



Week #2
He Came Among His Own... (John 18.12-19.16a)

The opening verses of John's gospel provide a perspective on the presence and power of the God of Creation in the life of Jesus from 30,000 feet. Early in the story John shocks his hearers with the line: "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him" (Jn 1.10). We might assume based on what John has told us in the opening verses of his prologue that since "he was with God in the beginning" (Jn 1.2) and "all things came into being through him" (Jn 1.3) and that his life is the light of all people (Jn 1.4) and that he "was coming into the world" (Jn 1.9) that Jesus, the Son of God, the Word from Creation would obviously be welcomed, known, loved, and embraced. But most of us know that is not how the gospel is going to unfold. The One who fashioned the cosmos will become flesh and live among us (Jn 1.14). And yet, John tells us from the beginning that when confronted with the good news of God's immediate presence among God's people, the Son of God will be rejected by those God created. This week's walk with Jesus takes us through three interwoven stories that expose the overt and subtle motivations for humanity's rejection of the Son of God - both then and now.

John 18.12-14, 19-24

As in Matthew's account, Judas leads an armed militia to the garden to arrest Jesus. John notes that both Roman and Jewish cohorts are part of the mix. A "speira" (Jn 18.12) is a Roman manipulus, which at the time could include anywhere from 200 (two centuries) to 600 soldiers (a cohort). This military unit was under the command of a chiliarch (Jn 18.12), which literally means "ruler over a thousand men." Even 200 soldiers (let alone 600!) seems like overkill if the goal is to ensure the arrest of Jesus. In addition, that sounds like quite a large detachment of soldiers for Rome to have on hand at Jerusalem. However, given the fact that the Passover festival was about to begin it would not be unusual for Rome to amass soldiers near Jerusalem to suppress any potential uprisings.

In addition to the Roman military unit, a Jewish temple police force of an unknown size is also in the garden. In this scene, the Roman militia was on hand to support the Jewish temple police just in case something went awry in the capture and arrest of Jesus. Contrary to any possible reports that Jesus tried to resist arrest, John's gospel portrays Jesus going out to meet Judas and the militia as they enter the garden (Jn 18.4). Note that the kiss of betrayal is not included in this gospel and that the soldiers "step back and fall to the ground" (Jn 18.6) when Jesus identifies himself as the person they seek, using the name of God (Jn 18.6,8, "I am"). In John's gospel, in contrast to Matthew, Jesus is not taken, but authoritatively hands himself over as he is seized and bound (Jn 18.12). In addition, both Gentile and Jewish militia take part together signaling early on the universal scope of the rejection of Jesus.

Having secured Jesus, the temple police take him to Annas, “the father-in-law of Caiaphus, the high priest that year” (Jn 18.13). John’s gospel is the only one that includes Annas in this portion of the gospel narrative, but it is not completely surprising. Annas was high priest before Caiaphus (c. 6-15CE), maintained a position of substantial authority in Jerusalem, and had five sons and grandsons who held the high priesthood through 41CE (Beasley-Murray, 323). Annas figures prominently in Luke-Acts alongside Caiaphus and other high priests in his family, solidifying his patriarchal status in the Temple during the time of Jesus, even to the point of maintaining the title of high priest (Jn 18.19, Acts 4.6).

As Jesus is brought before Annas, John reminds the reader that it was Caiaphus who said “it is expedient for one man to die on behalf of the people” (Jn 11.50, 18.14). When Caiaphus said this, he spoke to the rising concern over what Rome would do in response to the tumult that Jesus was causing among the Jews, particularly after raising Lazarus from the tomb (Jn 11.48). With these words, Caiaphus solidified the resolve of the Sanhedrin to kill Jesus (Jn 11.53). John, however, indicates that Caiaphus spoke far more than he could understand: “He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God” (Jn 11.51-52). Caiaphus understands the death of Jesus in the most expedient terms of leveraging political savvy and power to maintain national security and Jerusalem’s balance of power with Rome. John, understanding the Cross now in the light of Resurrection, understands Jesus’ resolve as he walks the journey from Gethsemane to Golgotha. What Caiaphus understands by “saving our nation” and what John and Jesus understand by “saving our nation” are two entirely different visions that stem from precisely the same events. In other words, what Annas and Caiaphus see, hear know and believe when they see the Cross and what John and his hearers see, hear, know, and believe when they see the Cross radically differ. How might perceiving the world through the sign of the Cross as John comprehends it alter the way we see, hear, know and believe? This is one of the driving questions that runs throughout John’s gospel (Jn 20.30-31).

In verse 19, Annas breaks from Judaic tradition in his “trial” of Jesus. Instead of calling witnesses, he questions Jesus directly. By questioning Jesus about his “disciples and his teaching,” Annas is likely attempting to demonstrate that Jesus is a false prophet of Israel, a charge punishable by death (Dt 13). Jesus speaks about the highly public nature of his ministry against the charge. False teachers who seek to subvert authority tend to teach in secret and all of Jesus’ teaching and healings have been done out in the open.

Jesus then directly accuses Annas of violating standard trial protocols, suggesting that Annas call witnesses (Jn 18.21), which is why one of the temple police officers strikes Jesus (Jn 18.22). Turning to the officer, Jesus more directly demands a fair trial. When Jesus says, “If I have spoken wrongly,” he is not referring to the assumed charge of being a false teacher, he is referring to the fact that Annas is not dealing justly with Jesus. Because Jesus has doubled down on his demand for a fair trial, Annas “sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest” (Jn 18.24).

We do not know if Jesus is put on trial before Caiaphus because John’s narrative turns immediately to Jesus’ trial before Pilate. The trial before Annas was a farce designed to expediently arrive at a death sentence. Any trial before Caiaphus would have been the same. The result is that Jesus is taken to Pilate since, as we discover in Jn 18.30, Caiaphus does not have authority under Roman rule to carry out the death penalty as adjudicated by Torah. At this point in our journey, the Jerusalem establishment has rejected Jesus and will do anything to be rid of him in order to protect their political and social standing under Roman rule. To be direct, they are choosing political expediency over faithfulness to God; what is best for Israel over righteousness before God. Before we explore Jesus’ trial before Pilate, we must deal with the interwoven narrative of the rejection of Jesus by one of his very own disciples.

John 18.15-18, 25-27

The last time we saw Simon Peter he was in Gethsemane with a sword being rebuked by Jesus for his zealot-like response to the authoritarian military incursion. In Matthew’s gospel, the disciples fled from the garden in fear, but in John’s gospel the Roman/Jewish militia allow the disciples to go free once Jesus is arrested. Now, Peter and a mystery disciple (more than likely John himself) are continuing to follow Jesus on the walk

from Gethsemane to Annas' courtyard.

Because of John's association with the high priest he is allowed free entry through the doorway into Annas' courtyard. Peter, however, is not as fortunate. When John speaks to a woman who tends the door of the courtyard about allowing Peter to come in, she innocently asks, "Are you not also one of this man's disciples?" (Jn 18.17). In this question, she apparently recognizes John as a disciple of Jesus and simply asks Peter if he is also a disciple. Is it possible that she considers herself a disciple? We are not certain. But Peter's answer is clear, "I am not." Whereas Jesus openly declares his immediate identity with God ("I am"), Peter literally negates the phrase ("not I am"). The woman allows Peter to enter and soon he finds himself huddled around a fire pit because it was cold.

The "servants and the temple police" (Jn 18.18) gathered around the fire ask Peter the exact same question as the woman at the door. The stakes are much higher in this setting for Peter as he hears the question. First, John was with Peter earlier and he doesn't seem to be among those gathered around the fire. Second, it seems that John was familiar with the woman managing the door, but those gathered around the fire are likely some of the same folks who were at Gethsemane. Peter offers the exact same response, "I am not." This marks the second time that Peter publicly rejects Jesus.

As it turns out, someone in the courtyard, likely also gathered around the fire, a "servant of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off," recognizes Peter and asks, "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" (Jn 18.26). John simply tells us, "once again Peter denied," and "immediately" the rooster crowed, marking Peter's final rejection of Jesus and recalling the scene where Jesus questions Peter's claim that he would "lay [his] life down" (Jn 13.37).

Here one of Jesus' own disciples publicly rejects him. It is true that Jesus told Peter this would happen, but in this series of rejection stories in John 18-19 Peter's disavowal of Jesus is significant as part of John's demonstration of the universal rejection of Jesus as he walks the way to the Cross. While we are not told directly, Peter seems to be concerned for his own safety and security as he "follows" Jesus into Annas' courtyard. He still believes Jesus, but now that the circumstances around Jesus have changed, now that he believes it is no longer as safe to follow him openly, he is too afraid to openly claim to be his disciple. I believe that many who have followed Jesus can resonate with Peter's dilemma, and John includes Peter's story of rejection to motivate the faithful to reflect on the quality of their own discipleship.

John 18.28-19.16

The final rejection of Jesus, the one whereby he is sentenced to death by crucifixion, is a brilliantly nuanced tale filled with psychological, social and political intrigue.

We presume that Caiaphus, the temple police, other leading Jewish officials (Annas?) and possibly a few others close to the high priesthood are among the "they" that walk with Jesus to the Praetorium of Pontius Pilate. Pilate was governor of Judea, the highest representation of Roman authority apart from the Emperor. John tells us that they took Jesus to the governor's residence "early" (Jn 18.28). They wanted to make sure that the matter of Jesus was the first order of business for Pilate on this Friday, the day of preparation for Passover (Jn 19.14).

However, in a shocking moment of irony, the Jewish officials will not enter the Praetorium so as to avoid ritual defilement (Jn 18.28). We are not certain why the Jewish officials believe they will be defiled by entering Pilate's residence. John does not mention that there are lepers, dead bodies, pigs, or unclean women at Pilate's residence. This detail is noted by John to highlight the hypocrisy of those who are bringing Jesus to Pilate to be crucified on false charges while trying to remain ritually pure, or in other words, righteous before God.

When Pilate asks for an accusation (Jn 18.29), the officials do not articulate one. They simply indicate that Jesus is "an evildoer" (Jn 18.30) and essentially says that they wouldn't bring someone to Pilate if there wasn't a problem. Because the charges are not specific Pilate immediately rejects the case (Jn 18.31). As will become

evident in this story and is attested by external sources, Pilate and the Jerusalem establishment existed in a constant state of political tension. Jerusalem did not like being occupied by Rome because Israel was God's Promised Land and God's Temple represented God's sovereignty over all other gods. The presence of Rome (or Babylon or Egypt or any occupying force) was an affront to God's purposes for God's people. Because of their history, Pilate believes he has good reason to be suspicious about the intentions of Caiaphus and his officials in this case, and Caiaphus knows how to strike fear in the heart of Roman officials.

John does not provide any details, but it is clear that once "the Jews" indicate that the case of Jesus rises to the level of the death penalty, Pilate is once again interested and a conversation takes place that we know nothing about (Jn 18.31). Since the officials will not enter the governor's residence, Pilate has to go back inside to speak with Jesus. It appears from his question (Jn 18.33) that the Jews are bringing the charge of sedition against Jesus. This charge is of interest because it is not an offense punishable by death according to Torah. However, sedition is certainly a concern for Pontius Pilate, whose primary job is to maintain the peace by fomenting revolution in his territory.

In typical Johannine fashion, Jesus does not back down from the accusation, claiming his authority over a kingdom and accepting Pilate's designation of Jesus as a king (Jn 18.34-37). However, to ease Pilate's concerns of revolution, Jesus tempers his claims by saying that he is no threat to Rome. His kingdom is not like those with which Pilate is familiar (Jn 18.36). If it were, his officials (the same word used to signify the temple police) would be resisting his capture by the Jews (Jn 18.36). The absence of such resistance proves Jesus' point. Jesus then claims authority over the kingdom of truth (Jn 18.37), which likely sounds more like a philosophical guild than a "nation" to Pilate. He brushes Jesus off with the ironic statement, "What is truth?" (Jn 18.38) and heads back outside. The irony is simply that for John, "truth" stands before Pilate in the person of Jesus and he does not (yet?) see it.

Pilate remains unconvinced of Jesus' guilt on the charges presented and instead of just calling an end to these proceedings unwisely attempts to appease the Jews. He offers to release an actual criminal as part of an apparent traditional Passover policy in hopes that they will accept the innocent Jesus. Following this course, the charges of sedition against Jesus would remain, but Pilate would be able to release him. The Jews, however, shockingly cry for the release of an actual criminal, Barabbas (Jn 18.40). This puts Pilate in a bind. There's no way that Pilate is going to release Barabbas, who was more than likely a Zealot legitimately convicted of insurrection and murder. Thus, Pilate's first attempt to release Jesus fails.

Pilate tries another approach. He has Jesus dressed up as a faux king, brutally beaten, and then presents him before the Jews (Jn 19.1-5). Pilate hoped that this barbaric form of humiliation would be enough to appease the Jews and enable him to release Jesus. By declaring, "Behold, the man!" Pilate negates the charge of sedition by presenting Jesus as a farcical pretender to the throne. He is battered, spat upon, bleeding - a conquered, weak, hapless faux king - a mere mortal. However, rather than creating empathy by demonstrating the abject weakness of Jesus, the chief priests and temple police call for crucifixion. They are undeterred in their original intention to kill Jesus so that he does not disrupt the power structure in Jerusalem or unsettle the careful balance of Jerusalem's relationship with Rome.

Again, Pilate is in a bind. He "finds no guilt in him" (Jn 19.6) but cannot find a politically expedient way to release Jesus. Out of frustration, Pilate tells the Jewish officials to "take him yourselves and crucify him" (Jn 19.6). The chief priests and temple police would love to do this, but everyone knows that only Rome has the authority to carry out crucifixions. In addition, politically speaking, if the Jewish authorities kill Jesus they might face a revolt because of Jesus' popularity. The power of the Roman military was widely feared, so in the minds of the chief priests both legally and politically Rome must be the ones to put Jesus to death.

At this point, the Jews offer a new accusation: Jesus claims not only to be a King, but also a Son of God (Jn 19.7). Roman Emperors frequently took on divine titles, routinely imagining themselves as sons of the gods. In the ancient world there was always a direct link between divine power and political authority. The strength of an emperor or a king immediately reflected the power of the gods who either backed them or who they embodied. For Jesus to claim to be a "son of god" doesn't challenge regional authority, it challenges imperial

authority. Pilate is rightly “more afraid than ever” (Jn 19.8).

He returns to Jesus with the question, “Where are you from?” (Jn 19.9). His question is about Jesus’ authority. In essence, “From where do you draw your political authority: from human lineage or from divine commission?” Initially Jesus says nothing. If Pilate cannot comprehend Jesus’ prior explanation of his reign, his kingdom and truth, how is Pilate going to wrap his mind around Jesus being the Son of the Father, who is the God of Israel? Only faith can see and know these things, and while Pilate believes Jesus is innocent of the charges brought against him, he is not yet like the man born blind (Jn 9).

Pilate threatens Jesus with his “authority” to release Jesus or send him to be crucified. Now Jesus speaks and offers something Pilate agrees with: Any authority that Pilate has over Jesus has been divinely granted. While the divine source may be at issue, Pilate can immediately understand that the divine authority of the Emperor comes down through his governorship to the position in which he finds himself in this moment. Jesus then points out the problematic position in which Caiaphus finds himself. Pilate knows that the charges Caiaphus is bringing against Jesus are false. So, in Jesus’ understanding, Pilate stands in a position of divine righteousness relative to Jesus, and Caiaphus is “guilty of a greater sin” (Jn 19.11). This argument convinces Pilate once and for all of Jesus’ innocence and he seeks to release Jesus.

However, the Jews were savvy and, as noted, very experienced with pushing Roman authorities around to get what they wanted. In response to Pilate’s repeated efforts to exonerate and release Jesus, the Jews now call into question Pilate’s allegiance to the Emperor (Jn 19.12). The import of their claim is that if Pilate will not convict Jesus of sedition and crucify him, they will appeal to the Emperor. In Pilate’s view, if the Emperor hears that Pilate did not respond with immediate severity against an insurrectionist he would lose his governorship and possibly his life. This pivot by the Jews places Pilate in an untenable position. In the political calculus, now it is either Pilate or Jesus. So, regardless of Pilate’s judgment (faith?) about Jesus and his innocence in light of the charges, he has no option left but to crucify him.

So, Pilate brings Jesus out to the place in the gubernatorial palace where official judgments are proclaimed (Jn 19.13). John notes the day and time at which Pilate’s pronouncement is taking place. This moment, as it turns out, coincides with the beginning of the preparations for Passover. It is no coincidence in John’s gospel that as the events of the Cross are about to take a significant step forward, work ceases, leaven is removed from Jewish houses, and the Passover lambs are beginning to be slaughtered. Whereas Passover remembers the Exodus from Egypt, the Cross is depicted by John and other New Testament writers as God’s Second Exodus, a powerful theological frame with substantial implications.

Rather than announcing a judgment against Jesus based on the charges, Pilate frustrates the Jews by declaring, “Behold, Your King!” (Jn 19.14). In this, Pilate gives the Jews one, final opportunity to offer their judgment either for or against Jesus. We know by now that, quite ironically, Pilate believes Jesus. However, we also know that Pilate is going to be forced to reject Jesus out of pure political expedience. The Jews issue their final rejection of Jesus at Pilate’s offer. He even asks them a second time, “Shall I crucify your King?” (Jn 19.15). Their response marks not only their ultimate condemnation of Jesus, but of the Lord God as well: “We do not have any King except for Caesar!” (Jn 19.15). As Passover begins, the Jews declare their ultimate allegiance to the Roman Emperor rather than the God who redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and delivered them to the Promised Land. The theological import of this claim is also profound and should serve as a continual warning to both Israel and the Church.

With what is likely a sense of deep sorrow Pilate hands Jesus over to the officials to be crucified by Roman authorities (Jn 19.16). While the Jews appear to have the last word in the trial of Jesus, it is Pilate who passive-aggressively lands the final theological blow in John’s gospel. When Jesus is crucified, the sign above him which ought to indicate the charge against him simply reads, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, so that all understand. The Jews are incensed by Pilate’s positive claim about Jesus that echoes his declaration from the seat of judgment, but Pilate is done with them: “What I wrote, I wrote!” (Jn 19.22).

Summary and Conclusion

By the end of these three stories, the Jewish officials, a close disciple of Jesus (not John, but Peter), and even Pilate as a representative of Rome have rejected Jesus. Indeed, Jesus “was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him” (Jn 1.10). The universal rejection of Jesus calls the faithful today to consider their own faith in and allegiance to Jesus and, maybe more importantly, our possibly overt and maybe more subtle “rejections” of Jesus that show up in our intentions, our words, and our actions. Few narratives in the New Testament cut so immediately to the heart of the way in which we routinely reject God out of personal, social, or political expedience than these three stories from John.

