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“What is Truth?”

John 18:33-37

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Lucy Lind Hind shares in her commentary on our gospel reading that in 1925 when Pope Pius XI instituted the Feast of Christ the King, he did so because he believed that the followers of Christ were being lured away by the increasing secularism of the world. They were choosing to live in the “kingdom” of the world, rather than in the kingdom, the reign, of God. Our scripture reading today helps us pause to consider Jesus Christ, who he was and is, and what kind of kingdom he ushers in.

John 18:33 takes place during Jesus’ trial before his crucifixion. He has already been given over by the religious authorities to Pontius Pilate. In our verses today, we hear their exchange, as Pilate seeks the truth about who Jesus is. I have added the first part of v38 to our reading. Let’s listen to God’s word for the church today.

John 18:33-37

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ ³⁴ Jesus answered, ‘Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?’ ³⁵ Pilate replied, ‘I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?’ ³⁶ Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.’ ³⁷ Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for



this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’³⁸Pilate asked him, ‘What is truth?’

Marcus Pontius Pilatus was the Roman governor of Judea under the reign of Roman Emperor Tiberius. It was his job to ensure order was kept, and, in particular, to quell any threats to the Roman rule. When the religious leaders have had their trial over Jesus, they hand him over to Pilate. Having heard their demands for him to deal with the man, Pilate goes into his headquarters to speak with Jesus for the first time. He asks him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” This is a political question, rather than a religious charge. Pilate didn’t care if Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, the anointed one. But he did care whether a new political ruler, one who might challenge the Roman rule, was arising. “Are you the king of the Jews?”

The gospel writer has been telling us from the beginning that this Jesus is in fact the King of Israel. In John 1:49, Nathaniel declares, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” The rest of the gospel goes on to explore that Jesus is indeed a sort of king – though not a king that the world would ever recognize. This is a king who serves rather than being served. He speaks not to the mighty and powerful, but to the lowly and rejected. He enters the holy city not on a white horse, but on a borrowed donkey.

“Are you king of the Jews?” And Jesus answers the question with another question, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” It can be an infuriating rhetorical device to answer a question with another question, but it is also the way of rabbis. Judaism is a faith based on asking questions, sometimes deep and difficult ones that can shake the foundations of faith itself. Pilate asks questions designed to catch Jesus in a capital offense. But in Jesus’ response, he seeks something deeper – he seeks to encounter the real Pilate, the one who is trapped in this strange battle back and forth for control.

When this larger scene opens in John, with Pilate coming out to greet the religious leaders who are there to hand over the prisoner Jesus, the gospel gives us what looks like stage directions. The writer pays attention to Pilate’s movements between his headquarters and the outer patio. In this visual back and forth between locations, we see Pilate move between his headquarters and the patio not once, not twice, but seven times. Pilate wavers back and forth between Jesus and his accusers seven times. He is torn, and Jesus knows it. Pilate knows what is right, but he also knows what is easy, what is politically wise and expedient, and he’s torn between the two. We know he eventually chooses the easy road – gives the people a choice between known felon Barabbas and Jesus.

But in the midst of all of this, Jesus takes a moment with Pilate. He seeks to encounter the real Pilate, the one who in truth is utterly trapped in his desperate effort to stay in control. There, Jesus invites the man to be transparent, to utter the truth about his own life.

It is exactly what George preached about last week with the Samaritan woman at the well. Here in the very last encounter Jesus has with another human being before his death, in fact the very encounter that will lead to his death, he makes an offer to Pilate: “...for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Jesus tries to help Pilate see the truth about his own life.



“What is truth?” Pilate asks.

It’s a question we might all ask. Google the term “truth” this week, and you will find headlines like “The Death of Truth” or “Speaking Your Truth” or “The Assault on Truth.” Blog contributor Debie Thomas reminds us that we are steeped in a culture of blatant lies, wild conspiracy theories, doctored images, and fake news.

Pilate’s response, “What is truth?” echoes down to us across the ages. Jesus doesn’t respond. That is, he doesn’t respond with words. He doesn’t engage Pilate in a philosophical dialogue or offer some pithy response. Instead, he embodies his reply with the whole of his life. “*You’re looking at it,*” his silence implies.¹ The truth is Jesus.

It is a fascinating paradox that an otherwise obscure provincial governor has the distinction of having his name recited every Sunday, if not every day, all over the world in the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. Earlier in worship, we all stood and proclaimed the words, “[Jesus] suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried.”

We can’t know exactly what Pontius Pilate believed about Jesus, but we do know that he insulted the Jewish leaders one last time when he had inscribed above Jesus’ cross in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek: “King of the Jews.” They objected, “Don’t write ‘the King of the Jews,’ but that this man *claimed* to be king of the Jews.” It was too late, Pilate said, “What I have written, I have written.”

The death of Jesus would not end the accusations of sedition for his followers. Long after Jesus’ death, political leaders accused early Christians of treason. They confessed a “kingdom of God” and a “citizenship in heaven.” They prayed the prayer we say each Sunday, asking “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” In all four gospels, Jesus’ birth, ministry, and even death signaled “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15).

The words “king” and “kingdom” are a bit tricky for us, particularly as Americans. After all, American colonists overthrew their king and made for themselves a new government, where no one would declare himself king. So, it’s easy for us to get hung up on that word – it sounds stodgy and smells of everything that keeps our non-church-going friends away from church.

Kingdoms then and even now are established and verified by certain criteria – political and militaristic power, rich splendor and class systems. We have an idea of what kingdoms should look like, based mostly on wealth and grandeur, privilege and power, authority and majesty.

But that’s not the truth about the kind of king or kingdom the gospel is talking about. When Jesus insisted that his kingdom was “not of this world,” he did not mean that it was merely spiritual or relegated to a future age beyond history or in heaven. And Jesus’ detractors were not wrong – if Jesus were a king, a Lord, a ruler, his kingdom would indeed clash with the kingdom of Rome.

In the simplest of terms, the kingdom of God that Jesus embodied is what life could be like, what life would be like, here and now, if God were king and the rulers of this world were not.

What Pilate misses, what most of us miss, is that Jesus’ kingdom was never a place. Pilate’s questions were meant to be political questions – sussing out whether or not Jesus was any kind of a political threat. But the kingdom we pray for, the king we worship, is not about an established rule, but about a way of life. His kingdom is not a place or some future reality, it is not “about determining the truth” as Karoline Lewis puts it, “but is the truth. His Kingdom is not content but



character. His Kingdom is not ruled by a king but by commitment. His Kingdom is not a thing, but a person.”ⁱⁱ

It is certainly easier to let the kingdoms of this world tell us what to think or how to behave. It is ultimately what Pilate chose when he turned the choice over to the crowd – do you want Barabbas or Jesus? It is a more direct way of being in the world when decisions are made for you, when rules and regulations are clearly defined, when expectations are known and can be accounted for. And it is a simpler life, a less challenging life to accept the ways of earthly monarchies instead of living by the rules of God’s kingdom.

The kingdoms of this world bank on sowing suspicion and encouraging autonomy. The kingdoms of this world depend on individualism and everyone looking out for him or herself alone.

Not so with the Truth. For Jesus’ Kingdom of truth chooses relationship. Jesus’ Kingdom tells the truth about the Truth -- that God so loved the world.

We get glimpses, pieces of that kingdom, here and now.

In his commentary on this passage, Roger Nishioka reminds us of that moment in our childhoods – most of us have had it, I imagine – that moment when we are frustrated enough with our families that we decide to run away. The decisions usually happen in some dramatic fashion. Passionate pronouncements are made. Maybe special items are packed, food is gathered for what was sure to be a difficult and arduous journey. For years, Nishioka shares, the prevailing wisdom was to engage in conversation with children in these moments, acknowledge their frustration and discuss with them where they would go and how they would live, eventually dissuading them from running away. Now, however, it is recommended that parents and caregivers simply tell children, “No,” explaining that they may not run away because “we belong to one another.” And when persons belong to one another, even when they are frustrated and upset, they stay with one another.

He argues that at the heart of this conversation between Jesus and Pilate is the question of belonging. Pilate is trying to determine if Jesus is claiming to be the leader of a nation. Jesus responds with a question of Pilate, explaining that the kingdom to which he belongs is not earthly bound. Ultimately, Jesus and his followers belong to the truth.

We are the Lord’s, and we belong not to this kingdom or that kingdom, but to God’s kingdom.

In the world of the New Testament, a person did not think of himself or herself as an individual who acts alone. Rather, the person is “ever aware of the expectations of others... and strives to match those expectations. [In this] group-oriented ... personality, one ... needs another simply to know who he or she is.”ⁱⁱⁱ

When Jesus tells Pilate that all who listen to his voice belong to the truth and are part of his kingdom, he is saying that belonging is less about individual decisions and more about collective participation in a community that transcends the self. The reign of God is greater than any individual.

Surely, Nishioka declares, the kingdom of God is present wherever Jesus is present. It is present wherever we experience the reign of God through God’s invitation, healing, and



restoration. And our belonging is not up to us alone. Our belonging is up to God. That is the truth that Jesus proclaims. That is the new truth to which all of us belong.^{iv}

Next Sunday, we will enter into Advent. It is a season of waiting, longing, and listening. We will be reminded that we live in an in-between time. We journey through expectant darkness, waiting for the light to dawn, for the truth to reveal itself, for the first cries of a vulnerable baby to redefine kingship, power, and authority forever.

The church exists to remind us of all of this. To remind us that we are not a people without hope. The king who reigns has not abandoned us. Truth has died and returned to life already. Truth lives, and we belong to him.

ⁱ Debie Thomas, *Journey With Jesus* (Nov 18, 2018), <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2014>

ⁱⁱ Karoline Lewis, "Dear Working Preacher" (Nov 20, 2018), <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5252>

ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce J. Melina, *The New Testament World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 74.

^{iv} Roger Nishioka, *Feasting on the Word Year B Vol. 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.), 336.

