

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for 2nd Midweek Lent Service -- March 16th, 2011

John 11:47-53

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

“What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”

He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

Dear Children of God,

We count many villains among the people of the passion, but who counts as the worst villain of all? Was it Judas, the opportunist and traitor? Was it Pilate, the executioner? We can make a good case for both. But I submit that the worst villain of all was Caiaphas, the Schemer. Without him, the other two men would not have entered the picture.

Yes, Caiaphas played the most active part of all in securing the death of Jesus. But why did this man, the Jewish high priest and the religious leader of the people, scheme to get Jesus crucified?

Theme: People of the Passion – Caiaphas, the Schemer

- 1. Caiaphas owed his position as high priest to the Roman rule**
- 2. Caiaphas wanted Jesus out of the way**
- 3. Caiaphas predicted the purpose of Jesus' death**
- 4. Caiaphas had his way and God's will was done**

1.

1. Caiaphas owed his position as high priest to the Roman rule

It may help to know that Caiaphas did not become high priest in the way God had instituted; namely, by inheriting it. He owed his position to the Roman governor, the one before Pontius Pilate. He kept his position by currying the favor of the Romans who ruled over his country.

As high priest, Caiaphas held the most influential position a Jew could have in Judea under Roman rule. As the religious leader, he commanded the respect of the people and he controlled the proceeds of the temple treasury. Since he ruled also as the president of the Jewish council, he had considerable political power. That was as close to self-government as Rome allowed the Jews. To help keep matters under control, the Roman leader of the day handpicked the council's leader, the high priest.

2. Caiaphas wanted Jesus out of the way

Caiaphas had much to lose from the movement inspired by Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, with his miracles, was gaining a large following of the common people, whose allegiance Caiaphas needed. Jesus openly attacked the corruption of the Jewish authorities, and Caiaphas had to fight back. Jesus drove the thieving

moneychangers from the temple and threatened Caiaphas where it hurt most, in the bank account. Worst of all, if the Romans saw Jesus as a threat, they would come down on all the Jews. Caiaphas could lose everything.

It's hard to believe. The high priest—whose position was a type of the Messiah—plotted the Messiah's death. You would think that he of all people would have recognized and welcomed the Messiah. But he did not. He used his office only for his own advantage.

Keep in mind that Caiaphas was, by most accounts, a Sadducee, a rationalist and modernist in his religious views. He didn't believe in the resurrection from the dead or even that man has a soul. He didn't believe in an afterlife, in heaven or hell, or in angels. He cared nothing about sin and salvation. All that mattered was what he gained for himself in this life. Jesus' teachings had no appeal for him. Caiaphas wanted Jesus silenced.

But are we really surprised that the church's leaders turned against Jesus? Don't we see much of the same today? We see church leaders that deny many teachings from God's Word. They too deny the existence of angels, miracles, hell, and heaven. Some deny the resurrection of Christ.

The results are the same as with Caiaphas. Having lost the gospel of Jesus, some church leaders get more involved in political matters. They turn to more earthly matters. They slight the basic teachings of sin and salvation and emphasize mostly what they can get for themselves in this life. At their worst, they join Caiaphas in trying to kill God, if possible. They teach that God is dead or that Jesus never really rose. The specter of Caiaphas lives on.

So the rude, unscrupulous, sly, and clever Caiaphas, a man not to be denied, turned his wrath against Jesus. He would get rid of Jesus, whatever it might take.

The plotting and scheming began long before that fateful Friday. The Jewish leaders spied on Jesus regularly. They took note of what he said and did. They questioned him and tried to trap him in his talk. They worried about him.

3. Caiaphas predicted the purpose of Jesus' death

Finally, the council met to decide what to do about Jesus. Caiaphas was ready to make his move and to have Jesus put to death.

The council debated the issue of Jesus with little resolve and no action. They saw that they were losing the loyalty of the people to Jesus. They fretted about the threat from Rome. Then Caiaphas drove them to a course of action.

"You know nothing at all!" he barked at them. They talked a lot but did nothing. He would tell them what to do. He did not offer any religious motive or show any zeal for God. Instead, he made it their patriotic duty to kill Jesus. **"You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish" (Jn 11:50).**

"One man" or "the nation"? He made it sound like the only two choices. The council had an easy time deciding. They all had too much at stake. They chose the "one man." Jesus must die to save the nation.

Caiaphas' wicked scheme was working. Little did he know that actually God was making it work for the good of all people on earth. Caiaphas spoke the words of a villain and schemer. God made them the words of a prophet. Caiaphas had murder on his mind. God had salvation in his plan. The council members wanted to kill Jesus for their selfish purposes. God would let them kill Jesus for his purpose.

So the words that led to the murder of Jesus contain a most wonderful truth: Jesus died "for the people." He died to save the Jews, the council members, the Romans, and us. His death did not save the Jews from the Romans as Caiaphas wanted. Within 40 years, the Romans would crush the Jews just because they, at that

time, followed a false, political messiah. But Jesus died as the heaven-sent substitute for lost sinners. He died for our sins, paying our deserved penalty. What Caiaphas thought was a political necessity was a spiritual necessity. One man, the God-man, died for—on behalf of and in the stead of—all people.

In that way, the most wicked deed ever perpetrated—the crucifixion of the Son of God in the flesh—was turned into the greatest good ever given—the eternal salvation of all sinners.

4. Caiaphas had his way and God's will was done

Caiaphas continued in his unscrupulous ways to the end. He had Jesus falsely arrested and subjected him to an illegal trial and sentencing. He brought in false witnesses against Jesus. He berated Jesus for remaining silent.

When it appeared, however, that Caiaphas might actually lose his case, he changed his tactics. He put Jesus under oath to the living God. **“Tell us,” he demanded, “if you are the Christ, the Son of God” (Mt 26:63).**

Now Jesus spoke: **“Yes, it is as you say. . . . But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mt 26:64).**

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and he would have the last word. But Caiaphas would get Jesus' execution. “There you have it,” he cried to the Jewish council. “Blasphemy! What do you think now?”

“He is worthy of death,” they decreed (Mt 26:66). Then they subjected Jesus to all sorts of abuse and mockery.

I have said that it is hard to believe what Caiaphas did. But there is a spirit in all of us as sinful children of Adam that wants Jesus out of the way. It is not always “convenient” to have him around. He cramps our style. Maybe, when we examine some of our own motives, we see a little of Caiaphas in ourselves.

Our pride, for example, moves us to seek approval and praise from other people, but Jesus asks us to be humble and to praise him and to serve others. We want matters to go our way. Jesus calls us to follow his way. We don't always understand or even like all of Jesus' teachings. Jesus insists that they are all true and to be believed. We want others to like us. Sometimes we're afraid they won't if they know we believe in Jesus. We push Jesus aside, so to speak, to satisfy our own selfish desires.

So today, we thank God that he used the villainous Caiaphas to bring his Son to the cross. There Jesus took our sins on himself and paid the penalty for them. He paid the price for our sinful pride, our wayward ways, our selfish desires. He undid the curse of Adam. He died for “the people.” And we look forward to the day that we will see him, as he promised, “sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Amen.