

## **"THE WRITING ON THE WALL"**

**Matthew 27:15-26**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Week in Lent**

**March 4, 2018**

### **Matthew 27:15-26**

*Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.*

*While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him."*

*Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"*

*So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.*

*Chris and I recently saw the film, "15:17 to Paris." Clint Eastwood created this film from the real-life story of three men whose brave act turned them into heroes during a high-speed railway ride. In the early evening of August 21, 2015, the world watched in*

*stunned silence as the media reported a thwarted terrorist attack on train #9364 bound for Paris—an attempt prevented by three courageous young Americans traveling through Europe. Throughout the harrowing ordeal, their friendship never wavered, making it their greatest weapon and allowing them to save the lives of the more than 500 passengers on board. The heroic trio is comprised of Anthony Sadler, Oregon National Guardsman Alek Skarlatos, and U.S. Air Force Airman First Class Spencer Stone, who play themselves in the film.*

*Airman First Class Stone takes a risk that few would take when he charges an armed gunman on board the train. Chris and I discussed this movie on the way home, openly questioning whether we could have done the same, taken the ultimate risk, charged the terrorist.*

*We remembered an earlier American hero, Todd Beamer, who was a passenger aboard United Airlines Flight 93, which was hijacked as part of the September 11 attacks in 2001. He was one of the passengers who tried to reclaim the aircraft from the hijackers, leading them to crash it into a field in Stonycreek Township near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. You might not remember his name, but I'll bet many of you can remember the two-word battle cry that he yelled out to other passengers who were brave enough to confront the hijackers: "Let's roll."*

*And then, we have the case just last week at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, when 54-year old Broward*

*County Deputy and School Resource Officer Scot Peterson failed to go into inside the building to confront the armed gunman who was shooting students and faculty. He resigned his post in the aftermath and hail of criticism and hate mail. He has been threatened. He has been called by government officials a "coward, disgusting, a disgrace to the uniform" and mercilessly harassed for his failure to act the hero's part.*

*I wonder if this is fair. I wonder what I would be able to do. Chris and I have talked about it. Church Council has talked about what we would do if an armed gunman breached the sanctity and peace of our worship space. Randy Mann and I attended an FBI training class recently specifically designed for leaders of worship spaces who might, God forbid, be confronted one day by a gunman in church. It happens.*

*Would I be brave and confront the gunman, giving him an easy target so that others might escape? Or would I dive behind the pulpit here, quaking and praying that the gunman would not shoot me?*

*I don't know. The FBI told us what might happen either way. It's bone-chilling to even think about it.*

*What makes guys like Todd Beamer and Spencer Stone put aside their survival instincts and take action when it is needed? What makes a trained Sheriff's Deputy freeze when confronted by the spectre of evil? We can only guess, and we can only hope that it will not be our lot to personally find out.*

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*In this narrative Lenten sermon series, we are looking at the observers to the story of Jesus' last ministry days in Jerusalem. In the first week, we considered the animals and angels who attended his 40 days in the wilderness. We imagined how the animals and angels might have comforted him in his despair and fear; we thought about how we might do in such an intense endurance testing fraught with danger and loneliness.*

*Next, we considered the conflict that the Pharisees were feeling when Jesus came onto their turf, disrupting their way of doing things, stirring up the people to challenge their unchallenged religious laws and authority. We imagined how the Pharisees must have thought that Jesus must die for their way of life and for their power base to live on.*

*Today, we heard how the plaintiff, small voice of an unnamed character made a small stand against the injustice that was the arrest, trial, condemnation, and execution of Jesus. It was such a pitiful, benign protest that you might not have even heard it when Jack read the scripture passage for today.*

*Pontius Pilate's wife appears in only ONE verse in all the Bible. Matthew is the only one that mentions her at all. This is what verse 19 says in Chapter 27, right in the middle of the drama of the joint trials of Jesus and Barabbas: "While [Pilate] was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that*

*innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.” What else might she have to say to us now?*

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*I am Claudia Procla, wife of the governor, Pontius Pilate, granddaughter of Emperor Augustus. Though I would never tell my husband, I secretly worshipped the God of the Jews. I was a recent convert to their religion. I took great interest when Jesus appeared on the scene and confronted the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman government's authority.*

*I didn't quite know what to think of him, this Jesus. I was intrigued, but troubled by all the attention he was bringing to the Jews, attention that might eventually compromise my husband's office and my safety. I had to tread lightly around my husband, for he was known to have a frightful temper and a quick, deadly hand of judgment.*

*I had my chance to be named by the Gospel writer; I had my chance to be a hero for God, but I lament that I was not brave enough to wear the lion's mane; instead, I played the part of the frightened lamb and an innocent man died for my inability to stop his execution.*

*Thirty-eight words is all that is devoted to me now. Thirty-eight words is what defines me in your Bible. I am nameless in Matthew's*

*Gospel; I am forgotten in the history of the greatest story ever told in Christian culture-the story of Jesus.*

*I had a dream, and the dream unsettled me, for the dream was about the Innocent One standing trial before my husband. I believe that God directed that dream to me in order to add a striking testimony to the sinlessness of the One being tried for the truth he declared. But what could I do to stop the trial, to prevent Jesus from being condemned to death? The writing was already on the wall. I was just one woman and I had a lot to lose....*

*I took a big risk in saying anything to the Governor. He detested the Jews! Josephus, the Roman Historian, would write about this. Pilate was especially insensitive and oppressive toward the Jews, seeking to abolish their peculiar laws and offending them by displaying in their Jerusalem quarters imperial banners bearing the image of Caesar. But in the past, he had accepted my counsel on various issues, and so I took this risk.*

*Alas, even though he, too, was troubled by this made up charge against the innocent, merely-misguided preacher, he ignored my plea—my strong advice, and followed instead the will of the angry crowd. I stood nearby as he washed the blood off his hands of this man in a symbolic gesture that gave up his Roman authority to the will of the Jewish Pharisees. Three years later he was removed from office and we were discredited and dispossessed of our property and homes. It*

would be said about Pilate by his successor, Herod Agrippa I, that he was "naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness."

This described him well, I think. He made the wrong choice to set the criminal Barabbas free and to condemn Jesus of Nazareth to death, but I was powerless to stop him. As was his tradition, he gave the Jews a Passover gift, releasing one of the prisoners from captivity. He could have released Jesus, but they chose the other man.

I didn't successfully influence my husband. I didn't do much at all, except whisper my plea in his closed ear. My whisper did not get past his closed ear to his equally-closed heart. An innocent man died for it, and for all eternity his blood is on my hands, too.

I shrouded my face and I slipped out into the crowd. I hid my trembling hands beneath my skirts. My husband's reign of terror against the Jews made my face well-known and hated in every place where I might go in Palestine. I left my fine court apparel behind and wore simple clothes and a common veil so as not to be recognized, for I was sore afraid of the people.

I had to be there in the public square. I had to catch one more view of the Jewish Teacher. Jesus was an innocent puppet of the Pharisees, the scapegoat, convicted but guilty of no crime except speaking his truth. I stood there behind my veil, afraid, straining my

ears to perhaps once more some words from him to still my fearful heart.

But he said nothing. Nothing. He offered no defense to the accusations. His eyes were swollen and tired; his body sagged under the weight of exhaustion, pain, and injury. I wanted to run back to my husband and demand that he let the innocent one go, but my feet were frozen in place. My fear was everything, all-consuming. My pain was multi-dimensional. I was a first century woman of privilege and power without any real power and without the privilege to commute the death sentence of the innocent man convicted by the mob and sentenced to death by my husband.

I stared at the weary form standing before the crowd, and I swear he looked me right in the eye as though he knew me, knew who I am. It was as though he could look right through my veil and see through my eyes right into my conflicted heart. He looked at me and his eyes softened as if to say, "I forgive you, Claudia." It caught my breath short and I started to weep silent tears of frustration and hopelessness. That man. That gentle, haunting innocent man let me off my own cross even as he prepared to be nailed to his own.

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I am Claudia Procla. I am a forgiven coward. I am one of Jesus' own. And I suffer for all eternity in silence, nameless in the record, faceless in the story, not a hero, not the savior of the Innocent One,



*just a human who did not, who could not act in the dramatic moment. I knew my place, and besides as I earlier told you, the writing was on the wall. So, who are you to judge me?*

*Perhaps It Was So.*