

Sermon by Rev. Anthony Weisman -- March 9, 2025
John 11:45-52
“Just The Facts”

You may be familiar with the line, attributed to Sergeant Joe Friday from the old show *Dragnet*, who would interrupt those who had witnessed some crime as they went on and on about what happened; he'd say, “Excuse me, but *just the facts, ma'am*.” This morning's sermon is going to be a just-the-facts-ma'am sort of sermon.

I want to give you as objective an historical account of Jesus's death on the cross as I think it's possible to give. Today you get the “what?”, and then, through the rest of the Lenten season, you'll get the “so what?” and the “now what?”. We'll spend the next five weeks in Lent out all the religious and spiritual, symbolic, deeper, personal meaning of the Jesus's death. But first, before that, before any of that – it's *just the facts*. Because faith has to – *it has to* – have some relationship to facts. Faith, being faith, is about more than the facts, but it's not about less than the facts. This isn't all made up. There's a core of historical truth at the heart of our faith.

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To start, you need some background: Israel is a little strip of land slightly smaller than New Jersey that sits at the meeting point of three continents – Europe, Asia, and Africa. In Israel, between the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the mountains and the Middle Eastern desert beyond the mountains to the east is as an even littler strip of land, of flat enough and temperate enough land, that any one of the major empires in the ancient world would march their armies through on the way to invade any other.

Tromping through the Holy Land was the only way from point A to point B for the Hittites, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Macedonians, the Greeks and the Romans. All of these great powers passed through Israel on their way to war with one another. And, as they did, all of these great powers took care to secure Israel for themselves, to subdue it and to claim it, so that they, they and not their enemies, could keep moving back and forth through it safely and easily. So Israel was conquered, conquered over and over and over and over again – for the better part of almost three thousand years. Different conquering empires treated Israel differently, some brutally, some not as brutally as the others. But there were only short spans of time when the Jewish people were free, truly free, of foreign occupiers, overlords, or oppressors.

In the time of Jesus, Rome was bad guy. The Romans ruled Israel, and, in effect, they ruled it as a colony of plantations. Land passed into the hands of Roman military heroes and second and third sons from families with political connections to Caesar. More and more, the Jewish people worked as – you can think of them as – serfs or sharecroppers. (It's not for nothing that so many of Jesus's parables are about servants working in their masters' fields.)

A small minority of foreigners made the native population into their workhorses; these Romans grew rich off the land and off the labor of the Jewish people. To be sure, the Jewish people *had* suffered far worse throughout their long, sad history. Life under Rome was nothing compared to

life under Babylon. But that doesn't mean that the Jews didn't want to live as their own women and men on their own land – the Promised Land, a holy land which they believed God had given them as a *homeland*.

I don't know if it ever occurred to any of them to ask God why it was *this* land – this land, which happened to lie on the invasion route of every military power in the region – to ask God why it was *this* land they'd had the bad luck to have been given. But, anyway, under the Romans, there were good years of relative peace in which the Jewish people were content enough with the way things were, punctuated by bad years of hardship and struggle, which erupted into rebellion and revolt.

What many of these rebellions and revolts had in common were revolutionary leaders who would rally the people against Rome. Some were radicals who preached, in essence, a sort of Jewish jihad. They rose up. Others were not fighters themselves, but prophets, that is, shapers of public opinion (like a David Brooks or Joe Rogan or Rachel Maddow, only religious). They spoke up. They sought to remind the people who they were, to strengthen their sense of Jewish identity, often by calling them to practice their Jewish faith with a deeper, truer devotion. In many ways, they sowed the seeds of Jewish nationalism which those calling for holy war then harvested.

There were many revolutionary leaders like this, men who rose up and spoke up against Rome. And things never ended well for them. They were butchered in battle, murdered extrajudicially, or tried and executed – and very often, their conspirators and followers with them. There were a number of instances of mass executions, of Jewish rebels being rounded up and executed, crucified, by the thousand. In some instances, the violence spiraled out of control and engulfed the whole nation, as it did in the decades just after Jesus's death, during what is called the Jewish War, when the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem and, striking at the symbolic heart of Jewish nationalism itself, reduced the great temple to ruins.

In many respects, Jesus fit the mold of a Jewish revolutionary leader. He did many of the kind of things that Jewish revolutionary leaders did. At least one of his closest followers was a card-carrying member of a group of guerilla fighters called the Zealots. As always, there were many disaffected Jews, primed by their unhappy experience of life under Roman rule, who were ready to join in anything that looked like a movement to take their country back.

The thing is, though: Jesus didn't preach violence like they did. Jesus also didn't preach against Rome like they did, not in so many words. Another of his closest followers was employed as a Roman tax-collector, an agent of the evil empire. But that didn't matter. The more popular he became – and he always seemed to be attracting crowds – the less control over his public image he had. People could and people would see him as a fighter or as a prophet whether he was one or not.

This made him dangerous. He was putting ideas into people's heads. It was of almost no importance what those ideas actually were. It was enough that he was putting ideas into people's heads, riling them up, making them restless. This would have made him dangerous in the eyes of Rome. But Rome was thousands of miles away. Even the prefect, the sort of Roman governor in

Israel, even he, Pilate, was ensconced with his armies in the new, gleaming Roman city of Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast – far from where Jesus was causing trouble.

So this made him dangerous in the eyes of Rome’s men-on-the-ground in the Galilee and in Jerusalem, in the eyes of the local middle-men to whom Rome had entrusted day-to-day management of public affairs. Jesus was dangerous in the eyes of Rome’s Jewish collaborators – the elites of Jewish society, the merchants, the scribes, the last remaining great landowners, and the priests, who, yes, like those in the worlds of business and government who had profited by collaborating with the Nazis in Vichy France, did very well for themselves, but who also, in this case, *were* genuinely concerned for the welfare of the people, and who were constantly triangulating between them and Rome, trying to protect them, trying to turn down the temperature and keep the peace.

The morning reading from the Gospel of John captures this dynamic perfectly. Jesus grows more and more popular. Rome’s Jewish lackeys grow more and more alarmed; if things keep going the way they are going, one of them says, “everyone will believe in Jesus, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.”

Soon enough, they worry, Jesus’s movement will grow to be more than what Jesus can himself control. Things will get away from him. Things will get out of hand. He might not mean for this to happen, but the people just *will* project their deep, fierce, ancient longing for liberation and freedom onto Jesus. The end result of his religious rabble-rousing will be riots, open rebellion, and then, finally, all of the fury of Rome visited upon the whole Jewish people.

They – the merchants, the scribes, the landowners, the priests – had asked Jesus to quiet down, for the sake of the people, to quiet down. But he refused to do so. He would not cooperate with these men who *were* good men and reasonable men and who were well-schooled in the ways of Roman politics and who knew how this movie would end: badly. And badly not just for Jesus, but for his followers, and for everyone.

One from among them, Caiaphas, a high priest, suggests a way forward: “It is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” Jesus must be killed, Caiaphas says, not because he *deserves* to be killed, but *for the sake of the people*. At this point, Caiaphas says, and says sadly, I think, that it is either him or them, him or *all of them*. I don’t think there is reason to believe that Caiaphas or anyone was a wicked, callous, Machiavellian schemer who hated Jesus. They didn’t hate Jesus. They loved their people, and they were prepared to do anything – *anything*, even something so evil as send an innocent man to his death, anything – to protect them from the one playing with matches in a political tinderbox.

The story continues. The Passover festival, the great holiday commemorating the Jewish people’s liberation from bondage in Egypt, is approaching. Nationalistic spirit will be in the air. Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for the celebration, and is hailed as a would-be revolutionary hero as he enters the city. There is no time to waste. Caiaphas and the others share what they know with the Romans – for they did not have the power themselves to put anyone to death. A plan is hatched. Jesus will be executed, not because that is what justice demands, not because they especially *want* him dead, but because that is the least bad option they see as open to them.

His execution was, was from the first and always, conceived of as a necessary evil, which is to say, as a sort of sacrifice. He will be killed so that no one else – not one of his followers nor any of the people, *so that no one else* – would be killed. He will be hung on a cross (a form of capital punishment reserved for slaves and enemies of the state) so that thousands more would not again be hung on crosses lining the winding roads up to Jerusalem. His blood will be shed so that there will be no further bloodshed. And he will go along with it. He will go along with it, silently, willingly, understanding the situation and understanding the stakes.

This is the core of historical truth at the heart of the belief that Jesus died as a sacrifice, that Jesus died “for our sake.” Jesus died so that his people would live. Over the centuries, this core of historical truth came to take on a very different meaning. But, originally, in a strictly objective, just-the-facts-ma’am sense, *this is the there there*. What makes the story of Jesus’s death a more tragic story – and in a way, a more deeply, painfully *true* story – is that he was killed not because evil men did wrong, but because good men did what they thought was right. He was killed not by horrible sinners, but by religious people struggling and failing to reconcile their competing religious commitments, who could not think of anything more to do than to trust in God and hope that the end would justify the means. We’ll pick it up here next week.

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One of the ways that this core of historical truth takes on a spiritual meaning for Christians is in our celebration of the Lord’s Supper. We come, again and again we come, back to these words, “for you” – this is my body, broken *for you*; this is my blood, poured out *for you, for you and for many*.” Let us hear them again. Remember with me...