

Text: [Matthew 27:15-23 \(CEB\)](#)
Date: March 8, 2026 – Third Sunday in Lent
Title: “Unlikely Freedom” – An Unlikely Lent Series, week 3
Theme: Why do we continue to choose Barabbas over Jesus?

1

The question of “would I have gone along with the crowd?”
Is one we often focus on as we get closer to Holy Week and Good
Friday
When we try to put ourselves into that situation and imagine what
we might have done

Lent is a time to reflect on the strength of our faith
Whether we’re living the courage of our convictions

But I want to step back from that question for a minute
Because we learned last week from the story of Peter’s denial
Just because we say we’ll stand with Jesus doesn’t mean we *will*

For me, today’s story from the gospels – which we might call a
“tale of two Jesuses” – Jesus Barabbas and Jesus Christ
(Jesus was a pretty common name in those times)
This story begs a different question
Not “WHERE would I have stood?”
But simply, “Why?”

2

I think to understand this question, we need to know something
about ancient Israel politically
It was a powder keg

Pilate was a deeply unpopular figure
In his decade-long rule as Roman Governor of Judea, he often
clashed with the population

Provoking deep offense and then brutally suppressing resistance
when it arose¹

People were furious that it was their tax money that supported the
occupation and subjugation of their homeland

As any of us would be

So the high priests and others who were in charge of Jewish
religious life found themselves constantly caught between an
angry populace and an angry prefect

Trying to keep everything in balance

Because they knew that widespread revolt would be disastrous²

What made things particularly volatile was the fact that just about
two centuries before, the Jewish people had thrown off
another occupying power –

the Selucids, the Greek empire founded by Alexander the Great
In 164 BC, Judas Maccabaeus threw off Greek rule, rededicated
the Temple, and restored Jewish control over Jerusalem

You know the story of Hanukkah – when the oil lasted 8 days?

That's the story of Judas Maccabaeus' restoration of temple
worship

So less than 200 years prior to Jesus,
there was a memory of Israel's remarkable victory against
overwhelming odds

I tell this story because it illustrates what was in the background
during New Testament times

The people believed that Rome COULD be defeated

They were just waiting on God to send a Savior – a Messiah – to
do it

Against this backdrop, armed rebellions happened all the time
And Rome squashed them, every time

And those who were caught, were crucified
Crucifixion was among the worst of Roman punishments, slow
and cruel

And so was usually reserved for enemies of the state –
for insurrectionists and rebels

It was meant to make an example of you – so crucifixions usually
happened along busy roads, with the bodies left hanging

3

Matthew's gospel doesn't say what Barabbas was accused of –
only that he was "well-known", other translations say "notorious"
Mark and Luke, in their gospels, tell us there was an uprising, and
Barabbas was charged with murder (Mark 15:7, Luke 23:19)

We usually talk about "thieves" on the crosses on either side of
Jesus

But in reality, the word sometimes translated as "thieves" can also
mean "bandits" or "insurrectionists"

The sign they hung above Jesus' head – "the King of the Jews" –
indicates Rome saw Jesus in that category too

Even though there's no evidence Jesus ever called for the
overthrow of Rome

4

So back to my question of "why"?

WHY did the crowds call for the release of Jesus Barabbas

And not Jesus Christ?

(*Christ*, being the Greek word for *Messiah*)

For one thing, the gospels point to religious leaders, who stirred up the crowd against Jesus

I doubt they needed to do much stirring
The crowds loved Jesus
They really thought he might be the Messiah
But he turned out to be a profound disappointment to those who were waiting on him to throw off Roman rule

It seems they looked on Jesus' arrest as proof that "he's not THE ONE"

Because "THE ONE" would never have let himself get arrested
He would have fought, and God would have protected him
THAT'S what people expected

Now, by that measure, Barabbas wasn't "THE ONE" either
But in a time of political violence,
Maybe the people figured, AT LEAST Barabbas managed to take out a few Romans on the way
All this "other guy" did was preach & heal

If YOU were in the crowd and wanted to get Rome out of your country, who would YOU want to see released?
Be honest

5

That's the thing about political violence
Our attitude toward it, the way we talk about it

Depends ENTIRELY on our point of view
To Rome, Barabbas was a "terrorist"
To the people of Jerusalem, he was a "freedom fighter"

During the American Revolution, we called them “patriots”
But the British called them “rebels” and “insurrectionists”
This tension exists in EVERY conflict where people turn to
violence to settle political disputes

6

If Barabbas was who I’m suggesting he was
The leader of a popular uprising against Rome – he was “famous”
after all

Then there’s a moral complexity to Barabbas that I think many of
us can understand –
If we’re honest, maybe even relate to
In a desperate situation, who among us hasn’t at least *considered*
going to war against an enemy?

I mean, maybe not physically
But to set out to destroy...
someone’s status, someone’s reputation, someone’s prospects

We are tempted when we believe WE’RE in the right
And we think THEY deserve it
To bring whatever we have against someone
We’re often at war within ourselves to restrain our worst impulses

7

When we read the scripture NOW and say,
Of course we’d choose Jesus Christ over Jesus Barabbas
That’s only because we know who Jesus Christ is
Because we have the benefit of 2000 years of reflection on his life
and his teaching

We know him as one who preached peace and who would
NEVER advocate violence
He was entirely innocent, we'd say

But for many in his own time, that was EXACTLY the problem!
For many, strong leadership meant being willing to take up arms

Let's be honest: Doesn't it still?
Isn't that exactly why we're at war right now?

Remember this: Jesus chose the cross instead of the sword
He became the scapegoat
The sacrifice

People *turned* on him – I believe
because he *refused* violence

8

Remember where I started: so often we want to ask if we would
have gone along with the crowd
As though it is purely a question of whether we could resist peer
pressure and do the right thing

But that's not really the question
Because that assumes the complete moral clarity that comes from
hindsight

Jesus good; Barabbas bad
Later copyists of the gospels refused to even write down
Barabbas' first name³ –
At some point he stopped being JESUS Barabbas and just
became Barabbas
because, heaven forbid he share a first name with the Savior!

The issue isn't whether we'd have been able to make the right
choice then
Given the moral clarity we have now

The issue is whether – knowing who Jesus is
And what he stands for

We can bring that same clarity to our choices today
Whether we, as Jesus' followers, can make the right choices
NOW

9

The question I said I wanted to ask was "WHY?"
And really, what I want to ask is this:
Knowing what we know,
WHY do we KEEP choosing Barabbas over Jesus?

Again, and again, and again
We choose violence over peace
We choose retaliation over negotiation
Every time we do that, we're choosing Barabbas

We choose his approach, rather than Jesus' approach
In how we relate to each other interpersonally
You hurt me, and I will burn it all down around you

Why?

We gravitate toward leaders who hold to Barabbas' ideals rather
than Jesus
Because at least they're "doing something"
Going to war feels like "doing something"

This week, I've spoken to veterans who,
with tears in their eyes, tell me that those who haven't seen inside
a war can't possibly comprehend it

Aren't equipped to choose it
Or maybe, it's more accurate to say
they can ONLY choose it because they DON'T know what it really
is

So why do we keep choosing it?

We look back on Jerusalem 2000 years ago
To the choice the crowd was asked to make

And say we know what the right choice was
It's clear to us that we MUST choose Jesus over Barabbas

Why is it then, that we so consistently choose the opposite?
That's what I'm asking us to reflect on this week.

Let's pray together...

By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ

¹ Examples included multiple instances where he positioned troops inside the Temple with banners bearing the insignias of the Emperor – a deep insult because these broke the commandment against “graven images.” Other examples included a time he put down a revolt in Samaria by planting troops in plainclothes among a large and unruly crowd. At a commander's signal, they drew swords and killed indiscriminately.

² And it was – in 70 AD, a broader revolt led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The Romans were so angry that they systematically destroyed the Temple complex, tearing it down piece by piece until all that remains today are the retaining walls that created the base of the Temple (this is the famous Western Wall).

³ This is true – Matthew is the only gospel to cite Barabbas' first name, and only in the early manuscripts. As time goes on, it seems there was a systematic effort to distance the two – specifically by making sure Barabbas' first name did not appear alongside Jesus'.