

April 7, Good Friday (John 18:1-19:42)

Evil uses people's anxieties, fears, and prejudices to twist good intentions into cruel deeds.

by [Melissa Earley](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue

Caiaphas and Annas make easy cartoon villains. A family tomb containing an elaborately decorated ossuary was discovered in 1990 in the Peace Forest outside Jerusalem. The ossuary is inscribed with the name "Yehoseph bar Qayapha (Qapha)." It contained the bones of a 60-year-old male, along with a woman and four children. Could the bones belong to Caiaphas? Either way, they help him become a real person to me. A real person with a wife and children, cousins, and neighbors. He was someone's son.

Does Caiaphas really believe that the masses will follow Jesus, which in turn will incite the Roman authorities to destroy the temple? Does he think handing Jesus over to Pilate is right or merely expedient? Can he tell the difference? Are the religious leaders who yell for Jesus' death duplicitous when they say they believe Jesus is a threat and a criminal? Or are they saying what they think is true?

The *Washington Post* reported that Jake Peart was among the nearly 1,000-person mob that stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2020. At his sentencing hearing he told the judge that "he was driven by a 'state of desperation,' a conviction that the presidential election had been stolen and the country he loved was falling apart." He said, "I felt like we were at a battle, standing up for our country."

Peart is more than a member of a mob. He is also a person. He is a 47-year-old real estate agent, a husband and father of five. In 2013 Andrea Milholm was driving drunk and struck Peart's sisters Krista and Kelsy as they walked along a Denver street. Krista was killed, and Kelsy was seriously injured. Milholm was sentenced to five years in prison. While she was in prison, Jake Peart wrote her monthly letters of encouragement and forgiveness. After a year of incarceration she was eligible for transfer to a halfway house. Peart wrote the judge a letter in favor of her early release, saying, "I want what will be most beneficial to Andrea."

Peart is a good person. But being good isn't enough. It isn't protection from being led astray by lies. Being good does not inoculate us from evil.

"What is your understanding of evil and how it exists in the world?" This is one of the questions asked of candidates for ordination in the United Methodist Church. When I faced this question 24 years ago, I groped for the right answer. Evil felt remote and abstract. In the traditional church that formed me, we did not talk about systemic evil or root causes of injustice. What mattered was sin. Was extramarital sex a sin? Was sex between people of the same gender a sin? Was abortion a sin? How much did God really care about sin? Was sin an integral part of being human?

I've come to realize that evil is what we're really up against. Evil is as much a participant in this story as the characters with names. It slithers through the scenes, hissing lies and breathing hate. Evil is at work in the Roman occupation, creating the very context in which Jesus' life and ministry cause anxiety for some of the religious leaders. Caiaphas and Annas did not take on their positions of authority in order to cut down an innocent man. Their aim was to protect the faith and maintain an institution. Evil uses people's anxieties, fears, and prejudices to twist good intentions into cruel deeds. John's Gospel itself has been for some a tool of antisemitic hatred.

Social psychologist James Waller examines what leads people to participate in the atrocity of genocide. The people who slaughter neighbors, friends, colleagues, and even family members are not much different from you and me. According to Waller, they do not turn off their moral compass. It gets redirected. The natural inclination to protect their own gets warped by lies. They come to believe that their acts of horror are necessary, justified, and even right. When a perpetrator of the Holocaust was asked, "How did you think it was right to kill the Jews?" he responded, "It's not that I thought it was right to kill them. But it was wrong to not kill them."

A lie may be the most powerful tool of evil. It turns good people into weapons of hate. And once we believe a lie, we will do all we can to defend what we have come to believe is true. "What is truth?" Pilate asks Jesus. Ancient and current events alike reveal how often we get the answer to this important question wrong.