

During this Lenten season we're looking at some lesser known biblical characters who are found in the stories of the last days of Jesus's life- as he journeys toward the cross. In their stories we so readily see our own (Eric Kolbell). This sermon series is called "Were you there? Finding Ourselves at the Foot of the Cross (Kolbell)." Today's biblical character is **Caiaphas, the High Priest**. There is not much known about Caiaphas, so in order to get a bigger picture, I'm reading from the gospels of both Matthew and John. But before turning to God's Word, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.** Matthew 26:1-5; John 11:47-53.

How did word spread back in Jesus' day- in 1<sup>st</sup> century Rome? There obviously were no cell phones or computers or social media or scanners or telephones or mail. Yes, occasional letters delivered by foot or camel, horse, or donkey but word of mouth was the main method of communication for most, so it took a while to spread, but word did spread...from town to town. And the word on the street was that there was a Jewish rabbi named Jesus who was performing all kinds of miraculous signs, such as healing on the Sabbath, forgiving sinners and even claiming to be the Son of Man. What's the big deal? Aren't these things good? Well, it depends on who you ask. Healing on the Sabbath was embarrassing to the religious leaders, and it made some of them very angry because it broke the rules of the Sabbath. But Jesus claims to be Lord of the Sabbath. To say that ruffled a few feathers is an understatement! And forgiving sinners? Well, only God could do that...and forgiveness was granted only once a year through the high priest, who at the time was Caiaphas. The high priest was the only one to enter the Holy of Holies in the temple, where God's presence appeared. The high priest would annually present everyone's sins, including his

own, to God for forgiveness. But Jesus was claiming the power to offer forgiveness without going through the holy priest. Oh yea and then there's that time that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, which convinced many to believe and word spread like crazy which led to the chief priests and Pharisees calling this meeting. There they asked "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 temple and our nation" (vv. 47b-48). I imagine you could've felt the anxiety in the room. Jesus was a threat not only to some of the religious leaders but also to the Roman authorities. Jesus, a rebel king, continued to stir up a revolution against the Roman empire. And Caiaphas, the high priest, was trying to avoid a revolution, so he offered the council some direction on what they should do.

Before today...how many of you have ever heard of Caiaphas or if you have, can name who he was? After today maybe you'll win at Bible trivia! As high priest Caiaphas was a political as well as a religious leader and was in charge of the highest Jewish court and governing body, known as the Sanhedrin or the council, which was made up of 70 people. Caiaphas belonged to the sect of the Sadducees, a priestly party- differing from the Pharisees, who were more about the law and teaching. He was an aristocrat, who did nothing to earn his position, as he married into the family. The priesthood was hereditary, but when Rome took over Palestine, high priests were then appointed. Rome looked to high priests to keep the Jewish people in line: collecting taxes, overseeing the temple, etc. As one could imagine, there was a very high turnover rate with high priests, for if they weren't doing what Roman officials wanted, they were asked to step

down (William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible*). While a liaison between Rome and the Jewish population, the most important role as high priest was to serve as a mediator between the human and the divine. As I mentioned earlier, there isn't much known about Caiaphas. What we do know is that his full name was "Joseph son of Caiaphas," but he was also known as "Joseph who was called Caiaphas" (Flavius Josephus). He was high priest for 18 years, which was one of the longest if not the longest tenure in history. Caiaphas' much longer term suggests that he had made cooperation with Rome into a fine art. And that was his greatest challenge among the many privileges- maintaining the status quo between his calling as a priest and his allegiance to Rome. But again, we don't know- we can only speculate. That's the thing...we only know what we're told in scripture and from historians. In November 1990 there was what many archeologists call the greatest discovery of a lifetime. It was found in the Peace Forest south of the old city of Jerusalem. During a construction project, a family tomb was accidentally discovered with several chambers containing 12 ossuaries or bone boxes, including one with the inscription "Joseph son of Caiaphas." Based on evidence collected, some scholars believe this to be the tomb of Caiaphas and his family. Even though there isn't much we know about Caiaphas, there is proof of his existence.

We can't do God's work and fight God's will at the same time. In the moment of a decision we often put together a construct by which we justify why what we do is necessary and good. "In Caiaphas' eyes, Jesus' message carried just enough authority to be dangerous. It was dangerous not just because it blasphemed God- but, quite the contrary, because it presented a kind of divine love that could bring

hope to the oppressed masses” (Kolbell)- to those who felt powerless. Caiaphas knew that the atmosphere at Passover was explosive and packed with lots of people. He feared a riot among the masses who wanted a freer, more dignified life. You see when people are liberated, other people’s power is threatened, hence the one thing Romans would not stand for was civil disorder. Therefore, if they rioted, Caiaphas would lose his job and all that came with it. They would also lose the temple and their people. There’s a lot at stake for Caiaphas, as he is second in power to the governor of Rome, and the temptations are too great. His top priorities now, it seems, are to protect his power and public order so he speaks up at the meeting. He tells them that they don’t get that it is better for them “to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11: 50). But in offering why Jesus- why only one- should die, he ironically prophesies about Jesus’ saving death. Hence John’s point: Caiaphas prophesied unconsciously. He put his finger on God’s grand strategy for the redemption of the human race. Caiaphas’ thirst for power is evident, as is his desperately trying to maintain the status quo. Some would say that Caiaphas was so blinded by the temptations that he forgot his calling. He “sacrificed the principles of the office to protect the powers that derived from it” (Kolbell). And some who are anti-Semites wrongfully use Caiaphas to fuel their bigotry towards Jews. Because Caiaphas was the high priest, he is often held by anti-Semites as the embodiment of Judaism. **Let me be real clear here.** Caiaphas’ story is his story alone. He doesn’t represent all Jews any more than one Christian represents all Christians or one Muslim represents all Muslims. No. Caiaphas does not represent any race or creed or people; he represents a human condition- the thirst for power and the unwillingness to do right by it. And any calling can lend

itself to doing the work of the Lord, not just Caiaphas's. So before we cast any stones, let's not forget that Caiaphas was a child of God, and he was a broken man who tried to serve God and ended up serving himself. "His sin is what he did with his power; his tragedy is what he could have done with it" (Kolbell). It's easy for us to look at someone else like Caiaphas and speculate and point out his sins, isn't it? It's much harder to look closer at our own misuse of power.

The story of Caiaphas is "timeless, because it is the story of any person who is entrusted with power to serve the common good but uses it to satisfy their own pleasures" (Kolbell). Yes, he was a priest but he could have easily been of another faith or no faith at all or a tax collector or a landlord or a senator or president or a teacher or garbage collector. Truth is we all have a little or a lot of Caiaphas in us. Whether our flirtations with power have been small or quite big. That's right- we may think of ourselves as powerless but we all have power- some are afforded more than others, but we all have it. When has been a time when you have misused your power to satisfy your own pleasures? What about a minister who puts on a collar to get out of a speeding ticket or an older brother who makes life miserable for his younger sister or someone who uses their words to tear someone or an entire group of people down? Our words, actions, and knowledge have power, even if we feel powerless. Maybe another question to ask ourselves in making decisions is are you benefiting others with your power or is it just for you? When you make decisions that not only effect you but others are you asking God for guidance?

In these words from Matthew, we're reminded that Jesus' aim is the cross. Jesus is headed to die on the cross because he so loves the world and cares for the common good. In so doing, he also offers us not only forgiveness of our sins but a new life and a new way to live. The irony is that the cross is the most profound example of how Christ uses power. Israel's Messiah, the Son of the Living God, will become king but through a different way- the way of the cross. Maybe that's why Jesus says earlier in Matthew's Gospel (16:24), "Deny yourselves. Take up your cross and follow me?" Amen.