

Text: Matt. 27:57-61; Luke 23:50-55

(Bibl. characters) 1

(take stool & sit down) Sometimes I think it would have been easier just to escape back to Arimathea last week. Maybe I should have just gone back to my own people to celebrate the Passover. I know everybody wants to be in Jerusalem for the Passover, but now I kind of wish I'd gone back to observe it with my brother Moshe in Arimathea. It's only about 25 miles away.

But now on Shabbat morning ... THIS Shabbat morning, Jerusalem feels like it's 200 miles away from sleepy little Arimathea. But Arimathea might as well have been in Arabia for as much good as it did me when I first came to settle here in Jerusalem.

- It didn't matter much that I'm an observant Jew, faithfully following the words of Torah, just as my father taught me to.
- It didn't matter much when I got here that I was highly respected in Arimathea, someone people sought out for my wisdom and maturity in the synagogue.
- Most surprisingly, it didn't even matter in Jerusalem that I am a man of means. I have farms and vineyards and lots of servants, and enough gold to make the temple treasurer's face light up whenever he sees me.

Yet it didn't matter for a long time, because I was always an outsider among those Jewish elites in Jerusalem. They always did look at me a little suspiciously. It took me years to earn enough respect among the Sadducees to finally get a place on the Sanhedrin council. Once there, I enjoyed my new privilege and influence among Yahweh's people. I try to stay faithful to Torah and our traditions while putting up with those bothersome occupying Romans!

But over time, even serving on the Sanhedrin and observing Shabbat every week in Herod's glorious temple ... even then I began to wonder if there was more to the faith of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob than this! The prophets told us Messiah would come & make everything right for us, and yet after hundreds of years he still never came! Meanwhile other would-be Messiahs came around ... rabble-rousers ... Zealots ... hotheads who wanted us to rally around them and stand up against Rome. Fools! All it produced was harsher treatment for us Jews, and an ugly death on a cross for them.

I kept wondering, "Where is the life, the vitality in our faith? Is this all the Blessed One wants from us?" Then the rumors started stirring about this energetic Galilean rabbi. This Jesus of Nazareth was making a name for himself. But with my Sanhedrin colleagues, it wasn't a good name. They called him dangerous ... a blasphemer ... a friend of sinners.

But there was something about this Jesus that had me curious. It was Nicodemus that first tipped me off about him. He was not like those other hotheads. This unusual rabbi had a dynamic message, a fresh word from the LORD, even if he didn't play by all of our rules. He was making a difference, getting the people excited about Yahweh in a way that we hadn't seen before. There was a spirit about him that was sometimes disturbing, sometimes refreshing, but always had me wondering, "Could the Most High be working through him? Is this the kingdom of God coming now?"

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My fellow Sanhedrists were threatened by him, but I was intrigued. I've always prided myself on being rather open-minded about how Yahweh might work, even when the Law seems to make it clear what is right and wrong in His eyes.

Oh, but I didn't tell most of the others on Sanhedrin about these open-minded thoughts. I kept these thoughts to myself. I didn't want to get run out of the Council, not when I'd paid my dues for so many years to be in that seat. So inside I began to feel caught:

On the one hand, I was being drawn to the message of this dynamic rabbi. I am a faithful observant Jew, but I am not hidebound in worshipping the One who said, "See, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs up. Do you not perceive it?" Could Yahweh be bringing renewal in our own time?

On the other hand, I would tell myself often, "What are you thinking? Are you crazy? The rest of them on the Sanhedrin will not stand for this disloyalty from you. They'll kick you out. You're already an outsider from Arimathea. No one will respect your opinion if they think you're sympathizing with this radical rabbi!"

The deepest spiritual part of me, that most vibrant place was whispering, "Listen to this rabbi! He has a word of truth for God's people!" But my commonsense was barking back at me, "Let him go. He's not worth risking everything you've built up, everything God has blessed you with."

Well, it all came to an unbearable head for me in the last 2 days:

- Being called out as the Council in the middle of the night, so we could judge this rabbi who talked tough but wouldn't even lift a sword to defend himself
- I wasn't sure about our Sanhedrin decision but I lacked the guts to publicly oppose it
- I was so disturbed by the cruel Roman punishment I knew would be meted out on him, that I just hid away at home
- But I couldn't forget this man of God who spoke the truth and silenced the powerful
- I couldn't help myself ...
 - I had to walk up to Golgotha, to be around for that terrible sight that my eyes kept trying to avoid ...
 - yet if I was seen there as a Sanhedrist I also couldn't afford to look sad or allow any tears, like those women congregating below him.
 - So I kept my distance and kept my composure, which was a monumental battle.
- And then my servant who was milling around at the death scene returned to me, saying that Jesus had already died, so quickly! I didn't really need the oral confirmation because I somehow already knew, what with the noonday darkness and that earthquake.

I was stricken with sorrow, stricken with fear and stricken with Jewish devotion, all at the same time. Shabbat was coming in just a few hours, and this amazing loveable holy man had just died. I had heard that his family wouldn't claim him, and that his known band of disciples had

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abandoned him. My heart broke at this most cruel injustice: even after his horrible and shameful public death, there would not even be any dignity left for his naked body left up there to rot!

This was too much for me. This inspiring love-filled gentle rabbi ... whether he was our Messiah or merely a good teacher ... he deserved a decent burial, for God's sake!

And then there was the Law! I am nothing if I am not a man of Torah. Deut. 21:22-23 says

When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the LORD your God is giving you for possession.

Some of us interpret this law to mean that if the body of an executed criminal is not buried before nightfall, our whole land will be defiled! This is Jerusalem! We couldn't allow that! I had to do something!

In the darkness and crazy confusion just after they killed Jesus, some words from the prophet Isaiah's scroll came to me, talking about Yahweh's servant:

... a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench ... (Isa. 42:3)

(kneeling) O most Holy One, I saw your kingdom coming in powerful inspiring ways in this Jesus of Nazareth ... Could he be your servant whom Isaiah prophesied? ... I don't know, but I feel like a bruised reed right now ... my faith feels like a wick not exactly burning bright ...

(back to stool) Then somehow it became clear what I had to do ... But was there enough time to get it done?

I sent my servant to go get some linen burial cloths ready, and to get a few more servants to go prepare my new tomb in the rock ... to make sure it was clean and the stone ready to seal it up. I paid quite a bit for this beautiful tomb to be hewn out of the rock, for me and my wife sometime in the future. But I knew that the rabbi deserved to be buried there more than I do.

I went straight to Pilate's lodgings where he stays while in Jerusalem. Since it was his sentence that condemned Jesus, I knew that he had authority over what happened to the man's body. My Sanhedrin credentials helped me get past the guards no problem.

- I hurried to Pilate's quarters because I was afraid the High Priest or other leaders hostile to Jesus might have gotten there first for his body.
- I hurried because there wasn't much time before sunset & Shabbat.
- I hurried because it felt good to do this practical act of devotion for Jesus, even though he wouldn't know I had done it.
- Mostly I hurried in order to distract myself from the terrible risk I was taking.
- I hurried in order to stay focused on this mission of mercy, lest my better judgment should convince me to abort this foolish mission.

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I knew instinctively that once I made the request of Pilate, there was no turning back. Pilate himself might think this was only the strangely generous offer of a kind-hearted wealthy Jew. But to my fellow Jewish leaders, I would be seen as a Jesus sympathizer. I would be suspect in their eyes, perhaps suspect enough to begin proceedings to oust me from the Sanhedrin. How soon might they start those proceedings? Now that my loyalties are known, should I pre-emptively resign my position before they have a chance to kick me out?

Burying Jesus will surely mean political suicide for my influence in Jerusalem. And with that might come a financial cost, if the leaders start refusing to do business with me ... I had heard rumors about Matthew & Zacchaeus, about the financial ruin that came to them when Jesus told them "Follow me." Yet how could I do anything else, when I had the resources and his need was so obvious? I'm scared about what will happen tomorrow, when word of my action gets around to the High Priest and his lackeys, but my lot is now cast with this Jesus and whatever becomes of his teachings ...

(bowed head) *Be pleased, O God, to deliver me. O LORD, make haste to help me!* (Ps. 70:1)

(return to pulpit)

CONCLUSION: There's a lot we don't know about Joseph of Arimathea, but also a lot to admire about this mysterious character who appears briefly in all 4 Gospels. I tried to get into Joseph's head a little to help us understand some of the huge dilemmas and struggles he must have faced if he was both a Jewish Sanhedrin member AND a secret disciple of Jesus.

But we don't live in the time of Jesus. We do, however, face our own dilemmas and struggles. Joseph of Arimathea was a biblical character study I did twenty years ago when I was a seminary student. But those reflections never found their way into a sermon, until now. A question I asked in that seminary paper was, "What impact does Joseph of Arimathea have on my own spirituality?" I'd like to share my 2 answers to that question, because they might also make Joseph relevant for your own spirituality

1st of all, Joseph challenges me to take a risk, a committed act of public devotion. Joseph was a member of the Jewish elites, yet he risked his career to do for the Lord what the original eleven disciples should have done themselves.

You & I ... are we willing to take a risk, any risk, out of our devotion for Jesus? What was the last risk you took as a disciple of Jesus Christ, that carried with it any significant consequences for you? Some of you are natural risk takers who like living on the edge, while others, like me, usually play it cautious & safe. Would you make a claim of loyalty to Jesus Christ if it meant losing your job, losing friends, losing influence and maybe even money? Joseph challenges us to do something bold for Jesus.

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The 2nd spiritual impact that Joseph has on me goes beyond just the fact of risk, and looks at the less-than-totally-convinced faith basis on which he probably took the risk. Not all four Gospels identify Joseph as a disciple of Jesus at the time of Jesus' death. Maybe his mind wasn't made up yet about Jesus. In our 21st Century language, we would say that Joseph didn't have all the facts when he chose to bury Jesus. We have almost 2K years of living on this side of the resurrection to support any risks we might take for Jesus. But Joseph did not have the resurrection as a lens through which to look back for making his decisions.

Joseph acted on a faith basis of sorts, but not a fully formed and rooted faith. This is why I most admire him. With my personality, I tend to calculate risks and get as much information as possible before making a commitment. Some of you are very much like me. For others, it's not just about avoiding risk, it may be about the very doubts you have about God. You may not see God as trustworthy enough to cast your lot with God when there are big stakes involved. Joseph didn't have time to fully weigh all the options and then act with full confidence that God would provide for him even through the risks he was taking. Joseph may still have had doubts about Jesus as Messiah, but he somehow found the courage on short notice to risk something big for Jesus of Nazareth.

What about you and me, brothers & sisters? I pray we may do the same. What risk is Jesus calling you to, in His name?