

Matthew 26:1-5
Not During the Feast!
Ironies of the Passion Sermon Series #3
February 24, 2016

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, “As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.”

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. “But not during the Feast,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.” (NIV84)

This was the easiest part of the plan. The Jewish leaders had determined that they were going to arrest Jesus and kill him “in some sly way”, and there were some difficult parts of the plan.

First, they’d have to find a way to arrest Jesus in “some sly way.” It wouldn’t do to just march into the temple courts and arrest him while he was teaching. They’d have to find him when he was not near a crowd—something that was pretty difficult to do with a man who was often surrounded by crowds.

They’d also have to find a way to, you know, actually arrest Jesus. We remember how the Philistines last week had a difficult time arresting Samson because he used unnatural strength to break the ropes that had bound him. Jesus was even more elusive, even more intimidating than that—because he used means of escape that appeared so natural as to be frighteningly supernatural. Some time before this, when the people of Nazareth had attempted to lay hands on him so they could throw him off a cliff, what did Jesus do? Helicopter out of there? Eat a bunch of spinach and develop superhuman strength? No, he simply walked right through them.

Then there was the matter of killing him. Could they do it without getting Roman approval? And if they were going to get Roman approval, how could they do so without attracting all sorts of attention from Jesus’ followers?

All these considerations were difficult parts of the plan.

But this!—this was the easiest part of the plan. “Not during the Feast.” The only thing they had to do in order to carry out this part of the plan was...nothing! Just don’t arrest him during the Feast!

Before we go on, let’s understand too the motivation that they had for making sure that this part of the plan worked. They didn’t want to arrest Jesus during the festival of Passover because it could easily cause a riot. Jewish nationalism always ran a little hotter during such festivals, and the infusion of thousands of people into Jerusalem during those festivals only intensified things.

Then consider that many of those visitors would have come from the region of Galilee, where Jesus was fairly popular. There was no sense in having their teacher arrested and put on trial when so many of them were in Jerusalem.

Better to wait until they had all gone back to Galilee. Then the Jewish leaders would be able to arrest, try and kill Jesus before any news of it even reached Galilee.

They also didn’t want to arrest Jesus during the feast because, as we talked about last week, any possible uprising or riot would attract the attention of the Romans, who might then come and put down the rebellion and permanently “put down” the Jewish leaders.

All the other parts of the plan required some detail—how to do it, who needed to be involved, what steps needed to be taken at what time.

This part of the plan required no detail. “Let’s not arrest Jesus during the Feast. What do you mean, how will we do that? By not arresting him during the Feast! Easy!”

And yet, in yet another irony of the Passion, that’s exactly when they arrested Jesus.

Why? What changed that made them decide to go ahead and arrest him during the Passover?

There are a number of possibilities.

One is that they just couldn’t wait. They wanted Jesus arrested and disposed of so badly that they could almost taste it. So against their better judgment, they took what they wanted right then and there.

It’s a common human failing—“I want what I want—and I want it now. Even if waiting would be better.” When it comes to sex, all sorts of people have claimed that they were going to save themselves for marriage, saying “Not before marriage.” But then when the opportunity presented itself, when it was so tantalizingly close, they decided they just couldn’t wait.

In fact, doesn’t that attitude about sin speak especially to us Christians? Many are the vows we have made to stay away from this sin or that sin. But then the opportunity presents itself, and the vow to obey God just doesn’t seem as pressing as the moment that has been placed before us.

Maybe they ended up arresting Jesus during the Feast because of hubris. In many ways their plan was falling into place beyond what they could have dreamed. A traitor had been dropped into their laps in the form of Judas—someone who would know how to get them close to Jesus when crowds weren’t around him, someone who could lull Jesus into a false sense of security before putting the knife in his back.

Then Judas came to them and told them that they could actually arrest him in a secluded place, the Garden of Gethsemane—and under cover of night! It seemed that they were running the entire show—setting the stage, directing the actors, scripting the parts. Nothing could go wrong!

And that sort of hubris is also the reason for why we do some of the sins that we do—because we figure that we can get away with it, that we are in control and that we will be able to script things perfectly so we can avoid the consequences. And you know what? A lot of the time we’re right.

Oh, there are times when the consequences of our actions are almost immediate. But we learn from it, learn how to do things a bit differently the next time, how to script things so we can still commit the sin while avoiding the consequences.

But there is one thing we cannot script, and that is Judgment Day. That has already been scripted by God, and he has already decreed that those who have done evil will be declared guilty and sent to Hell.

Just as the Jewish leaders would learn on Easter Sunday that they couldn’t script the end of Jesus’ story, lots of hubristic people will learn on Judgment Day that they can’t script the final act of life.

Finally, maybe they thought that if they didn’t get Jesus right then, he’d get wise to their plan and get out of town before they could put it into motion.

But Jesus was already wise to their plot—and yet he'd decided that he wasn't going to go anywhere. Because he was also wise to God's plan—and he knew that it was most certainly going to happen “during the Feast.”

I'm not sure if it strictly qualifies as irony, but I do at least find amusement in the two meetings that Matthew describes in the text. One meeting involves movers and shakers in a palace, plotting and scheming exactly how to carry out their plans, while also stating exactly when not to carry out their plans.

The other meeting involves twelve nobodies and one Somebody with a capital S that the people in the other meeting were plotting to turn into a Nothing.

That Somebody, Jesus, agrees with their plan to some extent. He agrees that he's going to be arrested and killed. But then he says that it's going to happen in 2 days—during the Feast!

Why? Why did God decide that it was going to happen during the Feast?

Maybe it's partly because God delights in doing as he said in 1 Corinthians: destroying the wisdom of the wise and frustrating the intelligence of the intelligent. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:19) Maybe because God laughs when the nations conspire and the kings of the earth take their stand and people plot against him. (Cf. Psalm 2) Maybe because God wants people to know and be assured that what was written in Proverbs is correct: *“In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps” (Proverbs 16:9).*

But mostly it's because God has a sense of parallelism. Jesus died during the Passover festival because he had to die during the Passover festival. For 1500 years a lamb had been sacrificed during the Passover festival to remind the Israelites of how God had saved his people in Egypt from the 10th and final plague when the angel of death passed over the Israelite houses which had the blood of the lamb on the doorposts.

For 1500 years a lamb had also been sacrificed as a picture of how the Lamb of God, Christ the Passover Lamb, would one day give his blood in order that eternal death would not come to those who believed in him for the forgiveness of their sins.

For 1500 years the death of a lamb at this feast had been pointing to Jesus. And now Jesus was here. Therefore he had to die during the feast in order to be the last and greatest brushstroke on the picture God had been painting for 1500 years.

We read that Jesus' birth took place *“when the time had fully come” (Galatians 4:4)*--not a moment later. There was no one who could have stopped it. Now the time had fully come for Jesus to die--and it would not happen a moment later than God desired. It would happen “during the feast”--no matter how much the Jewish leaders had different plans.

There's something else the Jewish leaders couldn't stop, no matter how hard they tried. They posted a guard at his tomb so no one could steal Jesus' body. But Jesus just “stole his own body”, rising from the dead and leaving the tomb.

They couldn't stop the news from spreading about him, either. Although they paid for a coverup and a phony story about Jesus' disciples stealing the body, they couldn't stop Jesus from making many appearances after his resurrection. And they have not stopped that message from spreading to every corner of the earth today. And because of what was put into motion, as the exact opposite of the Jewish leaders' plans, during the feast, we look forward to a different feast—the wedding feast of the Lamb! (Revelation 19:6-9) Amen.