

HIGH PRIEST LOOKS AT THE CROSS
Sermon Series: "Faces at the Cross"
John 11: 43-53 and Matthew 27: 40-43
March 5, 2017 ~ The Church of the Covenant

The High Priest Caiaphas is a person standing at the foot of the cross of Jesus on that fateful day of Good Friday. Perhaps no one was more responsible for having Jesus nailed to the cross and crucifying Him than he. He was part of a high priestly class in the Temple of Jerusalem who were part religious leader and part politician; he wore the priestly vestments but was a politician's politician at heart. I am sorry to admit this, but every successful pastor is also a successful politician at heart. He knew the law and the prophets by heart. But his heart was far from the law and prophets. He was responsible for the worship of God in the Temple. But God was not alive in the Temple of his heart. He was going through the motions. The man most responsible for recognizing the Messiah when He came, but when Jesus stood before him, Caiaphas was the man most responsible for Jesus' death. Caiaphas; High Priest at the Cross.

We meet Caiaphas right after Jesus' most mighty miracle, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Only Elijah the prophet had done as mighty a miracle beforehand. All the streets are abuzz with news of Lazarus' raising from the dead. The gossip mills flourished as they always do – "Could this Jesus be the long-awaited Messiah? The Savior and anointed One of God?" So rather than embrace Jesus, rather than accept at least the *possibility* that Jesus could be the Messiah, rather than accept the fact that someone who could raise the dead to life might just be the Son of God, instead of all of this, Caiaphas conspires to have Jesus put to death. So Caiaphas gathers the high priests and Pharisees and they are all worried and concerned. Not so much that this Jesus might or might not be Messiah, rather that regardless of who He is, that He will stir up the people, the Romans will come and put down the rebellion, the Romans will crush the nation of Israel, put it to death, destroy the Temple, and Israel will cease to be a nation. They are not so concerned with whether Jesus is or is not the Messiah. They are not concerned with the Truth; they are concerned with expediency; they are concerned with preserving the peace; they are politicians in search of preserving their power; they are not religious leaders in search of the Truth. It is there in the Gospel of John where Caiaphas is quoted saying the utterly cynical line, our scripture for today: "*It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.*" (John 11: 50) See, he is about EXPEDIENCY, not truth. He doesn't care in a way whether or not Jesus is Messiah. He just knows if this Jesus stirs up the people enough, does enough mighty miracles in their midst, causes a great fracas say at the upcoming celebration of Passover when Jerusalem swells to twenty times its normal size, he knows that the Romans will intervene, that Pontius Pilate the new procurator will make good on his threat, to close down the Temple, to kill the people, to have Judah cease to be an independent nation and become a subservient vassal state of the hated Romans. Jesus, don't you do any more mighty miracles here; don't you be raising people from the dead, healing people and forgiving people and drawing them close to God Your Father. It will upset the applecart, disrupt the delicate balance, cause disruption and discord. So for expediency sake, Jesus you must go, we must take you out, just as the High Priests have killed the prophets before You, Jesus, it is expedient that You should die, rather than the Temple be destroyed and the people killed. "I don't care", says Caiaphas, "that You are or are not the Messiah. I just care that You, Jesus, must die."

You think, how could the High Priest think such a thing? But, you know, I often think to myself, "I am a bad shepherd if I allow something to go on in our church that I know or should know will cause division, strife and discord." I don't want the sheep to scatter. I don't want to be responsible for breaking apart my congregation. But what if it were Jesus and the Holy Spirit stirring up the people? What if it were God's action around which people might divide? What if the Messiah came and it made me fearful that it would destroy my church? What if my response would be too much like Caiaphas'? Expediency over truth. There are reasons why spiritual renewal does not come. There are reasons why the whole church in America is in decline. And some of them are caused by the high priestly class of pastors who fear the Lord and what He might really do in the life of their congregations, if they let Him...Better to kill off His Spirit than my whole church die...

The next time we see Caiaphas is when he is judging Jesus before the Sanhedren on trumped up charges. Jesus is accused of many things. He is accused of saying He will tear down the Temple and raise it up in three days. Then the High Priest adjures Jesus by the Living God and asks Him whether He is or is not the Son of God. *"Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."* (Matthew 26: 63) Jesus says to him, *"You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the seat of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."* (v. 64) Interested in POWER and its exercise, Caiaphas, I will show you POWER, God's POWER, for I will sit on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, descending with the trumpet sound to judge you and all your kind, coming on the clouds of heaven! And then Caiaphas tears his high priestly garments, a sign that the priesthood was forever over, something no High Priest should ever do, on Sabbath Eve of the eve of Passover, in front of the Sanhedren, he did a most unholy, incorrect action, so angry was he. He turns to the power people of Israel, the high priests and Pharisees, "You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?" And they said: *"(Jesus) deserves death."* (v. 66)

The last time we see Caiaphas is at the foot of the cross. His is a face at the foot of the cross. He has manipulated the situation and has caused Jesus, this perceived threat to the stability and existence of Israel, to be put to death. He has bested Jesus in a way, at least for the moment. His nemesis is hanging on a cross and His followers, scattered; His movement is over; No more mighty miracles like the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Jesus is just one more aspiring prophet the High Priest has squashed in the name of stability, peace and expediency. Caiaphas is *of course* there. Would he be anywhere else? To savor his triumph. As it says, "So also the chief priests, scribes and elders mocked Him", (Matthew 27: 41) mocked Jesus while He hung in agony on the cross. They taunt: "You who would tear down the Temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself!" They taunt: "He saved others He cannot save Himself!" They taunt: "Let Him come down now from the cross and we will believe in Him!" They taunt: "He trusts in God, let God deliver Him now!" Of course, Caiaphas was there, relishing his triumph, leading the taunts, making certain this prophet was dead. Of course, his a face at the foot of the cross.

It is interesting however that within one biblical generation from that fateful Good Friday, when the Messiah was put to death in expediency, it is interesting that historians record that the Roman Emperor Titus came in 70AD and besieged Jerusalem and captured the city, and tore down the Temple, and killed the people and the high priests, and carried off the contents of the Temple in triumph (recorded on the arch of Titus in Rome) and not one stone stood upon another, just as Jesus had said. With utter contempt, Titus sowed salt on the ground of Jerusalem that nothing again would ever grow there. And Israel and Judah ceased to be. And by the way, Jesus' earthly Temple, His body, was indeed raised up in three days. God resurrected the Son of God from the dead and raised up His body to reign forever seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, ready to judge the quick and the dead, one day to descend with a clap on the clouds of heaven. Caiaphas, as High Priest, was also the principle prophet in Israel, and when he made his statement, *"It is expedient ...that one man should die for the people."* (John 11: 50) he was indeed prophesying. Jesus did die on the cross and He did die for the people. That's the irony of Caiaphas' words --they were true! Jesus died that we might live! Jesus died that our temples, our bodies, might be raised up in the power of the resurrection! Jesus died that our temples, our churches, might be raised up in the power of the Holy Ghost! The Messiah died on a cross, He was raised up on the tree of Calvary, that we, too, might be raised up in that day!!!!

So, elders, priests, and leaders... faces today at the foot of the cross of Jesus...is the church preserved by political expediency? Or is the church preserved by embracing the Messiah Jesus and inviting His Holy Power to be at work in our midst? Is the church preserved by expediency and our own efforts? Or is the church preserved by TRUTH, by its Savior and the power of God poured out at the cross? Look up into the face of Jesus today, see Him face to face in this sacrament, and you will know your answer. We are just faces at the foot of the cross. Amen and Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!**