

# What is Truth

When I was first asked to preach, about a week and a half ago, I immediately looked to see the list of scripture readings for this Sunday. My reaction was, I can't preach on that! I looked at another one and thought, "That doesn't feel right either." I remembered a sermon from the former dean of our seminary, Tom Currie, well I don't really remember the sermon, but I remembered the reference to a Frank Sinatra song called, "It's alright with me." In it, Sinatra sings, "It's the wrong place, it's the wrong time, it's the wrong song," – that's what I was feeling looking at this week's Scripture....But as so often happens, we don't find scripture, but rather scripture finds us even when we think "we cannot be found." Let us pray

*God, source of all light,*

*By your word you give light to the soul.*

*Pour out upon us*

*The spirit of wisdom*

*That we may come to understand the truth of who you are. Amen*

Yes Caldwell, I know what I wanted to preach, I was ready to preach some good social gospel like Luke Chapter 4 where Jesus goes to the synagogue, he is handed the scroll of Isaiah and he opens it proclaiming, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to

proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind to let the oppressed go free.....” That feels like Caldwell material, (by the way, this is a compliment!).

But, today we are found by the Gospel of John, a Gospel that is more concerned with who Jesus is than with what he has done. The perspective of this Gospel is Christ’s divinity, it is Jesus’ human side that is not always so evident. The writer of John is very clear about the purpose in writing this Gospel. Listen to Chapter 20 verse 31: “But these things are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name.” This is a Gospel of belief, it’s enough to make some of us begin to squirm.

In my twenties, struggling with life, faith, relationships, I was confused and searching; a pastor exclaimed from the pulpit, “There is no room for doubt in the church.” He may have said other wonderful things, but that’s all I heard. Lost, hurt, I did not step into a church again for years. I went searching for truth elsewhere. It was the wrong time and place for that statement for me.

And so we find ourselves this morning, standing before Pilate, the Roman governor of Palestine, there in his governor’s mansion, or palace, we witness a mock trial. “Why are we here?” I ask again. I see Christmas decorations up in the stores – and yet – here we are in John’s

narrative, heading toward the cross. It's the wrong place, the wrong time. But here we are. And I must admit something, we all know that Pilate is a bad guy in this story, but I've always had a place in my heart for Pilate. Pilate is questioning Jesus about his kingship, Jesus says "Everyone who belongs to the truth hears my voice." Pilate responds "What is truth?" It seems like a very reasonable question to me, a thoughtful, philosophical question.

Pilate says "What is truth?" but what he really means is "whatever"-- the inquiry over, I've had enough of this, he rolls his eyes and he walks out.

Pilate, a Roman governor in this far eastern province called Palestine, is trying to keep this stubborn, unruly sect of people who call themselves Jews, from revolting against roman rule. Pilate is a pragmatist. "What is the best strategy?" he might ask. "What is the easiest action to keep things from exploding?" From a management perspective, what is the organizational hierarchy of power? It's complicated, there is Caiaphas the high Priest, the Pharisees, other Jewish leaders, and followers of this man called Jesus, and then there is Jesus. Weighing the options, Jesus' followers are pretty meek, but these Jewish officials...well they warn Pilate, this man, Jesus, has called himself a king. How do you think that will fly in Rome? Are you really going to let him dis the Roman emperor that way? All things

considered, for the sake of political expediency, Pilate thinks, I'll put this one man to death, he may be innocent, but just to keep things peaceful, it will be for the best, at least for me anyway. It's all very reasonable, very understandable and will appear sensible when Pilate writes up his report for Rome. But, Pilate is no philosopher searching for truth, just a man doing a job....

Jesus was not Pilate's only mistake. It was a mistake consistent with what we know about him from outside of the Gospels, from Roman historians. What we know is that, basically, he was a lousy governor. He did not care enough about the people he governed to learn or know anything about their culture. He insulted them numerous times, attempting to put statues of Roman gods in Jerusalem, he threatened the locals with violence, and carried out a slaughter for which he was called back to Rome to explain himself. Pilate was preoccupied, unaware, not paying attention, self-possessed, and so he asked, "What is truth?" It has been said, "We do not see the world as it is, but rather we see the world as we are." So, "What is truth?"

I came to Caldwell midstream in a story. I have heard some form of the question, "What is Truth?" a lot. I don't know what arrogance on my part initially led me to think I could find the truth for this place at this time ....

Before I came here, I did an internship as a chaplain at the hospital over there [Novant Presbyterian]. One time I was asked to visit a mother who had just lost her baby. The mother was clearly still in shock, I will never forget her blank stare, the “lostness” of her eyes. I felt empty and totally inadequate. Tears that could not yet come to her, came to me. What truth could I bring to her? I could say nothing but “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry,” and I prayed.

What arrogance would make me think that I would come here and listen to anyone’s story of anger, grief, hurt, and have anything more to say than “I’m so sorry” and to pray for the whole church?

We are at the end of the Christian year, it has been a long journey. It is the right time and the right place to put away our strategies for truth, and direct our gaze to the person who is Truth; Jesus Christ. Today, in the church year, we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. King is not a word we use much in this modern age. If we do, we may think, tyrant, dictator, but what of this King? What type of lordship does Jesus Christ bring? This is a King who stoops down to wash our feet, a King who in the words of Thomas Merton, descended into hell to show that he wills to be lost with the lost, who emptied himself that we may be filled and find that our “lostness” is no longer our own, but is his.

Truth is a hard theological claim to make these days. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, reacting to enlightenment thinking, and frightened by it, a group came together to mandate the five fundamental tenets of Christianity. What a small and petty God that would be, who could be contained so easily.

Today, the church finds itself in a time where all truth claims are relative. Challenged and defensive, the church seeks to justify itself in the world's eyes, either by grasping more tightly to fundamentals or by conforming more to the world. Paul said in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, "we preach Christ crucified and it is foolishness to the gentiles." The theology of the cross has always been foolishness, and it always will be – it is God's foolishness. The claims of the cross are so much more than can be contained in any fundamental tenets, and are so much more expansive than can be found in any progressive or conservative scheme. Our truth is a person, who reconciles all of creation to himself, a King who beckons all to come, bringing their whole selves, minds, bodies and spirit. This King takes on our anger, our fear, and our hurt, this king takes in outcasts, like refugees, this King takes on the stories of our lives, our unfaithfulness, our disbelief because ultimately the truth we claim is the truth of Christ's faithfulness, His faithfulness unto death. It is about Christ's belief in us during times when we can't believe in ourselves or in each other.

This may not be “liberation theology,” but that is what it is. A burden is lifted that we might be free to live fully into the mission statement of this church.

And so, it is perhaps the right time, at the end of this Christian year to come to this King and as Scripture says “be still and know that I am God.” It is a time to empty our burdens, to take refuge, to replenish the spirit, with thanksgiving and prepare to move from Pilate’s fortress to Bethlehem, to wait on the coming of Advent. Let us know the Truth of Christ, and in doing so, let us know this place and each other for the first time, all over again.

Recall words from the beginning of The Gospel of John, verse 3.

*What has come into being, in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ....*

The light has come to this place called Caldwell. At the end of the year that light remains. Abide in that light, find rest in that light. Move into that light and let the illumination light the way to a new season.

All Thanks be to God.