

Good Friday, April 3, 2026 (A)
Matthew 26:14 – 27:66

Pastor Chris Repp
Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

We have come now to the hardest part of Holy Week – Jesus’s crucifixion. My task for the next few minutes is to wrestle some good news out of this story that we tend to think about as mostly bad news. But there is good news here. Surprisingly good news. It is not obvious to the casual reader, though. It’s not obvious even if you’ve been hearing this story all your life, as I have. So, we have to do a little work. Here goes. I’m going to give you three things to notice in Matthew’s passion account that build on each other, and make it even better news than just setting the stage for Jesus’ resurrection.

First, I want you to notice that there are two Jesuses in the Matthew’s passion narrative. You heard me right: Two Jesuses. There’s Jesus Barabbas, and Jesus the Messiah, the Christ. Barabbas literally means “Son of the father.” And that’s interesting, because Jesus has just been praying to God as his father in the garden of Gethsemane. So not only do we have two Jesuses here, but they are both “sons of the father.” When Jesus Barabbas enters the story, it is because Pilate is giving the crowd the option of releasing one of the two of them. Okay. Hold that thought for a moment and let me tell you about Leviticus 16. Leviticus 16 is about the Day of Atonement, the highest of holy days for the Jewish people, Jesus’ people. It’s also known as Yom Kippur. In the ancient rite of atonement, two male goats are chosen and brought to the high priest. The priest casts lots to determine which of the goats will be “for the Lord,” and which will be “for the wilderness.” The one that is “for the Lord” will be sacrificed, and its blood used to cleanse the sanctuary of the tabernacle and make atonement with God for the people’s sins. The other goat, the one that is “for the wilderness,” is not sacrificed. The priest instead lays his hands on the goat’s head and confesses over it all the sins of the people from the past year. Then that goat is taken away and released into the wilderness, symbolically bearing away the people’s sins. This would have been very familiar to Matthew’s original audience, as familiar as the rituals and customs surrounding Christmas and Easter are to you and me. They wouldn’t need the explanation I just gave you. They would hear this account and immediately think, “I know what’s going on here!” Jesus is like that goat that gets sacrificed to make atonement and Barabbas, the notorious prisoner, is the goat that gets sent away with the people’s sins.

Okay, now that I’ve helped you to make a connection that none of us would have made without help, let’s move on to the second thing I want you to notice here. Notice the blood. It’s weird, I know, in our time and place. But it is biblically meaningful. Blood is sacred. It is an animal’s life. It belongs to God alone, and that’s why you’re not allowed to eat it. Blood, when used ritually, cleaned, and purified, and sanctified whatever it was sprinkled or smeared on, even though sprinkling it around the sanctuary or smearing it on the horns of the altar would literally have made a bloody mess. Okay, again. Hold that thought, and then notice the blood when you’re listening to the passion story. The money that Judas was paid and tries to bring back is called blood money. The field that that money is used to buy is called the field of blood. And the crowd, when Pilate washes his hands in protest over Jesus’ innocence, cries out, “let his blood be on us and our children.” I want to focus particularly on that last one for a moment. That is a verse that has long been used among Christians in the service of an anti-Semitic agenda. It’s the proof text for claiming that the Jews killed Jesus. And see, they even admitted guilt for it, right here! But that conveniently ignores that Jesus and all of the original Christians were Jewish, and unless we Christians see ourselves in the Jewish characters of the Gospels, not only the disciples who abandon him, but also the crowd calling for his death, we’re missing the point. And so we’re also

missing what Matthew is actually doing here. Because if this entire passion narrative really is a re-capitulation of the atonement ritual from Leviticus, if Jesus is the innocent sacrificial victim whose blood makes atonement for sin, then what the Jewish crowd is asking for here – even if they don't realize what they're asking for – is to be atoned for by Jesus's death. What they intend for evil, in other words, God intends for good, as Joseph told his brothers at the end of Genesis.

The third thing I want you to notice in the passion reading this morning is what happens with Judas, and how it might connect with everything I've just talked about. Matthew's account is the only one in which Judas repents. He goes to the priests to return the "blood money" they paid him to betray Jesus. You might say he's seeking atonement for the sin he now regrets. Because the priests are the ones in this religious system whose job it was to help people repair their relationship with God. But they refuse to do that for Judas. So, he thinks that he is cut off from God with no possible future, and he ends his life in despair. And his blood money is used to buy a field of blood for burying foreigners. Now Foreigners here might mean Gentiles, non-Jews, but it could also mean people who aren't citizens of Jerusalem or the larger territory of Judea, and that would include Judas. So could Matthew be suggesting that this is where Judas was buried? I can't be sure about that. But if so, then here is some more irony. Judas in his death ends up in the field of blood, covered by Jesus' blood, and so made right with God after all. And the priests who don't want the blood money in the temple are ironically depriving the temple of the atonement it needs. And Matthew's audience knows the temple is coming down. They can still see its ruins after the Romans destroyed it in 70 CE.

How do these esoteric insights into Matthew's passion help us today? More specifically, where is the good news for us in all of this that I promised in my introduction? A few weeks back we had a reading from Romans 5, one of my theological go-to texts, where Paul tells us that it was while we were sinners and enemies that Christ died for us. I think that is also the message of Matthew's passion account. Jesus does not die for good people. He does not die for people who have pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and gotten their acts together. He does not die for the righteous. He dies for those who are cut off from God, estranged and alienated from God with no hope of a future. He dies for those who are in captivity to sin and cannot free themselves. He dies for those in the valley of the shadow of death. He dies for you. And for me. He dies to make enemies into friends and sinners into saints. He dies to end the tyranny of death and to make all things new, you included. As you listen to Matthew's passion account in a few minutes, may you hold this promise in your hearts. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.