

Sermon + Good Friday, John 18:1-19:42
April 10, 2020
For Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church
The Rev. Jonathan Linman, Ph.D.

Perhaps you've just had the fortitude to read through and engage the two heavy chapters that comprise the Passion according to John.

It's a lot of words in a very dramatic story. Amidst the interweaving features of the narrative of Jesus' last hours before his crucifixion, I listened for prompts of the energy of the Holy Spirit as I read the Passion, and was drawn to and captivated by Pilate's question to Jesus, "What is truth?"

Jesus had just told Pilate, "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."

That's when Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

It's a compelling question in our day in the life of the world. Consider Stephen Colbert's comic explorations of "truthiness." Or the whole Post-Modern, De-Constructionist movements in the academy that call into question the possibility of truth that is not historically and culturally contextualized such that truth is thus always relativized.

Think of "fake news" and the erosion of trust in science and the word of experts. And on and on.

"What is truth?" – it's abundantly clear that's a salient question in our age.

Truth is also a major theme in John's Gospel. Let's explore the Johannine use of this word.

Here are some examples of how the word "truth" appears elsewhere in John beyond the Passion narrative – some of these are favorite and familiar passages:

- "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)
- "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:17)
- "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:24)

- “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:32)
- “Jesus said. . . , ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” (John 14:6)
- “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” (John 16:13a)
- Father, “sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” (John 17:17)

We can thus gain some sense of what “truth” means in John by seeing and hearing which other words surround the word “truth”:

- Grace and truth
- Spirit and truth
- Truth and freedom
- Truth and life
- Word and truth

None of this gives us a precise definition of truth in John, but again the word associations give a good sense of the flavor of truth. Wonderful realities are connected with truth: grace, Spirit, freedom, life, word.

Now let’s return to Pilate’s encounter with Jesus. What’s curious is that Pilate’s question – “What is truth?” – is the last time the word truth is used in the gospel narrative.

It’s as if Pilate’s question is a rhetorical one which the further unfolding narrative and drama in the gospel seek to answer. That is, what happens next in the story answers the question, “What is truth?”

After Pilate asks his question, Jesus’ trial continues. He’s given a crown of thorns. The crowd demands that Jesus be crucified. And so, it happens.

Then come Jesus’ final words in John: “It is finished.” That is to say, it is complete, accomplished, perfect even. “It is finished” means that God’s truth has been accomplished to perfection.

The ultimate truth in John is the definitive, transformative, world-changing, God-glorifying nature of Jesus’ death on the cross. That laying down of life in connection with God raising Jesus up from the dead is the means through which God conveys the truth of grace, the truth of freedom and the truth of life in word and in Spirit.

Needless to say, this kind of truth is not the truth that the world prefers. Jesus' kind of truth is dismissed as fake news. God's truth is that which the powers of the world seek skeptically to mock, as in Pilate's derisive question, "What is truth?" The world seeks to put to death the truth of Christ. But the world could not and cannot keep that truth dead, as hard as it tried and still tries to this day.

In this age in which the very idea of truth is called into question all around us, may the Spirit of truth speaking in the Word keep us anchored in the truth who is Jesus Christ, him dead and him raised.

May the truth of Christ, and Christ's grace and Spirit and freedom and life prevail in healing ways for you now, and for all who suffer in relation to the pandemic now, and for all the nations now in an uproar.

God in Christ helps us. God in Christ saves us. God in Christ frees us, and gives us life. That's the truth.

And finally, therefore, let these sacred words of Good Friday devotion echo in your homes and well beyond, even among all the nations: "We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you. By your holy cross you have redeemed the world."

Amen.