? I had no choice but to accept the crowd's verdict. I had no choice, you see. I had no choice.

A New Day with New Choices

Simon Peter

As a follower of Jesus, I thought I was different from the rest.

I wasn't part of the religious establishment like the scribes, or a Roman puppet like Pilate, or just another face in the crowd calling for Jesus' death.

No, I was a follower of Jesus, the one he called Peter, the Rock. I was a member of his innermost circle of disciples. I travelled with him everywhere, I was given the secret of the parables, I saw Jesus in his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. I was part of all that, because, you see, I had made my choice.

When Jesus called me away from fishing the Sea of Galilee, I chose to follow him. When he said he was going to suffer, be killed, and rise again, I didn't understand what he meant, but I still chose to be with him. When Jesus was arrested, I chose to follow him to the courtyard of the high priest. Ever since he had first chosen me, I had chosen to be with him.

I suppose that's why I still feel sick every time I think of that courtyard scene. As I was sitting there waiting, one of the servant girls said to me, "You were with Jesus of Galilee."

In a sudden panic I said, "I don't know what you're talking about." I was horrified by those words of denial, but it was too late to take them back. And when I was confronted again and again, I could do nothing more than repeat them. Three times I denied knowing Jesus, and when it was all over, I could hardly bear the weight of what I had done.

I wasn't any better than the scribes or the Romans or the crowd. Sure, I had chosen to follow Jesus, but when it looked as if knowing him might be dangerous, I had lost my nerve. I had chosen to deny him. I had chosen to stop following.

For the next three days, I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I just couldn't forgive myself for being such a failure. Once I had said to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." How could I have denied him? How could I have denied him?

It was only after Jesus' resurrection that I learned to stop accusing myself. Through the love of Jesus, I discovered that God could forgive my terrible choices—as deep and painful as they were, God's love and forgiveness could cover them all. And through the power of Jesus' resurrection, I could learn to make new choices.

Scripture says, "Choose this day whom you will serve." That means we don't have to be stuck with yesterday's wrong choices. I'd like to tell that to all of the scribes and to Pontius Pilate and to everyone in the crowd. Today is a new day with new choices to be made. Believe me, I know.