

SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS WORSHIP – MARCH 22, 2026

FIRST READING: PSALM 146 (PLEASE READ RESPONSIVELY)

¹Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!

²**I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.**

³Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.

⁴**When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.**

⁵Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, ⁶who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; ⁷who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;

⁸**the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.**

⁹The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰**The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord!**

HOLY GOSPEL: JOHN 19:1-16a

Lector: Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him."

Pastor: So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him."

Lector: The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God." Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?"

Pastor: Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

Lector: From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.”

Pastor: When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge’s bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, “Here is your King!” They cried out, “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!” Pilate asked them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but the emperor.” Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

This is the Gospel of our Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

SERMON

PASTOR JANET KETTERING

Let us pray: Holy God, in this season of contemplation, help us to recognize that you revealed yourself in Jesus, who walked among us and was handed over to be crucified. May we be strengthened by his presence among us today, as we pray in his beautiful name; the name of Savior. Amen.

In this morning’s Gospel reading, Pilate appears out of place. He’s never secure and he’s never at rest. We see him this morning as he attempts to navigate the human dilemma created when our goal is driven by attempting to please man instead of God; when our concern becomes self preservation rather than preserving what God has created.

Two forces are at play this morning, with Pilate caught at the center. The Jews – or chief priests, as we discussed last week – seem driven by their fear: Fear of losing the status quo; fear of having their authority questioned; fear of having missed the mark of God’s intention of what his kingdom would look like.

We’ve often been taught that Jesus is where he is this morning because he was “handed over” into that circumstance. The reality is that Jesus handed himself over. He willingly walked towards his suffering, not away from it.

Both the chief priests making the case against Jesus and Jesus himself have chosen their positions. It’s Pilate who’s caught in the middle because of his appointed duties as the fifth governor of the Roman province of Judea.

As governor, Pilate was appointed under the Emperor and given responsibility for leading the military and overseeing Judea's judicial system, including matters of capital punishment. He was also responsible for levying and collecting taxes and minting coins.

In the case at hand – the case of Jesus – Pilate finds himself given the power of life and death, dancing between satisfying the priests, the people, the Roman authorities, or Herod Antipas. Or, of course, God. There is that.

The dance Pilate dances is a human one which we might relate to on a metaphorical basis, at least. I, personally, experienced it in the physical sense, on a shopping trip to Minneapolis with my two dearest friends.

It was our annual girl's trip for Laurie, Swantje, and myself. It was a time to get away from our responsibilities as State Trooper, Senior Corrections Agent, and Court Reporter.

A time to share life's concerns, do some shopping, take in a show at the Chanhassen Dinner Theater, and laugh. Our positions as wives, mothers, and people woven into the Minnesota Court System positioned us on a serious side of life; the side where people's past, present, and future, were held in the balance.

This weekend was a time for setting aside the seriousness of our responsibilities to simply breathe. Once again, we set out on the shopping part of our adventure, heading to Burnsville Center, where we separated with a plan to meet later after shopping individually for Christmas gifts.

I found myself wandering. I'd made a couple of purchases and was feeling overwhelmed by choices. Wondering where to go next, when I spied an interesting shop. I walked inside, overwhelmed by shiny objects, and felt a bit like a squirrel in an entire field of shelled corn.

What to pick up next? I glanced to the left and saw an adjoining part of the store I'd missed when I entered. Ohhhh...I thought. Look at all the pretty things in there. I headed to the archway to enter.

As I approached, another woman was exiting. Like me, she'd found a few things and held a shopping bag in each hand. Without making eye contact, we began a little dance. Maybe you know the one: A step to the left; back to center; step to the right. Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me.

Try as we might, we just couldn't seem to get out of each other's way. Finally, in desperation for a solution – but still wanting to get into that part of the store – I took a breath and paused to look up. Ahhhh. That was the problem. I was looking at myself.

There was no other part of the store enticing me to enter. This wasn't an archway. It was an archway displaying a mirror. All of the shiny objects that looked so inviting were already within my grasp. I was standing in the middle of them.

It was me I was facing and I couldn't get out of my own way, caught in the dance of satisfying what I hoped would be the desires of the people I loved with the understanding that someone would invariably end up disappointed.

Can you imagine Pilate feeling something of the same? As written so well by Pastor Adam Hearlson, Pilate can't seem to satisfy the priests, the people, the Roman authorities, or Herod Antipas.

But Pilate didn't enter into this fray of his own volition. When Jesus was brought to him, Pilate was shut away in his praetorium – whether for safety or solitude, we don't know.

As Pr. Hearlson points out, encountering Jesus proved just as confounding as the rest of Pilate's world. He doesn't understand Jesus or the charges brought against him. Everyone around him regards Jesus as a threat, but Pilate can't fathom why.

So he resorts to violence. To pacify the crowd? To loosen Jesus's tongue? In his appointed role, Pilate isn't above torturing an innocent man if it promises some measure of peace or clarity.

As is usually the case when it comes to human leaders, it's the soldiers serving under Pilate, rather than Pilate himself, who taunt Jesus while striking him, mockingly calling him "King of the Jews." We can imagine their thoughts: Why would a "real" king allow himself to be treated this way?

With evidence of torture made obvious, Pilate prepares the people for what has occurred, saying "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him. Here is the man."

Something about Pilate's statement and the evidence of Jesus's beating doesn't ring true. Why would Jesus be tortured if Pilate has found no case against him? Just because Pilate held that power...or was it something else?

We have no way of knowing what Pilate was thinking in that moment, but don't you wonder if he was hoping that the shiny object of a tortured Jesus might appease the crowd and satisfy the chief priests' desire for retribution?

We know the rest of the story, don't we? Sadly, we know that the violence against Jesus only served to whet their appetites. It seems unimaginable, I know, but their

appetites now demand crucifixion.

For Pilate, the situation has become unmanageable. He's caught in the dance...and will ultimately only face himself in the mirror and leave empty handed. Leave it to Jesus to basically let him off the hook, describing Pilate's authority as something that comes from above.

Jesus reminds Pilate — just as his story reminds us every day — that there's a heavenly authority that stands in judgment over Pilate and every earthly ruler. Can't you just imagine how Pilate is squirming in his own vulnerability by now?

His next actions make it obvious that he just wants to escape: From the chief priests, from the people, and from this one called Jesus who stands beaten before him, who does nothing to defend himself and makes no argument on his own behalf.

Using the crowd to their advantage, the chief priests change tactics. They reframe their claim against Jesus, from a Jewish blasphemer to a political threat — an enemy of the emperor. They've helped Pilate make his decision. This is a charge he can't ignore without facing the possibility of disloyalty.

He looks in the mirror and sees himself and the precariousness of the position he's in. He's been given the power of life or death for another. He chooses the expedient option: He hands Jesus over to be crucified.

When we think about it, we're each given the power of life and death over others. I'm not talking physical life or death, of course. I'm talking about the power to make life not simply bearable, but actually meaningful, for those around us...in accord with what God desires for his created humanity.

Isn't that just what our Psalmist was speaking of this morning? There's absolutely no question about God's desire. It's simply not up for any kind of debate, according to the Psalmist, who admonishes us to not put our trust in mortal princes in whom there is no help. Just as we were reminded on Ash Wednesday, when their breath departs, they return to the earth and on that day their plans perish.

Where do we find happiness? When we trust in the help which is the Lord our God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord who sets the prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down. The same Lord who watches over the strangers and upholds the

orphan and the widow. This...this is the way that Jesus teaches us still...yet...today.

Yes, God gives us the power of life and death over others, in essence. It comes from our ability to make choices in this earthly life, each of which carries a ripple effect of consequence, to us and everyone around us.

Following Jesus means walking toward suffering, not away from it; engaging with the suffering we encounter in our own lives and the lives of those we meet along the way. We're here because we're hidden with Christ in God – a God that has created us to engage in the suffering of the world with the heart and soul for justice that God himself longs for.

As we journey ever toward the Cross and the Empty Tomb, we'll be faced with ourselves and the Spirit that has been gifted to reside within us. When we meet the darkest parts of this broken world, we'll be given the choice between flinching, turning, and fleeing...or flinching, continuing to face forward, and kneeling down in service.

Service that is self sacrificing and God honoring. The restorative service called love; and love shouldn't end when we step beyond the walls of this church. It should only grow larger. So go in peace...and remember that love is the greatest miracle of all. Amen.

HYMN OF THE DAY | GIVE US CLEAN HANDS

<https://youtu.be/J8TCeQLABU4?si=XMA4TTPTP23XfPeM>

