

Andrew K. Frey

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 26:1-5

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples,² “As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.”

³ Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas,⁴ and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him.⁵ “But not during the Feast,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.” (NIV84)

Theme: Ironies of the Passion: Not during the Feast.

People say that timing is everything. Bad timing certainly isn't good. We've all seen it happen when a joke falls flat, not because it wasn't funny but because the timing of the joke was completely inappropriate. Or, you carefully plan a family trip, traveling over half the country to get to your favorite amusement park; but when you finally get there you find it is closed for two weeks for cleaning and repairs. On the other hand, having the right timing is a good thing—such as that perfectly timed photo that captures that exact moment in time that simply can't be duplicated. Or Greer Epstein, a woman who went downstairs for a rare smoke break the morning of September 11th and walked outside just as a plane hit the tower in which her office sat on the 67th floor.

Timing is everything, especially as we make our plans. Tonight's example of irony from Christ's passion is all about timing. It is found in in one simple statement of the Jew's religious leaders when they planned to kill Jesus: **Not during the Feast.**

It was Tuesday of Holy Week; Jesus and his disciples had been busy. On Palm Sunday Jesus triumphantly rode into Jerusalem as the people greeted him as their king. The next day Jesus overturned the money-changing tables and drove out all those who were selling animals for the sacrifices in the temple. Then all the people brought him the lame and the crippled so that he could heal them.

On Tuesday they went to the temple again where Jesus was attacked by the Jewish leaders who questioned his authority. After facing a number of different attacks from the chief priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, and teachers of the law—and soundly defeating all of them

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before many people, Jesus and his disciples left for the Mount of Olives, outside of Jerusalem. There Jesus taught them about the signs of the end of the world.

At the same time the chief priests and elders of the people met in the palace of the high priest, Caiaphas. They had to do something about Jesus. They had their problems with him the past—for the past three years they had argued with him. But things were coming to a head. He was usurping their authority. Many people followed him and loved him. And he had humiliated them again and again.

So they planned on killing him. But they decided, **not during the Feast or there may be a riot among the people.** The feast, of course, is the Passover, the major festival of the year. Jews from all over the world would travel to Jerusalem to celebrate this important festival. Hundreds of thousands of people would be there, an uncontrollable riot could easily take place. They didn't want to publically kill a beloved figure and risk a riot. So they planned to wait a week or so to kill him; that way the crowds would be down and Jerusalem would be relatively quiet once again. They also wanted to do it in some sly way—perhaps secretly, not causing too much of a stir.

Why did they want to kill Jesus? Because they were concerned about their power and authority. They saw Jesus as a threat—not only to what they believed and taught, but also to how they lived their lives. They weren't just the religious leaders of the people; they also held positions of political power. The Romans entrusted them with keeping the people in check. They saw Jesus as a threat to their positions so they planned to kill Jesus at the right time—just not during the festival.

No one here wants to kill Jesus; obviously, you don't share the hatred for Jesus that Jewish leaders had. But the motivation for killing Jesus lies in each and every one of our hearts. It's a selfishness—it's being more concerned about yourself and your position and your happiness in life than Christ. It is telling that God that want you want and how you want to live your life matters more than what he wants you to live your life; or that your life is more important that the life of anyone else. Every time we whine and complain about something that isn't fair or when our plans don't happen as we want them to, when we hold grudges against someone, when we manipulate certain things so we

can get what we want we show that the same selfish tendencies of the Jewish leaders dwells in our hearts.

The Jewish leaders planned on killing Jesus—just not during the festival. But what happened? As we know Jesus was killed during the festival—on the very day of the Passover. That wasn't the plan of the Jewish leaders, but it happened anyway.

It was also their plan to kill Jesus using deceit and trickery so that no one would notice. But that's not what happened either. It was death by crucifixion. The Jewish leaders were given a lot of authority—but one thing they couldn't do was put someone to death. But they had Jesus arrested secretly in the middle of the night and held an illegal secret assembly later that night. But it still had to be made public. So they took Jesus to Pilate to try to convince the Roman Governor that Jesus had committed a crime worthy of death. Pilate hesitated and on multiple occasions announced that Jesus was innocent. So the Jewish leaders riled up the crowd. When Pilate asked the crowd if he should release the notorious prisoner Barabbas or Jesus, the Jewish leaders convinced the people to ask for Barabbas. And then when Pilate asked what should be done with Jesus they shouted, **Crucify him, crucify him.**

It definitely wasn't sly; it wasn't done in secret it was out in the open. Jesus was forced to carry his own cross through town for all people to see. And there on the top of Mount Calvary, he was crucified. This was a public demonstration done by a major road so that many would see it. A notice was placed above Jesus so that all who passed by could see for what crime he was being put to death. And all who passed by hurled insults at him.

Did you catch the irony? The Jewish leaders had planned to kill Jesus secretly after the festival. Instead they were heavily involved in getting Jesus publically crucified on the busiest day of the year!

They were afraid of how the people would react if they killed someone so popular. But ironically the people didn't riot. There was no uproar. If anything it seems that the people were on their side. They praised him on Palm Sunday but shouted his name to be put to death on Friday. They were just part of the masses—following others without any real faith or belief. So as far as the people's reaction is concerned, it isn't at all surprising. The Jewish leaders probably felt relieved that

things didn't go as planned, and yet everything happened without any real issues.

Let's go back to Jesus' discussion with his disciples on the Mount of Olives. Jesus told them, **As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.**

This wasn't the first time Jesus had told his disciples about this. They knew what was going to happen because Jesus told them exactly what was going to happen.

On the day of Passover, the busiest day out of the year, Jesus would be put to death in a very public way. Not secretly after the festival as the Jewish leaders wanted it. Jesus knew and prophesied exactly what would happen.

What does this tell us? The Lord is in charge! Despite their best planned efforts to put Jesus to death when and how they wanted, the Lord had other plans. He chose the exact time and place—the Passover as the day when his Son would be arrested and die, because the Passover was a prophecy about Christ. For the Passover the people killed a male lamb without defect and smeared its blood on the door posts of their houses. Then the angel would not kill the firstborn living in that house. In this way God saved his people from slavery. By Jesus' sacrifice on the cross he saved us from slavery to sin.

On the cross he was abandoned to the sufferings of hell as his Father laid all the shame of our sins on his shoulders. The eternal scorn that all people deserve for our selfishness, pride, and arrogance, was endured by Christ. And then he rose so that we will live with him forever. The Lord wanted Jerusalem to be filled on the day his Son died, so that they could see the fulfillment of all that he had been promising for 1,500 years. So despite the plans of the Jewish leaders, the Lord determined when and how our Savior would die—he was crucified on the day of Passover.

Timing is everything. The Jewish leaders planned to kill Jesus their way and in their time frame. But that wasn't God's plan. Ironically, God wanted his son killed too—but only when and how he planned it. He used the hatred of the Jewish leaders to bring our Savior to the cross during the Passover so that by his sacrifice our sins are removed and eternal life for us is won. And when the time is right, God's plan is bring you home to live with him forever. Amen.