

## **Inside Out**

Menno Mennonite Church  
Lent 5: Narrative Lectionary  
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March 22, 2026

**Purpose:** To explore the role of Jesus' role as he encounters the conflict of the kingdoms leading to the cross.

**Message:** As the powers of this world strategize and manipulate, the Jesus way remains fully rooted in its identity of God's love.

**Scripture:** John 19:1-16a (I will read); Isaiah 52:13-15; 53:1-3 (Please read)

### **Synopsis:**

Like so much of John's passion story we don't spend a lot of time here. We know it. We hear it. Yet mostly we skip on to what is next. But this story is special: it gives a narrative of moral judgement as the nature of Jesus, God's kingdom, and the ways of the world are pondered together. It leads us to wonder: where might we stand in this story? We feel the push and pull of the decisions here, and easily pass judgement on those who can readily be seen as failing. We can identify with the ways that our motivations and ideas can become confused and befuddled. We can appreciate that within it all Jesus stands firm, offering the kingdom way that offers not resistance, but the willingness to remain faithful to the biggest truths of all: God's willingness to suffer for the sake of the truths of the kingdom.

## **John 19:1-16a**

19 Then Pilate had Jesus taken and whipped.

<sup>2</sup> The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and dressed him in a purple robe.

<sup>3</sup> Over and over they went up to him and said, "Greetings, king of the Jews!" And they slapped him in the face.

<sup>4</sup> Pilate came out of the palace again and said to the Jewish leaders,

"Look! I'm bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no grounds for a charge against him."

<sup>5</sup> When Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here's the man."

<sup>6</sup> When the chief priests and their deputies saw him, they shouted out, "Crucify, crucify!"

Pilate told them, "You take him and crucify him. I don't find any grounds for a charge against him."

<sup>7</sup> The Jewish leaders replied, "We have a Law, and according to this Law he ought to die because he made himself out to be God's Son."

<sup>8</sup> When Pilate heard this word, he was even more afraid.

<sup>9</sup> He went back into the residence and spoke to Jesus, "Where are you from?" Jesus didn't answer.

<sup>10</sup> So Pilate said, "You won't speak to me? Don't you know that I have authority to release you and also to crucify you?"

<sup>11</sup> Jesus replied, "You would have no authority over me if it had not been given to you from above. That's why the one who handed me over to you has the greater sin."

<sup>12</sup> From that moment on, Pilate wanted to release Jesus.

However, the Jewish leaders cried out, saying,  
“If you release this man, you aren’t a friend of the emperor!  
Anyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes the emperor!”

<sup>13</sup> When Pilate heard these words,  
he led Jesus out and seated him on the judge’s bench  
at the place called Stone Pavement (in Aramaic, *Gabbatha*).

<sup>14</sup> It was about noon on the Preparation Day for the Passover.

Pilate said to the Jewish leaders, “Here’s your king.”

<sup>15</sup> The Jewish leaders cried out,  
“Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!”

Pilate responded, “What? Do you want me to crucify your king?”

“We have no king except the emperor,” the chief priests answered.

<sup>16</sup> Then Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified.

This is again one of those stops on the way to the Cross that everyone knows and is familiar with, but nobody really knows what to do with. If you go looking for a sermonic background for this verse as I did you are not going to find a whole lot. The Revised Common Lectionary, the list of readings the large majority of the church uses does not recommend this text except for Good Friday observances and the stations of the cross. The whole of the chapter is largely ignored because these are parts of the passion story that are read for the rude facts that they are and left at that. There is no easy lesson, no message of hope, no “go and do likewise” unless you want to put Pilate as one of the premiere advocates for good hand hygiene. Yet we know that he is one of the pivotal persons in the whole saga. He seems to hold a great deal of sway here, even as he is pushed this way and that by those around. It is worth asking: what are we to make of Pilate at the end of it all?

There is not a whole lot of clarity on that. He is one of the biblical characters we are given that have a fairly extensive contemporary historical life that we can look at. Pilate appears to have served as the fifth governor of the Roman province of Judea—a role he held, according to Josephus, for 10 years. Appointed under Emperor Tiberius, Pilate would have been responsible for leading the regional military and overseeing the province’s judicial system, including adjudicating matters of capital punishment. He also levied and collected taxes and minted coins. The historians are divided on whether he was an effective governor. Some seem a long tenure—the second longest in the region—as evidence of success. Others cite this fairly low-status appointment and his lack of upward mobility as an indicator of mediocracy. Both Josephus and Philo, chroniclers of this period paint him as a fairly cruel and obstinate man with little regard for the traditions around him. Yet it was Pilate who would appoint and maintain the high priest and the religious authorities.

Christian thought is equally ambiguous. He is noted in the Apostle’s and Nicene creeds, the foundational statements about who and what we understand Jesus to be as part of Jesus’ story, but mostly as an instrument through which suffering was carried out. In some Egyptian and Ethiopian Coptic traditions Pilate’s reluctance inspired stories that never made it into the church primary lore about Pilate eventually becoming a believer. One story even has him summoned to Rome to answer for this execution. Tiberius, unconvinced by his explanations sentences Pilate himself to death for the involvement. Before his execution he is shown to pray to confess faith in Christ and is blessed by a heavenly voice as a fulfiller of divine plans. All this while other

early writings depict him as a diabolical ruler who ultimately is driven to his death for his hand in the Jesus affair. The Church has never quite known what to do with Pilate.

Let me make a suggestion at this point. Perhaps when we have such a person stripped bare as his is, the point of the story is not the person themselves, or the actual facts of the story so much as it is nature of what is being considered and how that interfaces with our human nature that is the point. In other words, maybe we need to stop looking to explain Pilate and see the ways in which Pilate serves to explain the human predicament even as he seeks to understand the perplexing plaintiff in front of him. As Pilate's internal and external turmoil play out, so too does the reality of our world challenge us every day. Like the movie *Inside Out* that takes us inside the emotional life of a child to comment on the inner life of us all, Pilate is put on display both inside and out to demonstrate how things really are with the human soul

Pilate in the reading we sat with last week gives the crowds and us a choice. Who to release? Who to embrace? Jesus the King of Jews, or Barabbas the violent revolutionary. Barabbas is chosen. They choose the one who is changing the world by violence; they chose Barabbas. They stick with what makes good sense and familiar. In the language of John's gospel from Chapter 3:19: "*And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil*" (John 3:19). We condemn Jesus — and ourselves when we choose other — seemingly more powerful, pragmatic, and expedient — kings. This is something we do all the time. We know the ways of this world, the ways of planning and politicking. We can see ourselves in the quandary that makes itself visible in Pilate and around him. We place our faith in our preferred path to prosperity rather than to heed the words of the one who bows to serve recognizing that it is God's kingdom whose future really matters. We chose "just the way things are" because we struggle to see another way, or are frightened by the cross that comes so readily when it ours to incarnate love.

Pilate is not ready to condemn Jesus to death, so he tries to satisfy the demands. Jesus is flogged and tortured. Along the way the soldiers ironically coronate him king. They crown him with thorns and dress him as he should. They hit the nail on the head as they proclaim him the King of the Jews even as they mock the very idea. Their very cruelty condemns them even as it tells the truth better than what they even know. If you have spent any time at all on the average playground we know it is those who are the most cruel that are the least secure. I always found

that the best way to deal with the bullies that came my way was to lean into the attack and take the joke from them to blunt what was going on.

Pilate goes to the accusers again and declares Jesus innocent a second time—this is in verse 4 and following. Jesus comes out under his own power still in control, dressed in the role that was his. Jesus is crowned here instead of condemned. This is a difference in John. The other gospels tell of Jesus being stripped. That is not John's reality. John emphasizes the intention of Jesus that remains all the way to Cross. Here Jesus stays the course as a king. Pilate calls Jesus "the man," as in Son-of-Man. The chief priests and police demand that Pilate crucify Jesus. Presented with their crowned king, "the innocent Son-of-Man,"<sup>1</sup> Jesus' accusers fulfill his words: "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he" (8:28). They finally bring their charge against Jesus to Pilate: Jesus claims to be the Son of God (19:7). Jesus' accusers cannot or will not see that Jesus is. And, like the Pharisees on hand when Jesus healed the eyes of the man born blind (John 9:1-41), they condemn themselves for refusing to see God in their midst. How often we condemn ourselves in this same way? Where does our blurred vision of the kingdom inhibit us from seeing its full dimensions.

By now Pilate is "More frightened than ever" by the possibility that Jesus might be precisely who he claims to be. Once again inside Pilate asks Jesus John's foundational question: where are you from? Before when Pilate asks this of Jesus, Jesus invites him inside the kingdom of truth but was rejected. Now Jesus just remains silent, nothing more to say. Pilate tries to demonstrate his power, his way, claiming authority over life and death. Jesus again rightly places power where it belongs: with God alone, who administers it not with threat and condemnation but with grace. The offer remains but Pilate cannot see it and cannot take it. How often do we ourselves deny the kingdom of truth by denying ourselves the promise of grace?

Pilate wants to release Jesus. But now those who brought Jesus to him for their version of justice put Pilate on trial. They question his loyalty. They demand their political pound of flesh by threatening to take it out of Pilate's hide. *Everyone who claims to be a king is no friend to the emperor.* On the day of preparation for the Passover, at noon, the precise hour when the sacrificial lambs for the Passover are sacrificed, the chief priests declare themselves to be better friends to the emperor than Pilate. Pilate capitulates to their demands and hands Jesus over to be crucified, to be lifted up. The chief priests, who insisted that Jesus be put to death for claiming to

be the Son of God, have claimed first Barabbas and now the emperor as their king. How do we condemn ourselves by the alliances we make and the company we keep?

We can argue where Pilate resides in all of this play, but I think he is the perfect foil to the way we are. We encounter the Word, the true God flesh among us and we don't know what to make of him. We don't always know what is truth or where that truth might take us. We can so easily choose the means of a violent world than those of a kingdom of love. We are quick to mock and show our cruelty to hide our doubts and our fears. We hesitate to accept that there is another day and another way that changes the world failing to see God with us. We are dubious that grace can even address our wretched selves. We easily align ourselves with those who promise us the most and those who meet our own ends rather than the one who knows us best. These are the movements of Pilate and the movements of us all.

Yet on the cross, Jesus who has been crowned rather than condemned will be enthroned and glorified. Jesus saves us from all the ways we condemn ourselves, the ways we put ourselves outside, whether we deserve to be or not. This, my friends is, good news.

May we each reach beyond those ways we condemn ourselves and see all that God is up to, even in the least likely of characters. Amen.