

Monologue – Joseph of Arimathea  
Adapted from monologue in *If Only I Had Known*  
Scripture: Luke 23:50-56  
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Yes, I suppose it took courage to do what I did. But courage was in rather short supply in most of my behavior. I rose to my position of honor and wealth by playing it safe, carefully weighing consequences, not offending anyone who “mattered.” Only there, in the twilight of disaster, in the darkness of hopes dashed, did I finally summon up the nerve to act on my conviction. It was so little – and so late. But let me tell you about it.

My name is Joseph, and I am from the Judean village of Arimathea. But early in my successful career as a tradesman, I moved to Jerusalem, where my fortunes prospered far beyond my wildest dreams. Within a short time, I had risen to such astonishing prominence among the leading men of Jerusalem that I was awarded a seat in the exalted Sanhedrin, the supreme governing council of our people in the city. There I took my place as an interpreter of the Jewish law and administrator of justice. Of course, the Romans held ultimate authority, but we remained responsible for many of our own legal affairs.

My closest friend in the Sanhedrin was a quiet, sensitive man named Nicodemus. It was he who first told me about a young prophet he had met, a certain Jesus of Nazareth. Having heard stories of this bold preacher and healer, Nicodemus had sought out the man in secret and talked with him. And he came back to share with me the exciting possibility that he had truly been in the presence of the long-awaited Messiah.

He told me of the amazing message this man was spreading about the nearness of the Kingdom of God. He spoke of a remarkable serenity and yet *intensity* in the man as he moved among the crowds that flocked about him. He even declared this Jesus to have the power to heal crippled bodies and to claim such closeness to God that he forgave sins on God’s behalf.

But neither Nicodemus nor I could feel certain enough that we dared risk our positions and our lives to follow him.

Increasingly I yearned in my heart to believe, to accept, to become committed to his cause. After all, wasn’t it a deliverer we had been praying for? But I could not let myself become convinced.

When he entered Jerusalem that day, I was there among the crowds. But you would not have noticed me. No, I was hanging back on the fringes and not dressed in my usual finery. I wanted to see him, but I did not want to be noticed. After all, members of the Sanhedrin didn’t follow messianic pretenders. When the people shouted “Hosanna! Hail to the Son of David!” something in my wanted to shout to, but I did not dare.

You do understand the dilemma I was in, don’t you? My wealth depended upon my good relationships with the rich and powerful. It was because of them I had risen to the position I held. I couldn’t risk that.

But don’t find fault with me until you have checked to make sure your own houses are in order. Have you never been guilty of shirking from open allegiance to your Lord? Have you never

taken the easy way out: the deed undone, the mouth clamped shut, when the situation demanded your vigorous response, your strong voice?

Besides, there was the scandal of that episode in the temple the very next day. Jesus came storming in and drove out all the people who were doing business there – buying and selling sacrificial animals. He wreaked havoc all over the place, and his following was so strong that no one dared stop him. But naturally many of us were upset by his actions. We were tied financially with the trade in the temple market and stood to lose money by his interference.

Frankly, I was angry. That was until Nicodemus made me realize that it really wasn't proper to make a profit off of other people's religious obligations. I felt ashamed that my desire to get ahead financially had blinded my spiritual sensibilities.

But my fellow leaders were in a uproar. People were flocking to listen to him. It was only going to cause them problems. So, Caiaphas, the high priest, sent a delegation of us to confront Jesus and find out by what authority he dared to speak and act.

It was not an easy question for him to answer. After all *we* were the defenders of the Jewish law and we had not given him authority. If he claimed authority from God, we could charge him with blasphemy. I wasn't sure how he would respond. What I wasn't prepared for was the skillful way in which he turned the question back on us.

But the more he outplayed us at our own game, the more the elders in the council were determined to get rid of the man they perceived as an enemy to their own religious authority.

Nicodemus and I were aware that some plot was brewing. Rumors were afloat that the chief priests had found one of Jesus' own followers who was willing to help deliver him into their hands. And it would have to be an inside job. He was surrounded by supporters by day and at night we never knew where to find him.

I was awakened from my sleep early on the morning after the Passover feast with a summons for the convening of the seventy. When I arrived in the council chamber, my heart sank to the pit of my stomach: there he stood. They had arrested him.

I sat mute during the mockery of proceedings that followed, unwilling to risk the displeasure of the overwhelming majority by speaking out in the man's defense.

The high priest sought witnesses who would testify that Jesus had committed blasphemy by laying claim to a status of divine sonship, for that would require us to render a verdict of death by stoning. But he could find none. And when he put the question to Jesus he would only say, "That is what *you* say."

It was finally the decision of the Sanhedrin to hand him over to the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate. They told him, "He claims to be the King of the Jews."

There were those of us in the council who did not consent to this cruel charade, who cringed at the vile insults and physical violence others heaped on him. But we did nothing to prevent it. And doing nothing was what I was guilty of.

But, what if...What if I had stood up in the Sanhedrin and declared publicly my support of the Nazarene? Would it have made any difference? Could I have persuaded anyone? What if I had sought him out when I first heard the rumors that they were going to arrest him and tried to convince him to flee from the city? Would he have done so? I cannot know.

I only know that I was guilty of failing to take a stand when I should have done so. I lived in expectation of the coming of God's reign. I waited longingly for the day when God would establish the sovereignty of divine love among God's people. That was my mistake – I wasn't *doing* anything. I was waiting around for something to happen.

By the time I screwed up my courage and did something, a man had been crucified.

I was in turmoil over my failure of nerve and the hiddenness of my allegiance to Jesus. I left the council chamber. I left the city. I went wandering in the hills around Jerusalem, agonizing over my cowardly hesitancy, struggling with my burning conscience, till the sky became dark and overcast with the threat of a storm. I was heading back toward Jerusalem when I saw the crowd of people gathered on the crown of a hill north of the city gates, called Golgotha. I froze in terror at what was happening there in the distance.

Numbly I turned and stumbled toward the hilltop in the half-light, as though my feet had a mind of their own. I pushed through the unruly crowd, till I was at the foot of the center cross. I could not bring myself to look up. I didn't have to. I knew.

And in the silent anguish of my grief-stricken spirit, I found myself forming the words: "I believe! Help my lack of initiative, my failure of nerve!"

In that moment – even when it seemed to be all over, when it would seem prudent simply to let the matter rest – in that moment when there was nothing more to be gained and everything possible to lose, I made up my mind. I would be silent no more. No matter what the cost. No matter how great the risk.

I returned quickly to the city, went straight to Pilate's quarters. Being a member of the high council, I was readily admitted to see him. I stated my purpose without hesitation: I wished to be given the body of the crucified Jesus, that I might bury him in my own rock-hewn tomb.

Pilate was astonished, both that such a one as I should be making the request, and that the person in question was truly already dead. Crucifixions ordinarily took so much longer. But the centurion brought him the news that death had already come. I was granted my request.

There was no possibility of hiding it. The news would be all over Jerusalem by nightfall. But that didn't matter now. I was no longer Joseph the tradesman, carefully weighing and calculating the fruits of my decisions. I was Joseph the disciple, who had finally come out of the shadows into the light.

I had to make haste, so as not to defile the Sabbath, which was near at hand. Back on Golgotha, I set to work with preparations for the burial, only to be interrupted shortly by the arrival of Nicodemus, my friend, who came bearing spices to be used for anointing the body. The two of us wrapped him in a clean linen shroud that I had purchased on the way, and then we carried him

to the sepulcher not far away and laid him inside. We closed it up with a large stone over the opening. Several women watched us all the while, and followed at a distance.

That was the extent of what I did. I gave him my tomb to be buried in.

How could I have known that he would have use of it for so short a time?

He was wrong, you know...when he said: "It is finished." It wasn't really finished. It was only just beginning.