

5 LENT  
MARCH 17/18, 2018

1<sup>st</sup> MARSHALL  
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

PSALM 146; John 19:1-16a  
***Between a Rock and a Hard Place!***

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ.  
Amen.*

You've all heard the phrase: *caught between a rock and a hard place*. It's one of those sayings that, though it may not be so easy to explain...it's pretty easy to understand... *caught between a rock and a hard place*...



According to one source, this particular expression is an **American** phrase (that) *originated...in the early 1900s during an economic crisis... On the **one** hand, mining employees faced low wages working at the rock face. And on the other, they faced unemployment and poverty if they refused to work* (Source: [theidioms.com](http://theidioms.com)). They were... *caught between a rock and a hard place*.

There are a few other phrases that depict the same sort of struggle:

- When one has to choose between the *lesser of two evils*, or
- between the *Devil and the deep blue sea*...or where you might be
- damned if you do...and damned if you don't*...

A pastor by the name of Steve Thomason has looked at today's bible story with this very phrase in mind – and for good reason. Almost every actor in the drama when Jesus appears before Pontius Pilate experiences that very challenge of being *caught between a rock and a hard place*.

The first to find himself stuck is good, old Pontius Pilate himself. Here's some important background on the Roman ruler:

- He's a very powerful man – much more like a **king** than a **governor**.
- He's been personally appointed by the very Emperor of Rome.

- He's the highest diplomatic authority for the whole region, and
- He's in charge of all of Rome's military in the area.
- In point of fact, Pilate's word...is LAW...

However, Pontius Pilate is also on the hot seat. Being appointed means that he has a very powerful and demanding boss – the most powerful and demanding boss in all the world. So Pilate's job is to preserve the myth that ROME is an unbeatable, unstoppable, unrelenting force against which no rebellion will be tolerated – will, in fact, be swiftly and brutally put down...

The Emperor has given Pontius Pilate his orders: keep the peace at all costs...it's a matter of life and death – in particular Pilate's death if he fails to control those troublesome Israelites. So well before the drama around Jesus even starts, **Pilate** is caught between a rock and hard place...

The next person facing a similarly fearsome choice is the disciple Peter. We've already heard his story.

On the one hand, he's the disciple to watch, the rising star, the guy who gets things done. He:

- is the first to say yes to impossible tasks (fish all night, then fish some more)
- follows Jesus out of the boat to walk on water (if only for a moment!)
- is the first disciple to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah
- is named by Jesus as the future founder of the church...

But then we see the crack in his armor. On the night when Jesus is betrayed:

- Peter's ready to die for the Lord – even hauls out his sword in the garden and cuts off the ear of a man who comes to arrest him...
- Yet the next minute he's standing by a fire in the courtyard of the high Priest...three times denying that he's a follower of Jesus...

**Peter** is caught between a rock and a hard place...

The Jews (and by that phrase the gospel-writer John means the **Jewish leaders**) are **also** on a hot seat of sorts:

- they are people of faith;
- they truly honor God's law and seek to do God's will...
- And though a few of them support Jesus in spite of his unconventional ways, the majority view him as a dangerous wildcard at best.

The most powerful Jewish leaders see Jesus as a spark with the very real potential to ignite a widespread rebellion – an act that would bring swift and brutal retaliation to the entire nation by the Romans. As the high priest said, *It is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed* (John 11:50).

The Jewish **leaders** are caught between a rock and a hard place...



So now the drama begins. Four different times Pontius Pilate meets with the leaders outside, and tries to persuade them that Jesus has done nothing deserving death.

1. *Judge him according to your own law*, he says at first.
2. The second time he tells them, *I find no case against Jesus*.
3. The third time he says, *Take him yourself and crucify him – I find no case against the man*.
4. Finally, after the leaders warn Pilate: ***If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor***... Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified... **He's** caught between a rock and a hard place...

Now...what about Jesus...

**-Do any of you think he feels caught between a rock and a hard place??**

(raise your hand)

**-How many of you think that he's completely at ease with what's happening because he knows...(as Paul Harvey would say) the rest of the story??**

(raise your hand)

Well, the **correct** answer is...you're **both** right. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus *is* caught between a rock and a hard place. He does not want to die – his humanity is obvious to his followers and us readers, and as he suffers – we identify with his pain, we relate to his fear, our hearts hurt with his betrayal, his suffering, his agony...

In fact, in the Gospel of Luke, we're told that Jesus prays, *Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me...yet, not my will, but yours be done* (22:42). Then Luke tells us that *In his anguish, Jesus prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling on the ground* (22:44).

This notion of Jesus suffering very human struggles is captured by the author Nikos Kazantzakis in his 1960 novel, The Last Temptation of Christ. In this book Jesus truly sees himself caught between a rock and a hard place. Beaten and bruised, cursed and abused, nailed to the cross...Satan comes to Jesus with one last temptation...

The Evil One invites the Lord to imagine what might have happened *if only*...if only he had made other choices...

Now, I realize that's not something you and I ever wrestle with...right?  
If only...

- I'd made the basket...
- I'd passed the test...
- I'd taken that class or dropped that one...
- I'd used those seeds or that fertilizer
- I'd moved here...or there...taken that job...or the other...

Basically Satan says to the dying Lord: *Take a look at what might have happened...if only you'd let yourself be wholly human for a while...* Then the devil fills Jesus' mind (his pain-wracked, world-weary, sleep-deprived mind) with a beautiful vision of being married, of having children, of living the life...the life that you-and-I all-too-often take for granted... That's Jesus in Mathew, Mark and Luke.

But here in John's Gospel, the rest of you are right.

- Jesus is in control...
- he's not murdered...he lays down his life.
- he's not betrayed...he witnesses to his place as God's chosen...
- he's not surprised...he's doing exactly what God had planned all along...

Yet in both scenarios, the main truths agree:

- No, Jesus does not want to die. And
- Yes, the Lord knows that he will.
- No, he is not surprised. And

- Yes, he trusts that God's will is being done.
- No, he's not insulated from the pain of:
  - betrayal, or
  - beatings, or
  - bald-faced lies. And
- Yes, Jesus understands exactly why...he must die.

So what helps **him** make the right *between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place* choice?

I think it's because Jesus is willing:

- to not count equality with God a thing to be grasped
- to die the death of a guilty man, he who was absolutely and truly innocent
- walk through that valley of the shadow of death...absolutely alone so that you and I will never have to...
- to pray, *Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing...*

Which brings us to our final question: **Whom, do you suppose, is Jesus asking God to forgive?**

- The soldiers who nailed him to the cross?
- The Jewish leaders who demanded his death?
- Pontius Pilate who sent him to die?
- The crowd who cried, *Crucify him!!!*?
- Judas who betrayed him?
- Peter who denied him?
- The rest of the disciples who abandoned him?
- You and me...we who can so easily forget the things he did, the lessons he taught, the way he lived, the people he loved, the reason he died???



Jesus prays, *Father, forgive them...for they don't know what they're doing...* and I'm quite certain that when he says "them" he means every one of us.

Add to that the words **we** say in the Lord's Prayer, *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...*

Forgiveness, I'm convinced, is where the rubber really hits the road in our lives: it's not easy to forgive those who sin against us. In fact, the prevailing attitude in our culture seems to be that we should do everything in our power to punish those who sin against us...

Which, if true, means that many/most/ALL of us find ourselves here caught between a rock and a hard place...forgive??...everyone??...even if they don't ask for it??...especially if they don't deserve it??

*Father, forgive them...for they don't know what they're doing...*

Of all the characters in this divine drama of grace, it turns out that Jesus is the only one who's not caught between a rock and a hard place. For he is, truly, our rock and our salvation.

In Matthew, chapter 21, Jesus said to those around him, *Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?*

To tweak a quote from Shakespeare's play Hamlet: *To forgive, or not to forgive, that is the question...* Thanks be to God that **Jesus** is the **answer!**

Amen.