

“Stoning Jesus”

John 8:48-59

Fifth Sunday in Lent, 2021 (One Year Lectionary)

I think it’s a cop-out for people to say, “There’s no reason arguing your religious position because you’ll never convince anyone.” Sometimes they say, “I have my position and you have yours, so there’s no reason to argue about it. You aren’t going to change my mind.” My line of business is the Gospel: the Gospel as good news, not as my opinion verses your opinion, not my feelings about Jesus, not my sense of things, not my preference. We’re not talking about our favorite licks at Baskin & Robbins. My business is reporting on some news that really happened. In that sense I’m like a fully interactive news anchor. And this news is about an event. I am sent out by the news-maker Himself: the King. It is His message, His doings that are proclaimed, broadcasted, heralded. They’re facts that are indifferent to all other so-called “positions”, whatever positions they may be. I don’t care. This is what the King did – it was public, and now it is headline news to be aired in the public marketplace. And because the news is so big, so world-altering, it affects even you.

So for instance, I had bad feelings that the Phillies lost the 2009 World Series to a bunch of drug-cheat gargoyles from New York. But my feelings about the World Series didn’t change the news: fact, New York won in 2009. Likewise, with the Holy Gospel: I’m not here so much to engender warm, snuggly feelings about your personal relationship with Jesus as to tell you about something that happened, about the things He said and did. There was this Jew, named Jesus, from Nazareth. He said that He spoke for and was acting on behalf of the Creator God reconciling humanity to Himself and reclaiming His global kingdom. We basically said He was a liar, convicted Him of treason for claiming to be the King of the World, beat him mercilessly, and nailed His naked body to a tree to suffocate to death. Certifiably

dead, this same man got out of the grave with what upwards of a thousand people over the space of a month and a half were happy to testify under oath was a transformed-resurrected body. Nobody has ever done that before, or since. It was all done in public, in a hostile setting, and turned everything we said about Him upside-down. By this resurrection-event He has been vindicated about everything He said about being the Messiah – the Lord of heaven and earth, about crushing our enemies of sin, death and the devil. And now everything is going to be different because the impact of His rule in the world is turning individuals, families and cultures upside-down as they, as we, embrace the news that Jesus the Christ is God and Savior. That's the news. Tune in next week for more on this developing story.

Oh, and one more thing: it's news like that that persuades people. It persuaded me to investigate the facts and to put a lid on my ignorant opinions and to put my feelings as a barometer of truth in their proper place.

But we manipulate the news sometimes, don't we? Take for example the urgent \$1.9T covid relief bill. News about it was manipulated and muzzled. There's nothing urgent about it. 1% goes to vaccines, distribution and testing. A full 91% has nothing to do with covid conditions, economic or otherwise, and nearly 80% sits in the coffers upon 2023 and 2024. That ain't urgent. There are sometimes agendas that supersede the news, the facts. News can be neglected, altered, obscured.

One such way in which the good news from the first century is tampered is through Romanticism. We tend to read exchanges between Jesus and the Pharisees through the rose-colored glasses of fashionable tolerance ethics as dispassionate discourse; like some polite and politically correct Ivy League luncheon: Jesus on one side of

the table, hands folded with broad smile; Pharisees on the other, returning pleasantries and warm handshakes, exchanging perspectival papers in a genteel fashion on a topic that's really indifferent because any truth assertions have to give way to a higher principle of diversity and neighborly niceness. So Jesus neither argues for the truth nor his contenders fight for reality, but rather they offer musings on the unknowable. It's a friendly exchange of speculations on unimportant concepts, that are unverifiable anyway. They're not opponents but fellow-villagers, not antagonist but enlightened educators. "Shall we discuss the doctrine of God?" "Why yes, a fascinating subject, don't you think, Rabbi Jesus?" "Indeed, a most curious idea. Please tell me, what are your feelings on the subject? Hmm. Yes, yes."

This widely romanticized approach to the Scriptures is fantasy. We have some Middle-Eastern Palestinians in this parish. Just ask them if Mediterranean Semites are dispassionate people, utterly stoic, a flaccid and placid race. Or watch the news – Palestinians are out in the streets, overturning cars, discharging automatic weapons in the street, flash mobs with firearms, burning effigies! And why? Passion for the truth. The truth matters to such people, unlike us in the West, who have forfeited truth for opinion, facts for feelings, conclusions for choice, and things that matter for things that flatter. No so in the Middle-East. The truth matters and it's worth arguing over and even fighting for. It's been that way since the earth cooled. That's how were to understand this exchange in John 8. The topic is God and who knows Him rightly – the Jews who say they have Abraham as their father or Jesus who says He is and the Father are one?

The Jews, who have been getting more agitated and livid with Jesus throughout the scene, are clearly ready to take whatever Jesus says and use it in evidence against him and, if possible, lay hands on him. They seem to think that His words about

Abraham knowing Him (or whatever) imply that He has been time-traveling or something, and they mock him for it. He's "not yet fifty years old" , they say (v.57), and Abraham lived two thousand years earlier. Jesus is insane. Don't even listen to him, they yell out to the crowds following Jesus.

But Jesus is talking at another level altogether. They are in the dark on this subject and He's bringing light. The point he has been making throughout the chapter – the point which is his defense against the capital charge that some are seeking to mount against him for his breaking the Sabbath and not being a follower of Israel's God – is that "the Father", Israel's God, the One whom the Judeans claim to worship, to know and to serve, is operating in and through Him in a decisive and unique way to summon Israel back to a genuine knowledge and allegiance to Himself – before it's too late. "The Father" is the One who alone gives salvation and redemption and is Himself alone the Way, the Truth and the Life; He it is who has given His words to Jesus, publicly declaring Him to be the Son and substantiating this declaration with many miraculous proofs and Scriptural fulfillments – the Father publicly declaring Jesus to be the only-eternally-begotten Son of the Most High God; so that—and here's the great point—if someone owns Jesus' words and therefore acknowledges that He is the One that is the Way, the Truth and the Life, then death will go by them without making any difference (v.51).

In making claims like this Jesus is not so much talking about Himself, but is talking about "The Father who sent me." This statement, however, is so striking that His hearers convince themselves that it constitutes evidence of demon-possession. You have got to be so entirely out of your mind to say that you speak and act for the Living God that the only way to account for such an outrage is to denounce you as a first-century Regan McNeil requiring exorcism. You're a devil. Satan owns you, they shout down at Jesus. The scene is raucous. Then more

abuses: You're a Samaritan! This was no compliment, as in, you're a "Good Samaritan." The extra charge that Jesus is a "Samaritan," the offspring of half-Jews/half pagans, is a way of saying he's obviously from an inferior, sub-human race and so it makes perfect sense to us that he would be uttering such nonsense. God is never with the Samaritans.

All four gospels tell us that Jesus' hearers accused him of being either possessed by, or in league with, the devil. Clearly, this isn't something the early church would have made up in fabricating later stories about Jesus. It's not the stuff you put in the Jesus biographies unless it happened; equally clearly, then, Jesus must have been saying and doing things that were remarkable enough, and disturbing enough, to make people throw such an accusation at Him. So exactly what was He saying here, and why, in the end, did it make them try to murder him by stoning?

Jesus could have answered the question of v.53, "Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?", by going the politically correct route and offering a situation-diffusing comment by backing down from his assertion. He goes further, Jesus throws down for the truth because the implications about God's reality and what He is doing in the world is infinitely more important than pandering to their good opinion of him or, much less, tenderly treating their sensitive feelings. The truth matters about God because it's a life and death issue. So Jesus states in vv. 54-56 that the one true God is at work in and through Him, and that Abraham himself, in trusting this one God and His promises for the future, had celebrated the fact that he would see the day of Jesus as God's presence and promised answer to the world's problems. This seems to mean that Abraham, in trusting God's promises that through his family all the peoples of the earth would be blessed, was actually looking ahead to the day when Jesus would bring that promise into reality. Jesus is claiming, in other words,

that He, Jesus, is at last embodying what the one living God—His Father and Abraham’s God—had envisaged and promised all those years ago. You could almost imagine Jesus following up that jaw-dropping statement with: You like apples, how’d like them apples?

What then does He mean in the crucial verse 58 “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”? He is identifying Himself so closely with the one true and living God that He can speak of Himself as being there “before Abraham existed”, in just the same way that only God could say it. And with his antagonists on the verge of exploding, Jesus drops this bomb on them that carries a double implication: first that although they claimed God as their Father (v.41), they did not know Him at all, because here He was standing in front of them and they reviled him and condemned Him as evil and, second, that Jesus Himself is that self-same God in the flesh. Oh! I would’ve love to been there to have seen the expression on their faces when he said, “before Abraham came into being, I Am!”

The contrast between the verbs “before his existence / I existed” is unmistakable. It repeats the same contrast and significance of Psalm 90.2: “before the mountains came into being ... from age to age, O God, You are.” The world’s leading biblical scholars, such as Cambridge’s Graham Stanton and Oxford’s S.R. Driver, have pointed out that the Greek declaration used by Jesus (εγω ειμι) “I, even I am” is the equivalent of the Hebrew declaration by God the Father at the burning bush: “I am”, which is also the self-designation of Yahweh throughout the writings of the prophets. The upshot of this wasn’t missed by Jesus’ opponents. The fact that they attempted to stone Jesus to death after hearing the words “I am” shows that they perfectly understood that Jesus was taking on Himself the Divine name so translated in the LXX version of Ex. 3.14, where God disclosed to Moses the holy title by which the Hebrews where to call Him. It is clear that Jesus here offers of

himself a one-to-one identification with the timeless being of the deity revealed at Creation and during the historic event of the Exodus. When Jesus said that He was and is the “I am” the Pharisees and Scribes had had enough; but they could bear with it no longer. To take upon Himself the deep revelation of God’s name was rank blasphemy, and it was time to kill this blasphemer.

Again, we would be wrong to see this passage as part of a gentle, abstract theological discussion. It takes place at the leading edge between ecstasy and fury, with opponents accusing Jesus of being demon-possessed and Jesus exploring more and more what it means that He is speaking and acting as the YHWH incarnate and that they can’t and won’t understand or believe him. In this setting, what verse 58 means is this: Jesus is so conscious of the Father with him, working in Him, speaking through him, that he can speak, in a kind of ecstasy of union, in the Name of the Father always. “I am He”. To say this is to utter one of the central meanings of YHWH, the secret and holy Name of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The crowd reacted as predictably as many have since. In Jesus’ day they accused him of blasphemy, and threatened him with stoning. In our day Jesus is accused of nonsense (How can a person be both divine and human? How can he be the only way to God?). Today the writers of the Gospels are accused of lying, the Church of having changed the historic records, to have Jesus say things that he couldn’t possibly have said – things like He is in fact the creator-redeemer God and that He rules heaven and earth and will in fact come to judge the living and dead. John’s only answer is for us to read on ... cross, resurrection. All of this will be substantiated in history and substantiated by hundreds and hundreds of eyewitnesses. Our answer to a world that would like to lay their hands on Jesus and kill him or that would rather that we played nice and bowed the knee to their idol

of political correctness and tolerance ethics and treat Jesus like he were dead just like Muhammad, Moses, Buddha, and Buhallulah and therefore that Jesus doesn't really matter any more or any less than them because its all at best subjective and at worst irrelevant.

But that's where we come in. we've got some good news: Jesus is God; not "a" god or god to me. He is, with the Father and the Spirit, the only true and living God. He is the King and what He has to say about us goes. He has the ultimate and final say-so and that is good news for all who believe this truth assertion. We bow the knee to Him, not to the idol of pluralism. And what He says to the baptized is this: You are forgiven, depart in peace and joy. It is truth like that that matters. Now go and make a stand for truth, doubting nothing of God's Word and work and ways through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.