

The Bible's «Minor» Characters: Pilate's Wife

Matthew 27:15-23

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Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Evening Worship

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¹⁵ Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. ¹⁶ At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. ¹⁷ 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?” ¹⁸ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. ¹⁹ 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.” ²⁰ Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. ²¹ The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.” ²² Pilate said to them, “Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?”^[1] All of them said, “Let him be crucified!” ²³ Then he asked, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”

Sam, as many of you know, has been giving a series of sermons at Evening Worship about minor characters in the Bible. And when he suggested that I could be part of the series, I jumped at the chance.

The only minor character left in Sam's series is the wife of Pontius Pilate. The Bible, as you know, does not give her a name, which is not that unusual, lots of people in the gospels are never named, in fact in some ways a name is unusual, but from other sources we know that Pilate's wife is Claudia Procula, a grand-daughter – this is interesting! – a grand-daughter of Caesar Augustus. Did you know that?

Frankly, I did not know about that until I prepared for this sermon!

Her appearance in the Bible is relatively brief – it's only 38 words in the English translation – but even though her role is not large, down through the centuries she has captured the imagination of artists and poets and novelists and – more recently – film makers.

Charlotte Bronte, just to give you an example, was one of the famous Bronte sisters – and who doesn't remember novels like *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*? Well, Charlotte Bronte wrote a relatively well-known poem in 1846 called “Pilate's Wife's Dream.”

We will get to the dream in a moment, because that, after all, is what she is remembered for in the Bible.

And then, last but not least, although I could give lots of other examples, Pilate's wife appears in Mel Gibson's 2004 movie called “The Passion of the Christ.”

So, even though she makes this very brief appearance in scripture, she nevertheless made quite an impression on believers down through the centuries, and in the time I have tonight I want to explore why that this. What is it about this woman that makes us take notice of her?

Now, not to keep you in suspense, Pilate's wife – is it okay if we begin to call her Procula from now on? – Procula tried to save Jesus' life with a direct appeal to her husband, the governor. You could argue, as a matter of fact, that Procula did more than anyone else in the story to save Jesus' life.

Which is a pretty good way to be remembered.

Of course, Peter came to the Garden of Gethsemane armed with a sword, and when Jesus was about to be arrested, he famously sliced off the ear of a soldier. Maybe you remember that Jesus at that point told Peter to put his sword away and healed the man's ear.

But everyone else – or just about everyone else – ran away at the first sign of trouble, leaving Jesus to endure the trial and the terrible beating and the crucifixion on his own.

There's a wonderful verse or two in Mark's gospel, where a young man is in the garden with Jesus and ran away. And when the soldiers reached out to grab him, they somehow got only his linen cloth. And so, as the story puts it, he ran away naked. Tradition has it that that young man was Mark himself.

Talk about minor characters in the story!

Getting back to Peter, let's give him his due here: He did not run away. In addition to drawing his sword, he came to the courtyard of Caiaphas the high priest, but I think you know what happened there. He suddenly lost the courage he had earlier in the night and said three different times that he had no idea who Jesus was.

And so, the name Peter and the word "betrayal" are now synonymous in the minds of most western people.

Maybe it would have been better if Peter had run away with the rest of them.

And then, of course, Jesus' mother apparently stayed with him throughout. John's gospel records that Mary and the beloved the disciples were there at the crucifixion to the end. But – and this is my point – the story makes clear that most of Jesus' followers simply ran away out of fear. There isn't a single hero the bunch.

So, that leaves Procula as the one and only person who tried.

Let's spend a few minutes tonight trying to understand what motivated her, why this Gentile woman, grand-daughter of the emperor, put her convictions on the line, and why – 20 centuries later – we still mention her every time we read the passion story.

Pilate was the fifth Roman governor (or Prefect) of Judea, and probably the best known. I think it's safe to say that this region was not the most desirable in the Empire. Careers died in places like Judea. It was a thankless outpost.

Early in the first century the Jews, as I think you know, were a restless bunch. Most conquered people quickly discovered that the Romans wanted everyone to be happy. Hard to believe, maybe, but true. Just swear allegiance to Rome, make a few animal sacrifices each year, and so forth, and life could be quite good.

The Jews, though, would have none of that, and so Judea was always a restless, contentious place to govern. There was always the threat of an uprising in the air.

Here's an interesting fact, and as we'll see it turns out to be an important fact as well. The Roman governor did not live in Jerusalem. I mean, why would you? Jerusalem means a great deal to us today for spiritual reasons, but in the first century it was not the most attractive city in the empire.

Maybe at the time of King Solomon, after that first temple had been built, maybe then it was a glorious capital, but in the first century the Roman governor preferred to live in Caesarea Philippi, which was a lovely port city on the Mediterranean.

If you've been there, then you've walked through the ruins of the governor's home which is on the beach and looks out on the sea. The sunsets must have been lovely.

But at least once each year, around the time of Passover, the governor and his wife set out for Jerusalem. With so many people in town, and with so much anti-Roman feeling, it was best, for obvious reasons, for the governor and some of his men to be a visible presence.

The governor of Judea typically commanded a force of 3,000 to 5,000 men. I don't know how many would have traveled with him, but probably enough to make a statement.

As a small, but important footnote at this point, the procession of the governor into Jerusalem was quite a parade, and it typically drew quite a crowd. People wanted to catch a glimpse. He was a celebrity. Maybe a minor one, but he was all they had. The governor entered the city on a beautiful horse with a large contingent of soldiers.

In contrast to that, Jesus entered Jerusalem at about the same time, Passover week, riding a donkey, not anybody's idea of a beautiful animal. His followers were noisy, and they were waving palm branches, but still ... the contrast could not have been more striking. Pilate's entry into Jerusalem – and Jesus's entry.

I think it's interesting that Procula traveled with her husband to Jerusalem. I mean, I've stood in her living room (or what's left of it), and it's a beautiful spot. And satellite photos suggest that the harbor, entirely designed and built by Roman engineers, was magnificent, one of the wonders of first-century design and engineering, since there was no natural port at that spot.

But according to legend, Pilate and Procula were close and had a good relationship. According to other sources, she traveled with her husband most of the time.

According to the Gospel of Nicodemus, one of the apocryphal gospels, which was written around 325 AD, Procula was a convert to Judaism. And what this means is that she was like the Ethiopian eunuch in

Acts 8. They, and others like them, were known as God-fearers, a technical term. They were outsiders who, to their credit, were spiritual seekers and who had found their way to Judaism.

They would never be fully accepted as Jews, but they were nevertheless drawn to the God of Israel.

And I think that's interesting, don't you? Here we have the wife of a Roman governor who finds herself drawn spiritually to something that is very different from the religion of Rome. That in itself is a courageous position for a woman in her position to take.

But it was not unique. According to The Book of Acts, there were other women of high social status who were also drawn to faith first in the God of Israel and then his Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

These women wanted something more than Roman religion offered, which was kind of a blend of everything. Something about the God of Israel seemed to them real and genuine and substantial. Unlike Roman religion, which no one took seriously, except maybe the emperor, the religion of the Jews offered something they wanted and needed.

So, we come to this Passover week in 33 AD – or whenever the year was, exactly – and Jesus is arrested by Jewish authorities, he is tried under their law (you remember the scene before the Sanhedrin), and then he is turned over to the Romans.

Let me just say here what some of you already know.

The Romans executed people all the time. And crucifixion was one of their favorite methods of execution, especially for slaves and people of low social status. And not only did the Romans crucify people all the time, sometimes they did it to many, many people at the same time.

And then they would leave their bodies up on their crosses for days. A Roman execution was not only public, it was unavoidable. Crucifixions occurred where everyone could see them. And of course it was awful. Excruciating.

Whatever was troubling Procula was not the idea of execution itself, or even the idea of a crucifixion.

According to Matthew's gospel – and I'm going to leave out the whole story of Barabbas right now – Pilate was sitting on the judgment seat, in full view of a crowd of people, and his wife sent word to him, and the message was, **“Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.”**

Now, generally speaking, I have never had much sympathy for Pilate. He may truly have been torn over what to do with Jesus, but I have never thought so. My guess is that his mind was made up. He wanted this over as quickly as possible and with as little fanfare as possible.

But now comes this word from his wife.

However you look at this story, what Procula did was a courageous thing to do – to tell your husband, the Roman governor of Judea, in the middle of stressful day, that he is about to execute an innocent man.

You know, in terms of storytelling, these words really only serve to remind the readers that of course Jesus is innocent. We all know that. And these words suggest that maybe some other people knew it too. What was happening was a terrible miscarriage of justice. An innocent man was being condemned to die.

That's the role she plays in the story.

So, let's go deeper. Let's imagine, if we can, what this woman was doing.

What I very much want you to see tonight is her example. She used her voice, her unique position as the governor's wife, her presence in Jerusalem and her embrace of Judaism to save Jesus' life. She used what she had.

We sometimes think that we don't have much power. We sometimes think that our voices do not count for much. Am I right? We sometimes think that the government is so large and so powerful that we would never be heard. Why would we even try?

But courage doesn't look at life that way.

Soren Kierkegaard, who was Danish philosopher and theologian – Soren Kierkegaard reflects on the meaning of courage, and he says, “To dare [to be courageous] is to lose one's footing momentarily. To not dare [to not be courageous] is to lose oneself.”

I think what he means is that, if we do not speak in those situations, if we keep our mouths shut when we know something to be truth, if we assume that our voices mean nothing in the face of a greater power, then we lose something of ourselves. We lose our humanity.

To put it another way, cowardice robs us of something essential. We need to speak, not because anything we say will change a horrible situation. We need to speak because we are human beings, children of God, called to a life worthy of the one who loves us.

We need to speak because, as Jesus puts it in another story, if we are silent, the stones will cry out. There are times in our lives – situations in which we find ourselves – when silence is as bad as Peter's betrayal. Being silent doesn't make us better. In some ways, it makes us worse. We could have spoken, but chosen to remain silent.

According to tradition, Procula became a Christian. And the Greek church made her a saint.

After spending time with this little story – these 38 words – I think I understand why they would make her a saint. Her courage inspires me. I feel convicted when I read her story.