

**Southport Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. June Barrow**  
**February 28, 2010**

**God on Trial**  
**Luke 22:66-71**

**66**At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them. **67**“If you are the Christ,” they said, “tell us.”

Jesus answered, “If I tell you, you will not believe me, **68**and if I asked you, you would not answer. **69**But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.”

**70**They all asked, “Are you then the Son of God?”

He replied, “You are right in saying I am.”

**71**Then they said, “Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips.”

Our lesson today takes us back to before Easter, to the hours just after Jesus is arrested and put on trial. Trials are dramatic – one person standing in a courtroom, accused, waiting for charges to be read, testimony to be recorded, a jury or judge to decide the future. The results are dramatic too, all or nothing – the man is guilty or innocent. Genuine drama with lives in the balance.

This teacher Jesus had become a person of interest, a public figure, someone controversial. He was sought after—crowds pursued him. He was hated—some wanted him silenced and even plotted his destruction. But he’d committed no crimes and in fact had healed and helped and fed many people in many towns. But still he is arrested late one night, in the cover of darkness. One of his own close friends pointed him out to the arresting soldiers. Jesus was bound and taken away. The equivalent today would be to imagine Jesus handcuffed. And in the next several hours, Jesus would stand accused in four different courts.

First, religious leaders questioned Jesus all through the night. In the morning a more formal religious trial was held. Witnesses were brought in willing to make false statements. Jesus was asked a simple question: “Are you the Son of God?” And Jesus replied that he was. Jesus speaks the truth and is pronounced guilty.

But they don’t want Jesus simply declared guilty, they want him silenced, but this religious court does not have the power of capital punishment. So Jesus is sent to the place of Roman law, to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate talks with both Jesus and his accusers and is quick to see that Jesus is not guilty of a crime. He declares Jesus innocent. But this so displeases the accusers that Pilate hands the responsibility off to King Herod, who is the regional ruler. And here Jesus is tried again, before the civil secular law. You’ll remember that when Jesus was born, there was a King Herod on the throne. But that’s not the Herod in today’s story. This Herod is a descendant of the earlier one and is just as bad a man. This Herod is the king who had beheaded John the Baptist. He is greatly disrespected among his own people. His nickname is Herod the Fox and while that word suggests slyness to us, it meant “worthless” to the people of that day. So Herod the Worthless meets Jesus. He is glad to meet him, because he’s heard of Jesus the miracle worker and hopes to see a spectacle or two. Jesus might be entertaining. But Jesus won’t do a miracle here, so Herod is no longer pleased. Herod and his guards ridicule and insult Jesus. In Herod’s court, the mockery of Jesus begins. But Herod, like Pilate, knows Jesus to be innocent; he cannot find Jesus guilty, so he sends him back to Pilate, back to the Roman court and the power of Roman law.

Here are Pilate's words to the accusers of Jesus and to the crowd that has now gathered. "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and found no bases for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death." For the second time, Pilate declares Jesus innocent.

But then a new kind of court trial begins. Jesus has been on trial in a religious court, in a civil court, in a Roman court, and now he will stand before a kind of people's court. Because a crowd has gathered and the accusers have been at work, the people who have been stirred up cry out for the death of the accused man. For the third time, Pilate says, "Why? What is his crime?" Even Pilate's wife knows Jesus to be innocent and she sent word to him, "**Have nothing to do with that righteous man.**" (Matthew 27:19)

But the volume of the crowd increases and so Pilate, despite his clear assertion that both Herod and he know Jesus to be innocent, yields to the people's court. The mob calls out for death and the trial is over. The sentence is pronounced – the death penalty.

Why did this happen? Why did Jesus have to die? "**In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God...**" "**In the beginning God created...**" "**And God said, 'Let there be light...'**" (John 1:1, Genesis 1:1-3) How did the Creator end being accused by his own creatures? How does the Maker of all things end up on trial by those he made? How can God be on trial? How did this come to be? Let's talk for a moment about God and about us.

From cover to cover, the Bible insists that God is profoundly right and altogether perfect. The Bible term for that is *holy*. You have all sung, *Holy, Holy, Holy*. God is light and in him there is no darkness, no shadow, no turning. With God, all is pure, clear, holy light. This is God – but this does not describe us. We are not pure light; within us there are shadows, blind spots, mixed motives. As the Bible says, "**We see through a glass darkly...**" (1 Corinthians 13) We are not pure, unmixed light. This is what the Bible means by the term "sin". More than just one wrong action, one crime, sin is our state, the human condition.

Something in us knows this. We know we are separated from God. Did every one of you learn to sing "Jesus Loves Me" when you were a child? We've sung it, but at some point we doubt it. We see that if God did see us, God would disapprove or be disappointed or turn away. We all know the gap, the distance, the separation. **Isaiah 59:2 says: "But your sins separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you..."** Is there any of us who hasn't known this separation?

God is holy, and God is also deeply loving. He loves this creation he has made. When you love someone, what do you want more than anything else? You want a deep and lasting relationship with that person. On Friday, there was a memorial service for a dear woman in our church named Dorothy. She and her husband Gus were married in 1940; they had nearly 70 years of marriage together. And if Gus were here right now, he would tell us that nearly 70 years of marriage was not enough time with Dorothy. He loves her and the separation from her feels unbearable! And God loves us and wants a relationship with each of us, with me, with you. And we are made for that too.

A few years ago I visited a family in the church and met their new dog, a dog that had been rescued from abuse. Though large, this dog is very timid, easily frightened, because of the terrible things he has experienced. The father of the family said that once, as he was walking down the hallway to his bedroom, he began to unbuckle his belt, and the dog panicked, giving the family some idea of what the poor animal might have experienced. This family was willing to take this dog in, give him a home, and love him. Just a few weeks ago, they told me that the dog, which they've had for five years, is just

beginning to play. Love heals. Do you remember what **Isaiah 53** says: “**And with his stripes, we are healed.**”

God wants us without separation, for eternity. Though separated from God, we are loved. And we are pursued by God. When we could do nothing for ourselves, God did it all. Here’s a story.

Francis Thompson was a brilliant man. Born to successful parents, he first studied for the priesthood then later earned a medical degree. He was a gifted writer. He was also an addict. Despite his privilege, his education and his ticket to wealth, his addiction forced him to the streets. He lived in filth and destitution, a broken and finally homeless man. Still he wrote, because he was brilliant. He sent some of his writings to an editor. The editor recognized his brilliance and spent months searching for this writer. But Francis Thompson was living on the streets, a very lost man. An editor was looking for him – and so was God. His most famous work, “The Hound of Heaven”, tells the story of his running away from God and of God finding him:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears I hid from Him, ...From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.*

Those last words become a refrain: “From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.” A hound is a hunting dog and Francis Thompson discovered that God was hunting for him, looking for him when he was on the streets, lost in poverty and addiction. God found Francis Thompson. And Scripture tells us: “**But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**” (Romans 5:8)

The pursuing love of God is deep beyond our knowing, so deep it stoops. Remember Jesus washing the feet of his disciples? God pursues us though we don’t want him, reject him, and in this dramatic story, even put him on trial, condemn him with lies, pronounce him guilty, condemn him to death, and then put him to death. To the many insults of that dreadful day, to the outrages of those four trials, what is Jesus’ reply? It comes from the cross. Jesus said, “**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**” (Luke 23:34) These words are spoken just hours after the sham trials and condemnation of religious leaders, Herod, Pilate, and the crowds of people. Father, forgive them.

There was injustice day that day in four different trials. But God was enacting a different justice, an eternal justice. Justice for the weight of human sin was met that awful day when Jesus was condemned. It was God who paid the price.

Lies were told that day by false witnesses. But God told the truth that day, the truth about the devastating cancer that sin is, the truth that sin is so serious it requires a great sacrifice and the sacrifice was Jesus. Jesus said: “**No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again. For this is what my Father has commanded.**” (John 10:18)

There was hatred that day. But there was love, too – deep, profound, seeking, healing love. Love was shown that day and that love heals us. That day there was injustice, lies, and hatred. And God met them with justice, truth and love.

Friends, there is a problem with each of us. And there is a remedy. Christianity is not a self-help religion meant to enable people to become more moral. We don’t need a self-help book; we need a Savior. We

don't need a little cleaning up; we need death and resurrection and the life-transforming truths of the gospel. We need a Savior and we have a Savior.

God on trial. How could this be? People like us put God on trial. On that strange day, lies were told and power was wielded. The religious leaders believed they had power and they used it. Herod believed he had power and he used it. Pilate had the power of Rome behind him and he used it. The soldiers who arrested, beat, and then crucified Jesus had the power of arms and weapons and they used that power. And God seemed powerless, defeated. But God is the Lord and his ways and purposes are mysterious, beyond our understanding. Underground, behind the scenes, in mysterious and hidden ways, the eternal purposes of God were being enacted. As the Bible says in another story, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." The intentions of God prevailed even though they were invisible to the ruling powers that day.

I wonder where Paul was on this day of trial and crucifixion. The Bible doesn't say, but we know that Paul would have approved. He was one of the skeptics, one of the religious rulers, one of the critics of Jesus. But like Francis Thompson, God was pursuing him. And though he declared himself the sworn enemy of Jesus, Jesus found Paul. Paul would never say that he was "on a search for the divine" and that's how he "found" Jesus. No, he would say that though he was lost, blind, and unaware, God claimed him. Near the end of his life, sitting in prison, Paul wrote these words to his young student Timothy:

**Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1Timothy 1:15-17)**