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Second Sunday in Lent  
Matthew 26:1-5  
February 25, 2018

In Christ Jesus, who died on the cross exactly when God had planned, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

If you have been watching the Olympics you will readily agree with this phrase: "Timing is everything." A thousandth of a second can be the difference between gold and silver or bronze or maybe no medal at all. Timing your start, timing your jump on your skates, timing your turn on the slopes, timing your move to shoot on the goal needs to be just right or it could be disaster.

That phrase is also true in many areas of our lives. Maybe now is not the right time to ask your parents for permission to do something. Maybe now is the perfect time to tackle that job you've been putting off. If the time is right don't delay. If you wait too long it might be too late.

This morning's example of irony from our Savior's Passion is all about timing. It can be summed up in one simple statement that the religious leaders of Israel agreed on, a statement of when they wanted to kill Jesus: **Not During the Festival**

The "festival," of course was the Passover. It was one of the most important festivals of the year, and it was followed by a week-long celebration known as the Festival of Unleavened Bread. During the Passover, Jewish pilgrims flooded Jerusalem. The city would be full of visitors from far and wide. Our text takes place just two days before the Passover—Tuesday of Holy Week. The Jewish faithful were already streaming in. One could feel the holiday excitement in the air. Jesus' enemies all agreed:

**NOT DURING THE FESTIVAL!**

**I: IT WAS THE ONE TIME THEY DID NOT WANT TO KILL JESUS.**

Matthew sets up the irony for us so well. On that Tuesday, two groups of people were meeting. On the Mount of Olives, Jesus sat down with His disciples. In the palace of Caiaphas, the High Priest, the chief priests and the elders of the people were meeting. What were these Jewish leaders doing? Matthew says, **THEY PLOTTED TO TAKE JESUS BY TRICKERY (SECRETLY) AND KILL HIM.** The leaders of the Jewish nation, the men charged with both justice and religious teaching, as we heard last Sunday, hated Jesus so much that they were plotting to kill Him. But they wanted to do it in some sly, sneaky, secret, treacherous way. They wanted to make sure that they wouldn't be blamed for it. How's that for irony?

So they reached agreement on one important issue: **NOT DURING THE FESTIVAL.** The Bible doesn't even tell us who first said these words, because it doesn't matter. They all recognized the wisdom of this statement. It would be so much easier to deal with Jesus after the Passover was over. The crowds would be gone, having gone home. Jerusalem would once again return to normal and they could do whatever they wanted to Jesus. But NOT during the festival, for that would bring too much attention, too many questions. That was the one time they **DID NOT** want to kill Jesus.

What a contrast to what Jesus was doing. He and His disciples had already had a full day. They had been to the temple, and Jesus

had confronted His enemies and won every argument with them. Then He and His disciples had walked out of the city to the Mount of Olives, and there Jesus had taught them about His return, His coming to judge all of mankind. Then He spoke these very important words: **"YOU KNOW THAT AFTER TWO DAYS IS THE PASSOVER, AND THE SON OF MAN WILL BE DELIVERED UP TO BE CRUCIFIED."** It didn't matter what the chief priests and the elders were plotting. Jesus' time had come. In two days, on the very day of the Passover, He would be arrested so that He could be crucified. At the one time His enemies did not want to do it, they would kill Him. It was determined by His Father.

There would be nothing secret or sneaky about it. He wasn't going to be stabbed in the back by an assassin in some dark alley. He wasn't going to just disappear with His body never to be found. He was going to be publicly crucified before the whole city. That meant of course that the Romans needed to be involved, because the Jewish leaders did not have authority to carry out executions. This would require a legal, public proceeding. Crucifixion involved nailing the victim to a cross and letting him hang, sometimes for days, until he died. It was done at a public place of execution. Guards had to watch over the prisoner until he died. In Jerusalem, it meant that one had to march the prisoner through the city and outside the city walls to Calvary, also called Golgotha, where executions took place.

Nothing about Jesus' death was what the Jewish leaders wanted or expected. So what lesson are we to learn from this irony of Jesus' passion? Who was really in charge? The leaders of the Jews were convinced that they had matters under control. Even though the Romans ruled the land, they pretty much had Pontius Pilate wrapped around their finger. They felt they could control him. They also controlled the temple, and through it, they controlled the people. They were convinced they could make this happen the way they planned it, the way they wanted it.

God, however, had other ideas. God in eternity had chosen the Passover as the day when His Son would be arrested and die. He had given the Israelites the Passover as a prophecy of Christ, the day the blood of the lamb was shed. The Father wanted Jerusalem to be filled to overflowing on the day His Son died, because God wanted His people to see the fulfillment of all that He had been prophesying and promising through His prophets for over 1,500 years.

Jesus' entire ministry would climax in this final trip to Jerusalem. So even though these men agreed, **"Not during the festival,"** it was they who paid Judas to betray Jesus. It was they who sent the temple guards to Gethsemane with Judas on the night of the Passover to arrest Him. These men gathered false witnesses in the middle of that night, held a kangaroo court, and convicted Jesus of blasphemy. These men brought Jesus to Pilate early in the morning and demanded that He die. These men convinced the people to ask for the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus when Pilate wanted to let Jesus go. These men even stood in front of Jesus' cross taunting and ridiculing Him.

These men did all that at that time because God's plan could not be stopped. God's love demanded that His Son give Himself to pay for all sins—even for the sins of those men. So when these men

least wanted to kill Jesus, God made them fulfill the plan He had conceived of before the world began. And God did all that for us. He saw you and me before He even said, **"LET THERE BE LIGHT!"** He controlled everything so that it all happened exactly the way it was supposed to. He even used these wicked, unbelieving men to bring Jesus' mission to completion so that we would live.

The Jewish leaders played into God's hands. Now, obviously, when God decides that He's going to make something happen, it's going to happen. But how we become His tools matters. Do we serve Him out of faith or in spite of our unbelief? What made these men serve God's plan? It was their own sinful pride. We see that in the rationale for their decision:

**NOT DURING THE FESTIVAL!**

**II: IT WAS THE ONE TIME THAT WHAT THEY FEARED MOST  
WOULD ACTUALLY HAPPEN.**

What did they fear most? Losing their position, losing their office. That's why they hated Jesus. He was too popular. From the very beginning, they worried that He was undermining their position by His teaching about God and His love. That same fear drove their decision to wait. Because of all those pilgrims who were filling Jerusalem, they said, **"NOT DURING THE FEAST, LEST THERE BE AN UPROAR AMONG THE PEOPLE."** Riots are destructive. People get hurt, even killed. Buildings get burned down. Property gets looted. But that's not what these men were worried about. They ruled Israel because the Romans let them. The Romans figured that, as long as these men collected taxes and kept the people in line, it was cheaper and easier to let them take care of local matters. But if they couldn't handle the job, the Romans would remove them and find someone else to do it. That was the Jewish leaders' biggest fear. They loved being in charge.

As we said last week, sinful pride drove them to plot murder. Obviously, you and I don't share their hatred of the Savior. But can we honestly claim to be any better? Their problem is our problem too. Sinful pride is the center of all sin. It takes many different forms, but in the end, sinful pride says that "I am the most important person on earth. What I want should matter more than what other people want—even more than what God wants." Now, maybe we would not put it quite that way, but isn't that the way we act sometimes?

When we get angry with someone because we did not get our way—isn't that the same thing? When we hold grudges, when we replay in our minds over and over again the things that people said and did to us, isn't that sinful pride? When we do what we want to do even though we know that God has said "No" to that, isn't that sinful pride? When we wallow in despair and are convinced that our sins are so bad that God could never love us, that's sinful pride too. It's saying that what Jesus did on the cross isn't good enough to cover *my* sin.

God calls us to humility, to not look at self, but to put Him first, to serve Him and our neighbor. God calls us to sacrifice for our spouses and our children and for strangers who still need to hear the Gospel. God calls us to be pure in heart and mind, as well as in word and action. Sinful pride always finds a reason and an excuse to rebel against God. And even if we actually succeed in hiding that pride from every other human being, God still sees it.

That sinful pride in our hearts and displayed in our lives earns death and hell. That's what every single one of us deserves.

That's why God made sure that His Son died on the very day these men didn't want Him to. Jesus was dying for us. And it was no accident that He died on a cross. Crucifixion was for the worst of criminals, the traitors, murderers and rebels. Certainly, part of that was because of the horrible pain involved. But you know what? Nowhere does the Bible dwell on the pain of the cross. It dwells on the shame. To the Romans, the cross proclaimed that a person was the lowest kind of criminal, unworthy of any kind of mercy or honor in death. To the Jews, the cross was even worse. God had said, **FOR HE WHO IS HANGED IS ACCURSED OF GOD** (Deuteronomy 21:23). God's curse is when He damns someone to hell. To the Jews, being hung on the cross symbolized being abandoned to hell.

So Jesus said that He would be crucified. He would be abandoned to the sufferings of hell itself on the cross. His Father would lay upon Him all the shame and scorn that we sinners should have received from a holy God for daring to follow our sinful pride instead of Him. God should pour that shame and scorn out on us in hell. But He won't. Because Jesus didn't suffer just one man's scorn and shame and hell; on the cross He suffered all the scorn, all the shame, and all the hell of every sinner who will ever live. Then He died for us all. And then He rose. When He rose, He said that all the scorn and the shame, all the death and the hell, was over. We have been set free. We will live with Him forever.

Timing is everything. These men wanted to kill Jesus, just not that week. And when it didn't go the way they planned, they still celebrated getting rid of Him. They probably even counted themselves lucky that there was no riot. As we said last week "Irony is a set of circumstances or an outcome that is contrary to what you might expect." They might have seen irony in the foolishness of their fears, in their worries, but that's not the real irony here. The real irony is that God used their hatred, pride, unbelief and opposition to bring our Savior to the cross at exactly the moment He planned so that Jesus could fulfill His mission and earn eternal life for us.

Thank God for that irony.  
Amen.