

“Hearing God’s Message”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – April 14, 2024

Acts 3:12-19, Luke 24:36-48

In today's text, the apostle Peter says: "you Israelites, ... you killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses." Harsh. What did he mean?

A poll conducted by the Anti-Defamation League found that 26 percent of Americans believe that the Jews killed Jesus. And that number has held strong to today!

That's a troublesome finding when we realize that the question isn't very specific. It doesn't ask, for example, if a "few Jews" or "certain Jews" or "some Jewish religious leaders" were involved in getting Jesus crucified. It also doesn't designate a time period, so that, although Jesus was killed in about A.D. 30, some people have considered Jews of every generation since as somehow complicit in Jesus' death.

And the question doesn't even touch on the fact that Jesus was put to death using a *Roman* form of execution -- crucifixion -- at the order of a *Roman* official and carried out by *Roman* soldiers. Yet nobody thinks of Italians when asked, "Who killed Jesus?"

Nonetheless, the poll's finding is not surprising, because the New Testament itself, and especially the gospel of John, blames Jesus' death on an undifferentiated cohort identified only as "the Jews", which makes it sound like all Jewish people in the Roman outpost of Judea had turned against Jesus and helped to railroad his death.

The reading for today from Acts is another example. It's from the early days of the church, with Peter speaking to a crowd in the temple that gathered in awe after he and John had healed a man who'd been lame from birth. Peter, addressing the crowd as "you Israelites." They then took the opportunity to tell the listeners that it was not he and John, but God who was the real healer of the lame man.

But Peter did not stop there. He added that God "glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. but you rejected the holy and righteous one and asked

to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead" (vv. 13-15).

Peter really dishes out blame, and perhaps it's on target with some in his Jewish audience. It is altogether possible that some of those listening to him had been in the crowd that had yelled, "Crucify him!" when Pilate asked what he should do with Jesus (Mark 15:13-15). But Peter lets Pilate off the hook, and tells his audience, "You killed the author of life!"

As we read the rest of the story, we see that Peter's purpose was to lead his audience to repent of their sins. So, this "you killed Jesus" statement served to jolt people into thinking about their overall rebellion against God, and to hear the message that, if they repented, their sins would be "wiped out" (v. 19). And, as we read further, we see that his message was effective. Luke, the author of Acts, says that "many of those who heard the word believed" (4:4).

To help us understand Peter's apparent use of a wide net of blame, it helps us to realize that his sermon was probably not captured verbatim. In fact, Luke was reporting a speech he himself was not present to hear, and it's possible that he shaped his rendition of Peter's sermon to support themes he, himself, understood from the larger teaching of the church leaders.

We who follow Jesus today should care about this. Anti-Judaism is still a wicked and dangerous force running amok in the world today. And we who value and love the Bible need to recognize that wording in it about blaming Jews, wording that may have made sense in the context of the early years of the church, does not apply thereafter. And if we encounter someone spouting this Jews-as-Christ-killers heresy -- which the poll says a quarter of regular Americans still believe -- we should be willing to speak up with a kindly and informed correction.

But that leaves those of us who want to live by the Bible with a dilemma. If parts of the Bible, such as this blaming of Jews business, no longer applies, does any of it, and how do we know which is which? In other words, which biblical material is bound to the time in which it was written, and which is timeless and thus applies for us today?

The answer is not simple, but it is straightforward: We need to learn how to study the Bible. Now I do not intend that statement to be condescending, but the fact is, the Bible is not an easy book. Neither is it overwhelming. To be able to sort out **the time-bound** from the **timeless**, however, it requires us to approach it with at least the same sort of rigor and willingness to hear it without

bias with which we would approach any complex subject about which we are not an expert. Granted, we are looking to the Bible for far more than information -- we are also looking at it to hear God's word to us. But we are looking at it for information and understanding as well.

In the last century, the Scottish Bible scholar William Barclay wrote a little book titled Introducing the Bible in which he included a chapter about how to study the Bible. One of the points he made is that an honest approach to Scripture must encompass the whole of Scripture. He maintains, rightly, we believe, that when we're considering a matter biblically, we should do so not just "in the light of any text or series of texts, but in the light of the whole mind and character of Jesus Christ as we know them, and in the light of the mind and heart of God." That principle can help us hear what is timeless in Scripture.

But there are also specific study procedures we can use to clarify what God's word is for us out of a piece of text. Here are seven things you can do *before* deciding how a passage may apply today. I've taken these from an entry titled "How to Study a Bible Passage,". No author is named, but the study helps come from Graded Press. I've abbreviated and summarized the steps here:

- **Determine the Bible passage.** Include enough context to be sure you are looking at a complete thought.
- **Read the passage carefully, word-for-word, as if you were seeing it for the first time.** See what the passage says.
- **Investigate key terms.** Use a Bible dictionary to make sure you know what specific terms mean in the context in which they appear.
- **Clarify the literary context.** Read what comes before and after the passage to make sure you see how what you're studying fits into the spot it occupies in the text.
- **Clarify the canonical context.** If cross references are given in the Bible helps, look them up. Discover where else in the Bible the topic of the passage you are studying is referenced.
- **Clarify the historical and geographical context.** Who wrote the passage? When and where was it written? What was going on at the time? Bible handbooks and general introductions to books of the Bible can help fill in this information.
- **State the original meaning of the passage for the time, place, and situation for which it was written.** Actually, write it down.

Those seven steps complete, you can now consider what the passage means for today. This is the payoff for the in-depth work you've done. You can get at today's meaning by asking yourself one last question:

- How does this passage relate to what I already know about God and God's love for us?

Once you answer those questions, you'll likely recognize where the Bible is addressing you. Also, you now understand what I do every week when I prepare a sermon for you.

We may now seem a long way from the discussion about blaming Jews for the death of Jesus, but if we apply this study procedure to the passage where Peter is preaching, we're likely to be reminded where we're ducking blame, or blaming others for things we have done. And we can see that the larger message of the passage, that repenting of our sins and turning to God, wipes out our sins, "SO THAT TIMES OF REFRESHING MAY COME FROM THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD" (v. 20).