

# The Plan

Good Friday—April 2, 2021

St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania

Pastor James Haun

[The readings for the service are Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Hebrews 10:16-25 and John 18 & 19. The sermon text was chosen from other verses, but all are urged to read the day's text to best honor and appreciate this day's meaning.]

## John 11:47-52

*So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.*

As we stand, humbled before the Cross of Christ on this holy evening, our hearts and spirits cry out in anguish. How could such a horror and injustice be perpetrated against the righteous Son of God? His only "crimes" were telling the truth and loving people in word and deed. How could a nation which seemed to be adoring him days previous turn on him so suddenly and cruelly? We do know that this didn't happen by accident. Someone had a plan, and John's Gospel takes us back just days before this terrible event to a group of men who put together an evil scheme to put a stop to this troublesome rabbi. Let us consider this plan.

Jesus had recently raised Lazarus from the dead and his fame was rising rapidly—so much so that the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council, called an emergency meeting. John reports: *So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.* Jesus had become such a threat to these men that they all believed that some bold action needed to be taken. We commonly speak of the religious leaders being jealous of Jesus' fame and following, but now it had grown to more than a matter of jealousy. The common people were beginning to hail Jesus as their great Savior, the Messiah, and some were calling him their new King! The Romans were willing to respect local religious expression throughout their empire, but this tolerance had its

limits, and loudly pronouncing anyone other than Caesar as savior and king would not be permitted for long. Their fear was not unrealistic! What were they to do?

While one could pronounce their concerns reasonable, there was a deep *un*-reasonableness to their cry, for they refused to consider the meaning of the many signs, that is, miracles, which Jesus was performing. Lazarus had been raised from the dead for all to see, and they could not deny the genuineness of these powerful works. They called Jesus' mighty works signs, and a sign is something which points the way. These signs of Jesus plainly pointed to God, but this was an obvious truth which these leaders very consciously chose to ignore. Jesus was not the kind of Messiah which they had been expecting, and they had stopped trying to understand him a long time ago. Now they saw only the need to stop him, for the Temple and their nation were at stake. The Temple and their nation had become the very core of their religion and needed to be defended at any cost.

This anxious conversation is deeply unsettling to hear, especially as their fears are so very understandable to us! When our favorite things and our great earthly treasures are threatened, we can become very combative and ugly. In a very real way, our faith becomes tied up in buildings and traditions, and the thought of their destruction is more than we can bear. We need to remind ourselves frequently of our Lord's exhortation to *seek first the Kingdom of God*, and to put all other things as a distant second. Our calling as believers is to follow Jesus Christ despite all dangers and losses. Before we scorn the unbelief of the leaders of Israel, we would all do well to put ourselves in their shoes and to ponder the depth of our faith.

They saw this as a time for action, and Caiaphas the high priest had a plan. *But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."* Caiaphas was the high priest and a Sadducee, which was a small sect of powerful Jewish leaders. As they were of a power elite, they were known for being assertive and arrogant, hence the insult which begins his pronouncement. All could agree that Jesus was a threat, but Caiaphas put forth the plan was going to push them into action. At the core of this plan was a simple proposition—it is better for one person to die than for the whole nation to be lost. The math was plain and chillingly logical, and it is not an unfamiliar math for us in our day. We are moving into the day of "cancel culture" when a person deemed unworthy of a voice is simply erased from all media. In a similar yet more brutal manner, Jesus was being cancelled.

Caiaphas put forth a proposition, and while it must have frightened and unsettled those present, they found his logic compelling and saw no better alternative. Jesus must die. In human terms we might say that Caiaphas was giving them good advice. It makes perfect sense to those who cannot see beyond this world and it seems to

offer the safest path. Such good advice also reminds us, and warns us, that there can be a dramatic difference between the world's good advice, and God's advice.

This was a dark and grim meeting, but John the evangelist points out that something amazing was happening in that very place. He points out that the high priest's words were not spoken by his own authority. *He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.* God was speaking in that Sanhedrin! Caiaphas put forth the plan as the only reasonable means of saving the Jewish nation, and the Gospel writer completely affirms that intention! Jesus was indeed going to die for the nation of Israel and more. Jesus was going to die and rise to bring salvation to all the nations of the world. Though completely blind to the real meaning of what he had said, Caiaphas was acting as a prophet of God!

Good Friday and the humiliation and death of the Savior was the result of a plan, but it was not really the result of the Sanhedrin's plan. It was God's plan. Certain humans, thinking themselves powerful and much in control, put forth their plans, but it was God's plan which came to be. We have heard of the "rule of unintended consequences," which warns that all plans have results which were not originally foreseen, and may even completely frustrate the original desire of the plan. Caiaphas' plan was the ultimate expression of unintended consequences. God's plan went forth as was predicted hundreds of years previous. Isaiah said of the Messiah, the Suffering Servant: *But it was the Lord's will to crush him.* (Isaiah 53:10) Caiaphas and his cohort were only doing God's work. A few weeks ago, I spoke of our call to be God's hands in this world, doing acts of love and advancing the Kingdom of God. It is wonderful to see the Kingdom go forth through such a loving witness of His people, but if we are to study the Biblical history it would seem that God's plan is advanced as much *in spite* of us humans than through us!

What shall we say to such an amazing plan? Certainly, this is a call to praise. God is in control, and no matter what we may see around us, we can be thankful and glad that God's plan is pressing onward. God is sovereign! We can trust when our lives go badly and troubles come our way, for we have seen God do marvelous things through the most painful of circumstances. In a world which seems dark with sadness and hopelessness we can be joyful in our bright, inextinguishable hope. God is in control.

God has a plan, and that plan cannot be frustrated. Even our greatest rebellion can only advance that plan, and this is why we call this Friday Good.