

Have you heard? Those are the words we use whenever we’ve learned something or experienced something we want to make sure others have the chance to know about. Last week, in a very friendly way, I asked if you had heard what happened to Purdue in the tournament. It was an honest question. I didn’t mean any harm by it. Later that day Kentucky lost in the tournament. I had 146 different texts from people asking me, “Have you heard? Have you heard? Have you heard?” I changed my phone number this week.

Like many of you, our family has a text thread that we use to communicate to one another about random things. I’m on a text thread with Keren, Keren’s parents, her four siblings, and all their spouses. On occasion, the texting frequency can get a little intense. I’ll be in a meeting and my phone will go off literally 80 times. I’ll assume someone has been in an accident, been taken to the hospital and is on life support. I finally look down and see it’s more pictures of grandkids. On occasion I have to silence the thread, turn on do not disturb. Last week the family feed started blowing up with a picture of my father-in-law. Many of you know him. He has been here at The Creek and preached for us. He was at the airport with one of his daughters going through security, and he forgot he had a handgun in his bag. He was swarmed by police officers and then my 67 year old father-in-law, who has been a preacher for 45 years, was arrested. As they hauled him away he yelled to his daughter, "Tell your mom she is going to have to find someone to preach for me this weekend!" My sister-in-law was standing in the security line, laughing hysterically, documenting the entire thing. Then she texted our family feed and asked this question: “Have you heard?” She sent this picture (view the online sermon to see the photo).

When we experience things in life, whether they are comical or deeply meaningful, there is something natural that wells up from within us that makes us want to tell other people. We are in this series preparing for Easter and we are listening to people who witnessed the events that led up to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but we aren’t listening to the usual voices. Instead of listening to his followers, the disciples, we are listening to those who were on the other side of the table, those who actually opposed Jesus. We are imagining what it would be like, hours after the event, for them to gather their family and friends together and say, “I just witnessed the most incredible thing I’ve even seen. I don’t know what to make of it all just yet, but I had to ask, ‘Have you heard?’” Last week, we listened to the testimony of a man named Malcus, the servant of the high priest, who was there in the garden when Jesus was arrested, had his ear cut off, and was healed by Jesus. Today, we get to hear a story from a man named Barabbas.

Like I said last week, I’d encourage you not to focus on taking notes during the first part of the sermon this week. Simply enter into the story, maybe even close your eyes, and listen to the narrative. When we are first introduced to Barabbas he is a man in chains, a convicted criminal on death row, condemned to die later that day. But it wasn’t always that way for Barabbas. He would tell you...

When I was a kid there was nothing in my life I was more passionate about than God! There was nothing I wanted more than to honor God with my life. My heroes weren’t the rich and famous; they were the mighty men of old whose lives had been captured by God for a cause greater than themselves. I wanted to be like Gideon and his small army of 300 obliterating the Midianite army of 135,000! I wanted to be like Sampson grabbing hold of the jawbone of a donkey and taking down 1,000 men. When Jonathan and his armor bearer hiked up the side of the mountain to kill twenty men, he became my hero. I wanted to be like David the shepherd boy who fought Goliath and cut off the head of the giant. When they saw evil in their land, when they saw wicked people rise up against God to oppress God’s people, they refused to take it lying down. God used men like that long ago, and growing up I was just crazy enough to believe that God was looking for men like that to use today!

And when I became a man, there was more than enough opportunity. As in days of old, there were wicked overlords in our nation, godless oppressors who raped and pillaged our land and people. They blasphemed our God and defiled all that was holy. No one was worse than a man named Pilate—that filthy little weasel Caesar sent to our people. What a pathetic excuse for a leader.

Pilate showed his true colors within months of gaining power. He knows that the Jewish people don't allow any images of people or leaders to be displayed in our towns—it's a violation of the second commandment God gave us. Every leader who came before Pilate understood this and agreed to keep their statues away from our cities. But not Pilate. He was so filled with spite and hatred, that in the middle of the night, like the coward he is, he filled our city with images of Caesar. He said he wanted to honor Tiberius, but all he wanted to do was antagonize and insult us. When we went to his palace to protest, he threatened to kill us. We stretched out our necks and said, "You can take our lives, but you'll never take away our devotion to God." We saw in that moment that he was terrified of Tiberius finding out what he did, so we sent a letter to Rome, telling his boss what his little puppet was up to. As soon as he read that letter, the statues were gone. That idiot was rebuked a thousand times and told to do a better job keeping the peace.

But instead of doing better, he did worse. Pilate had this grand plan to build an aqueduct that would bring water into Jerusalem from far way, 25 miles long. At first, everyone thought it was a good idea. We could all use more fresh water. But then that fool ran out of money. And what did he do? Ask Caesar for more money? No! He defiled our temple. His soldiers walked right into our treasury and stole all of our money. He funded his pet project with the money we had given to God as an offering. This time when we went to protest, he had his soldiers blend in with the crowd. He gave them a signal, and when we weren't looking, they pulled out clubs and beat us. Dozens died; others were left paralyzed. We licked our wounds like dogs, and promised that one day, we would get vengeance. All of these events will be recorded in the history books for anyone to read. Josephus, Philo—they'll tell of it.

We had planned to wait for an opportune time to get back at Pilate and all of Rome, to take back our freedom and worship God without threat or fear. We planned to be patient and wait for the right time, but then Pilate pushed us over the edge. There was a group of people from Galilee who walked three days to come to Jerusalem during one of the festivals. They brought goats and sheep to offer as a sacrifice. For some reason, Pilate didn't like these guys. He sent his men in disguise into the temple to watch them as they offered their animals. After their sacrifices had been slain, Pilate had his soldiers murder those men; they slaughtered them while they still had their eyes closed in prayer. Then he mixed their blood with the blood of their sacrifices. I was there; I watched it happen with my own eyes. It was the most vile, corrupt, wicked thing I had ever seen. One day, historians are going to write about this, too. I couldn't take it any longer. I decided it was time to be like Jonathan, like Gideon, like Sampson of old, to stake out in faith and fight for our freedom. I went home, got all the men I could rally to my cause, and we hatched our plan. We were going to storm Pilate's palace. The other religious leaders only cared about praying. We were here to fight, to take back the land God promised us and our ancestors on oath. That night we stormed the palace. I slaughtered several guards myself. I watched them die with pleasure. But there were too many of them, and God didn't multiply our strength like we had hoped.

So there I was, with chains around my wrists. I had been tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death for my role in the uprising and for murdering a man. And technically, I was guilty. I did it. I couldn't deny it. It was a high-handed crime and I was caught in the act. I had no defense. But I assumed God would deliver me. All I could do was pray for a miracle. Like Hananiah, Azariah, and Meshiel long ago were delivered from the fiery furnace, like Daniel was delivered from the lion's den, my last hope was that God would find a way, any way, to deliver me. But there I was, hours from my death, and I had to come to grips with the fact that no deliverer was coming. I thought I would be confident and stoic at the end, but if

I'm being honest, fear gripped me. I was overwhelmed with terror at what would happen beyond the grave.

Then all of a sudden, from my cell in the palace, I could hear a commotion. It sounded like another riot was taking place. I peeked out of my cell and could see that a mob of Jewish leaders had come, begging for Pilate to rubber stamp their decision to kill a man—the Romans had long ago stripped the Jews of the right to give people death sentences; only Roman leaders could do that, and they wanted Pilate to do it for them with a man named Jesus. As soon as I heard that name, I knew who they were talking about. I had seen him before. I had heard him teach. I was there when he was preaching one time—there must have been at least 5,000 other men along with me. He was speaking about the kingdom of God, telling us how to be a part of it. Then, after hours during which we clung to his every word, we looked at the time and realized none of us had eaten in hours. It was 3:00; we had missed lunch listening to this guy. Then Jesus took the bread and fish from one little kid's basket. He prayed, and then he kept pulling more and more food out, enough to feed every single person there. It was like he was Moses, giving food to God's starving people in the wilderness. I saw it and thought, "This could be him; this could be the Messiah." We all wanted to make him our new king. But when we found him the next day, he said that he was the bread that had come down from heaven, that we had to eat his flesh and drink his blood. None of us were ready for that kind of commitment. Besides, he spent his time telling us to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, turn the other cheek, blessed are the peacemakers—that's not the kind of "revolution" we were looking to sign up for.

But now here is this Jesus again—and the Jews say he is guilty of claiming to be a king. They brought Jesus before Pilate and Pilate asked him to his face, "Is what they say true? Are you the king of the Jews?" I was curious what he was going to say. He answered, "It's true. I am king. But my kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my followers would have fought to prevent this from happening to me." Pilate just looked confused, "So you're saying you're a king?" Jesus had a serious look on his face and said, "I came into this world to testify to the truth, and everyone who really cares about the truth listens to me." It was philosophical, it was deep, it made me stop and think how much I cared about the truth. But Pilate, being a Roman, being a relativist, didn't care one bit about Jesus' word games. He just scoffed dismissively and said, "What is truth?"

Pilate wasn't a smart man, but he was smart enough to know right away Jesus didn't deserve to die. So he went out to the people and said, "I find no basis for charges against this man. He should be free to go." The people wouldn't listen. The Jewish leaders had polluted their minds. They already knew what they wanted. And honestly, I could tell from the look on Pilate's face he didn't want to get in the middle of it. So he said: "Listen, I am going to make this easy. Take Jesus to Herod and let Herod decide his fate." They took Jesus down the road to Herod's palace. Herod is the man who actually has the title, "King of the Jews." When he heard that Jesus, this lowly peasant, this itinerant preacher who was standing before him in chains, thought he was the king of the Jews, all he could do was laugh. He literally spit water out of his mouth when he heard it. "How could you be the king? I'm sitting on a throne in my palace, and you are in chains. I have all the power in the world. You are at my mercy." Honestly, he found the whole charade amusing, a comical spectacle, so he decided to have fun with it. He ordered his soldiers to bring a purple robe, the kind that kings wear, and put it on him. His servants took turns bowing down to him, praising him. Herod couldn't stop laughing. It was the best part of his day. But Herod couldn't care less what happened to Jesus, so he sent him back to Pilate and told Pilate to do whatever he wanted; he couldn't care less.

So there was Jesus, in a royal robe, standing before Pilate, in front of all the people. Pilate wanted to find a way to release Jesus. He said to the crowd, "You know what a gracious and compassionate leader I am. Every year, around this time, when you people celebrate God setting you free from slavery, I mercifully, out of the goodness of my heart, set one of your prisoners free. Today's the day." At that moment, he

motioned in my direction. He pointed to my cell and told the guards to unlock it and bring me out. I had no idea what was going on. They marched me up to the front of the crowd and I stood there next to Jesus. He looked me in the eyes and nodded, as if he knew what was about to take place and it was his plan all along. Then Pilate raised his voice and said, “Who should be set free? The King of the Jews, or this insurrectionist, thief, and murderer?” I could tell Pilate thought it would be an easy choice. Everyone would want Jesus set free. He healed people. I stole from people. He was an innocent man. I was guilty. He deserved to live. I deserved to die. But for some reason, the crowd started chanting my name. “Barabbas. Barabbas.” Could it be? Has God really done it? Has he found a way to rescue me? To deliver me? Pilate gave the signal. I was set free. A new lease on life. A second chance. I couldn’t control my joy. Then I looked at Jesus one more time. I heard him whisper, “I have come to set the captives free.” At that moment, the guards turned the key and my chains hit the ground. It was the happiest moment of my entire life. But then I watched as they took those chains and placed them on Jesus and led him off to be tortured and killed. I slowly began to realize what just took place, and when I did, that joy and elation turned to sadness and grief mixed with an indescribable wonder and awe. That man took my place—he died so I could live. Who is that man? I don’t have an answer to that question yet, but I just had to ask you: have you heard?

How do you respond to a story like Barabbas’? I think there are two different ways we have to approach it. First, just like Pilate, we get to decide how much we care about the truth. When Pilate was interviewing Jesus, he asked him if he was the king of the Jews. Jesus said that indeed he was, but that his kingdom had a different quality, a different character to it, than most were expecting. Then Jesus said the most interesting thing: “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” If you really care about the truth, you will want to listen to Jesus. “Jesus came from heaven full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). In John 8 Jesus said that those who follow his teachings will know the truth and the truth will set them free. In John 14 Jesus said he is the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus is the truth. All genuine pursuit of the truth will eventually lead people to Jesus. But most of the time, most of us are just like Pilate. We aren’t really that interested in the truth. Getting to the truth takes time, effort, thought, discipline, and commitment. You can’t waste your days on social media and streaming platforms. You have to actually think. If you discover the truth and you know it’s the truth, it will either demand you pay whatever price is necessary to live like it’s the truth, or it will turn you into a coward who lives a life of contradiction, knowing what God wants from you, but doing what you want instead. Following the truth about Jesus would have cost Pilate his career. He would have had to flush his power and wealth down the drain to follow this man. Jesus is an inconvenient truth. So most ignore him. Will you? Just like Pilate every person has to decide how much they care about the truth. But that’s not it...

Just like Barabbas, we get to live because Jesus died in our place. The Bible tells us that Barabbas was involved in a rebellion, and because of that he had a death sentence. The Bible also tells us that everyone of us has been involved in a rebellion. We have rebelled against God and his ways, and through our sin we have declared that we know more than God does about how the world should be run. We want to do it our way. The Bible also says, like for Barabbas, the results of our rebellion, the wages of our sin, is a death sentence, a spiritual death and eternal separation from God. That is the place every single one of us either has stood or presently stands in. Guilty of a rebellion, deserving of death. Yet Jesus came. In standing next to Barabbas, he stood next to every single one of us. Our chains weren’t just broken, they were placed on him. Our death sentence wasn’t just commuted, it was transferred to him. Romans 5:8 says, “God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 6:23 says, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Jesus took your place. He died so you can live. No one took his life from him. He gave his life for you.

If you had the chance to hear from Barabbas today, you would want to do two things: you would want to do whatever it takes, to pay any price to pursue the truth and really understand who Jesus is, and you would want to live the rest of your life as an expression of devotion, thanks, and praise to the one who took your place and gave his life so you could live.