



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

April 7, 2019

"Barabbas!" - Hope Restored Sermon Series

Pastor Dan Chun

**Mark 15:1-15** *Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed Him over to Pilate.*

*"Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "You have said so," Jesus replied.*

*The chief priests accused him of many things.*

*So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of."*

*But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.*

*Now it was the custom at the Festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested.*

*A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising.*

*The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.*

*"Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?"*

*asked Pilate, knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him.*

*But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.*

*"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them.*

*"Crucify Him!" they shouted.*

*"Why? What crime has He committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify Him!"*

*Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed Him over to be crucified.*

Normally I have several points to a sermon. Each one different. Today I have one question to ask in three different ways.

Here is the question that I shall ask three different times and answer three different ways.

**Who is Barabbas?**

**Who is Bar-Abbas?**

**Who IS Barabbas?**

I know that sounds boring and repetitive, but hang in there with me.

So, not surprising, let's start off with the first question: Who is Barabbas? Historically speaking.

We don't know a lot about him. It's mainly in the gospels that we learn about him. Not from history books, not from the rest of the Old Testament. But from what the Gospels tell us, we can learn enough for a criminal profile, so to speak.

First from our passage, we learn that Barabbas was part of an insurrection against the Roman Empire. The Romans had put its Insignia – a huge Golden Eagle – on top of the main entrance of the Holy Temple.

That was an outrage to the Jews. Rebellion was in the air. A group of Torah students tore down the Eagle.

King Herod then hunted them down, put them in chains, dragged them to his house and later burned them alive.

For the Jews and for Jesus, there is only one God. Caesar is not above the one true God.

**E**arlier in the Gospels, Jesus was asked, "Should we Jews pay taxes to Caesar?"

Jesus was smart. He asked, "Whose image is on the coin?" They said "Caesar's." Jesus replied, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

When Jesus asked, "Whose image is on the coin," a Jew would find a picture of Tiberius Caesar, but the inscription on the coin was actually Tiberius Caesar son of the Divine Augustus, meaning Tiberius, King, son of God. It was calling for absolute obedience and allegiance to Caesar because, to the Romans, Caesar was their god.

So when Jesus said "render to Caesar what's Caesar's, and to God what's God's," He meant pay taxes to the Roman Empire, but give your heart and soul to the only one true God, the father of Jesus.

Jesus was in peaceful rebellion to the belief that Caesar was God. He demanded our absolute devotion. There is no earthly king or president or rock star or celebrity that should ever have our absolute devotion. That should be reserved for God alone.

I give Barabbas credit. He knew it was not right that the Romans had put their political sign of allegiance and power on the Holy Temple Gate's door.

But while Jesus was for peace and forgiveness and grace, Barabbas was for violence. He murdered someone or some

people during an insurrection as he incited people against Rome. And for that he was arrested.

I know he is called a thief in some translations, but he was not a thief who went around pick-pocketing people or stealing from homes. If that were the case the Greek word for Barabbas in this story would have been kleptes where we get the word kleptomaniac, one who goes around stealing, sometimes compulsively.

But in this passage the word for Barabbas is lestes, which means he is like a brigand, a member of a gang or a band that goes around and robs people or ambushes them. In Barabbas' case, he is part of a band that goes around fighting the Romans, and has murdered people in the rebellion.

Sometimes Barabbas gets a bad rap. People say that he is a guy who went around murdering people. No, he is not some serial killer. He was more like an insurrectionist who was fighting a government much like our minute men during the colonial days who were killing the British soldiers to free our country leading up to 1776.

Barabbas was trying to free his country from the Romans. He was more like Francis Marion known as The Swamp Fox who used guerrilla warfare to fight the British during the wars of independence in the 1770's.

So now, hopefully we are getting more of a feeling why the Jews wanted to free Barabbas on that day. He was fighting for a

cause - THEIR cause - the people's cause! He was a revolutionary. He was a well-known freedom fighter.

But still, what he did was wrong in the eyes of Jesus – to kill for a cause, to return evil with evil.

The fact is, the world's societies are often built on revenge. We like revenge. Most of the popular movies have some kind of revenge factor about pay back the bad guy.

Pacifism, turning the other cheek, is not something our society knows by second nature. Jesus came to overturn the law of revenge and blood killing. He taught against "an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth."

So that is to answer the first of the historical question of who is Barabbas? Yes, he was one who killed, one who was a freedom fighter, and who thought violence was the way to go.

As an aside, when Jesus was crucified, we read about how there were two thieves crucified near him. The word for those thieves was again not kleptes, like a common thief. Think on this: common thieves were not crucified. Crucifixion was for serious crimes. Crucifixion was for greater felonies. No, the word used for the two thieves on the cross near Jesus was the same word for Barabbas – lestes – which meant they were probably insurrectionists too. That's why Barabbas had the possibility of crucifixion because he was a revolutionary against Rome.

**N**ow the second question:  
Who is Bar-abbas?

As we uncover more details, we find this is like an interesting mystery of the history of Jesus-and-Barabbas that keeps unraveling. How and why did their lives intersect at this time and place, especially because we never hear of Barabbas again?

Barabbas is Jewish. In Hebrew, the word “Bar” means “son of.” Abbas means father. Hmm, son of the Father. Same word that Jesus used in the Garden of Gethsemane when he said:

**Mark 14:36** “Abba, Father,” He said, “everything is possible for You. Take this cup from Me. Yet not what I will, but what You will.”

Jesus used it as Abba, Father God. Bar-Abbas, son of the Father God? Barabbas, Son of God? Same name as Jesus?

To make Barabbas’ name even more interesting, if you look at Bible translations like New Revised Standard Version or New International Version or New English Version it says this:

**Matt. 27:17** *So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, “Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?”*

Holy smokes! In many translations and even in a historical document by the ancient historian Origen, Barabbas’ first name is Jesus. No way, you say! So Barabbas’ whole name is Jesus, Son of God?

Wait a cotton-pickin’ minute! The Messiah’s name—Christ’s name—is Jesus, Son of God. Are you telling me now that Barabbas’ real first name is also Jesus and literally his name is Jesus, son of Abba? So now this story get thicker in meaning.

There comes a time in our lives when we have to choose between the world’s Jesus, son of God and the real Messiah, the Christ, Jesus Son of God. What a juxtaposition!

Both may sound righteous, but only one is the true God, the true Christ.

And that’s what the story was when Pilate said to the crowd before him,

**Matt. 27:17** *“Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?”*

Friends, that is one of the questions for us today.

The Jews back then chose Barabbas because they thought the Messiah who was to come would be more like Barabbas – a warrior, a powerful fighter, who would go against anyone and would hopefully free their country from Roman oppression.

They wanted a leader who was powerful, would protect them and kill for them.

Who would want Jesus who seems so silent even before Pilate, who appeared so weak when He once said in a sermon:

**Luke 6:35** *But love your enemies, do good to them, and*

*lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.*

Kind to the wicked? Where’s the revenge and pay back to those evil in our lives?

The people could say, “Look at those words of Jesus! What a wimpy God! Did you hear Him say that on the Sermon on the Mount? What a softie! Love your enemies? Really? Do good to them? Lend to them? Be kind to the ungrateful and wicked? No crazy way! No! Kill the wicked! Kill them!”

I just read a book about Nazi hunters who spent decades to hunt down and kill Nazi SS leaders as pay back. That’s the world’s way! That’s the manly way. Maybe for some it’s the American way. We want a powerful God who kills our enemies and protects us from all daily pain.

We say, “With the world you gotta be like the world! They’re mean. Be mean back to them. Forget this turn-the-other-cheek stuff.”

Friends, the challenge for us is this: do we try to change the real Jesus—the Messiah, the Christ, our loving, kind, forgiving, wise Lord, and best friend—to really be more like a worldly Jesus Barabbas? And do we stop believing in Him when He doesn’t act like a world leader? Sometimes our personal belief gets mixed up and deep down we want a Barabbas and not the Jesus who is God.

I have a friend who desperately wants justice in this world. But justice for him means Jesus needs to protect everyone from pain and make all enemies suffer.

Because he saw friends suffer from pain, and he didn't see Jesus protect them but allowed it instead, because he didn't see a justice for all the mean people in this world—he decided to become an atheist. He left the faith. He said Jesus didn't exist. Or if He did, He was not a nice God.

So he, in essence, would have said that day before Pilate, "Crucify Jesus Christ! Put Him away! Eliminate Him! He is not the real Messiah! I would rather have a political Messiah like Barabbas."

There are times when we would rather follow the ways of the world than follow the true Jesus of the Bible. And here is what we would say in making Jesus in our own image: "I want a Messiah who makes me rich, who takes away all my pain, where I always have worldly success.

If the real Jesus doesn't do that, I will intellectually abandon and crucify Him."

Yes, those who followed Him the most closely in the Bible, that inner circle of the 12 apostles, almost all died a martyr's death, but for me in America, no, the real Jesus will make me worldly successful and if He doesn't then I move on. Crucify Him. Make Him dead in my life. I would rather follow a Barabbas, a

political, societal leader who uses power and, if needed, revenge or unkindness toward my enemies; and *certainly* not forgiveness or mercy.

I don't want to be led by the Holy Spirit. I want to tell the Spirit what I want Him to do. I don't want God's agenda for my day. I would rather use my prayer life to tell Him what He needs to do to accomplish my agenda.

I don't want to follow His morals. I would rather tell Him what my morals are and He should approve of them.

I would rather tell Him how I want to spend my money. I don't want Him to tell me how to be generous.

I will tell Him what the causes of my life will be. I don't want to be quiet or slow enough to hear what causes He wants me to have.

If Christ butts in and tries to tell me what to do and how to do it and how I must forgive the unforgivable or love the unlovable, make peace with someone with whom I don't get along, then I would rather not have Him in my life.

So I join in the chorus: "Crucify Him. Get Jesus' voice and His stupid ways out of my life. Because I don't want to change my life."

I said I would ask the question three times "who is Barabbas?" The first time we talked about the historical Barabbas.

The second time we talked about the Barabbas who might be interfering with Whom we think is the true Messiah, the true Son of God.

But now here comes the judo flip.

I now ask a third time, "Who IS Barabbas?"

Who should have been set free that day? Who deserves to die for their sins? Who is not totally innocent? Who often chooses society's ways instead of Christ-like ways in how to do business, how to be involved in entertainment and media, or how to relate with other people? Who is the Barabbas in the story?

The answer is—you and I.

The crazy thing is that we are the Barabbas in the story. We are guilty of sin for joining the wrong causes and living a life that is not consistent with the will of God, for maybe being violent in the ways we have treated people with our unforgiveness, our lack of empathy, our selfishness, our compulsiveness with habits that hurt our loved ones or ourselves. We are Barabbas who uses the name of Jesus, as in "Dan Chun, follower of Jesus," but we all fall short.

As it says in the Bible:

**Rom. 3:23** *For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.*

The amazing point of this story is that the Jews crucified the wrong man.

**J**esus was perfect love, perfect wisdom, so kind, tender with children, loving, gentle, peaceful and peace-making, forgiving. He was the only one without sin in this world.

And yet, our innocent Lord took our place on the cross. We should have been the ones on it because we are guilty of insurrection for our rebellion against God. From day one, we have been the rebels against God and hence ache for the deep peace we have always wanted, to have the strength in the midst of our pain and stress.

I believe that the depth of *our* awareness of *our* sin will always be in direct proportion to *our* depth of love for God.

The bigger the awareness of our sin, the deeper of our love for God. Are we aware of our sin and rebellion? Confession is good for the soul. Unfortunately, it is a lost sacrament for us Protestants.

I think that is why Mary Magdalene so loved Jesus because she was filled with demons and knows what it is like to be saved, as were those Jesus healed—lepers, blind men, addicts who couldn't stop drinking or eating or having sex, embezzling tax collectors and wayward adulterers, all who were forgiven by Jesus. They loved Jesus deeply.....deeply.

Only when we know how much we have sinned, how much we have missed the mark, how self-centered or unloving we can be, will we fall so utterly grateful at the foot of the cross remembering how Jesus took our

place when we, the Barabbases, should have been condemned.

But good news! The verses following the one on the screen restore our hope, for to complete it, it says this:

**Rom. 3:23-26** *For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.*

*Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when He freed us from the penalty for our sins.*

*For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed His life, shedding His blood.*

*This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when He held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for He was looking ahead and including them in what He would do in this present time.*

*God did this to demonstrate His righteousness, for He himself is fair and just, and He declares sinners to be right in His sight when they believe in Jesus.*

Or if I may read this same passage in the paraphrase of The Message version:

**Rom. 3:23-26** *Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity He put us in right standing with Himself. A pure gift.*

*He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where He always wanted us to be. And He did it by means of Jesus Christ.*

*God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in Him sets us in the clear.*

*God decided on this course of action in full view of the public—to set the world in the clear with Himself through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins He had so patiently endured.*

*This is not only clear, but it's now—this is current history! God sets things right. He also makes it possible for us to live in His rightness.*

Who IS Barabbas? The surprise ending of the story—it is we. We who are far from perfect who rebel against Father God, were saved by Jesus. Jesus went to an execution that should have been ours. He was beaten, blindfolded and punched, whipped, stabbed and crucified on a cross.

The tear-provoking, lump-in-the-throat-choking part is that He did it willingly so that sin would never fully control us or prevent us from God.

We could all be close to God forever here on earth as the true Bar-abbas, a son or daughter of God our Father.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts, as well as audio and video recordings of sermons, also are available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org) by clicking the eSermons tab.