

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: John 18:28-38

Sermon Title: "That's the Truth" (The Supporting Cast of Lent: Pilate)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

April 10, 2011

Pilate looks sternly in the eyes of Jesus Christ. He stares, trying to get a glimpse of Jesus' soul down deep, trying to find the hidden crevices to understand who he is. Pilate inhales through his nose, taking in as much oxygen as his lungs will take. And he says, "What is truth?"

At this moment, Pilate cannot understand the profound meaning of his three little words. "What is truth?" It is a short sentence that goes beyond the walls of the Praetorium, the Roman governor's official residence and the primary army barracks for the soldiers in Jerusalem,... reaches passed those walls and travels at the speed of light toward the future and eternity itself.

What is truth? Pilate is not looking for facts here, is he? Facts are different from truth. The Atlanta Braves Home Opener was April 8, and they won against the Philadelphia Phillies, 6-3. The University of Connecticut Men's Basketball team won the NCAA Tournament. Tuesday always comes after Monday.

These are facts, but they may not be truths. Truth gets to something deeper, something genuine, something pure. When we see truth for what it is, we see the face of God. We find God as our Absolute Standard, who stands unchanged no matter what the circumstances might be. We find God as our Steadfast Redeemer, who reaches out to support us, no matter what doubts or sins try to keep us from living. Does Pilate know the impact of his question, and is he really seeking to discover what, or even Who, Truth is? He should, because Truth could save his life one day, and that's the truth.

What is truth? Pilate measures up this Man before him, and he tries to figure out why people have called him the King of the Jews. He doesn't look like any king he has seen before. Pilate has met kings in large courts and large armies with large buffets of food and large numbers of people milling around. Jesus stands on his own without an entourage and not even with fine clothes on his back. King of the Jews indeed. And the Son of God, to top it off? Pilate heard that Jesus is some sort of god. That cannot be, because only Caesar is god. Just as easily as we say "Jesus is Lord," the Romans used to say "Caesar is Lord!" This was an idea somebody made up – probably a Roman emperor himself – who believed he was just as

powerful as the gods, that he too could be a god. Certain Roman emperors took on this title of lord and god, and many Roman citizens simply bought into it.

They were all bamboozled, tricked into believing an untruth, and they took it hook, line, and sinker. Pontius Pilate believes the Caesar is god, and may think he himself is carrying out some divine work as one of Roman's governors. The truth is that nobody is a god – we aren't even worthy enough to tie the sandals of the feet of divinity. Paul reminds us in Romans 3 that nobody "is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God... All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."¹ This goes for Caesar and Pilate and the priests standing around Pilate and every one of us. There is nothing divine about any of us.

All except one. Jesus Christ, the one Pilate is staring at. We may not completely understand this, but in every way Jesus was sinless. He never put one finger wrong or one foot out of place. He was tempted like any of us, but he never committed the act of sinning against God the Father. Jesus was sinless, but then he became sin for us, to remove our sin and transform us to be the righteousness of God.² We may not completely understand that as well. Because of

¹ Romans 3:10-11, 23.

² Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21.

Jesus Christ, we are made holy. We are made as “little christ,” as Martin Luther and C.S. Lewis put it. As “little christ” we bear the name of Jesus Christ, we do everything for Christ, and we carry in our bodies his righteousness to share with us, so they too might believe and become “little christ” with us. That’s the truth.

What is truth? Pilate asks a question that everybody throughout the course of human existence has been contemplating. What is the truth about our existence? What is the truth about how we were created, and what our main purpose on this planet ought to be? Charles Darwin’s belief was that all living creatures, including us, came from a green, oozing soup in some obscure corner of the earth. Living organisms in that soup soon turned into fish or birds or dinosaurs or land-based animals or human beings. This is the truth according to Darwin and his disciples. And then many biologists believe the truth is that we came directly from monkeys, and by some stroke of luck we just happen to develop a better brain that gave us the ability to talk and process information and make complex decisions. And then there are others, who study the universe through telescopes, that believe we didn’t just come from monkeys but from the stars themselves. The Big Bang caused all

sorts of cosmic particles to fly in all sorts of directions, and those particles clumped with other particles to make stars and moons and planets, and some of those particles formed human beings, again by some stroke of luck. The materials that are found in stars are also found in our bodies, and so some scientists truly believe that Brother Sun and Sister Moon are indeed relatives.

Yet we turn to Scripture, and discover something more profound about our existence. Genesis tells us that we were made by God. God molded us with his own hands. God breathed his own Spirit into our lungs. We didn't come from stars but from the deep imagination of the Creator. We didn't evolve from monkeys, but were formed from God's skillful, caring hands.

Paul tells us in Colossians that all things were made for Christ and through Christ. John tells us in his Gospel that Christ was with God, and was God, in the beginning of all creation. Just as all the stars and moons and planets were made through Christ and for Christ, so were we made. So Christ is more than a Savior: He is the very reason for our existence. Our meaning and survival lie in Christ. We cannot speculate about where we have been and where we are going without Christ. What is truth? The truth is: If Christ was not in the beginning, we wouldn't be alive

today. Nothing in the universe would exist. Even Pontius Pilate would not exist to be governor of Jerusalem, to be able to stand before Jesus, the Reason for existence, and be the very person who would sentence our Reason for existence to death on a cross. That's the truth.

What is truth? Pilate cannot fathom the truth of his position at this moment in history. He stands in the gap of a major decision. He doesn't know it now, but the decision he makes will change the course of history itself. The far-distant future will be transformed for many people who would come to know Jesus Christ as the crucified and resurrected Lord and God.

Pilate is not thinking of the far-distant future, but of the near future in his present condition. He soon wants to get rid of the high priest Caiaphas and his Sanhedrin of priests, who are hounding him to kill a Man because he is a threat. Pilate soon wants to get rid of a tinderbox of angry people who are foaming at the mouth for Jesus' execution, and who will explode into a raging fire if they don't get what they want. Pilate is feeling the pressure from all sides, even from his own wife who tells him not to have anything to do with this Jesus.

Pilate cannot fathom the truth of his next decision,

doesn't perceive the far-reaching consequences. He gets to choose whether Jesus will die or not, and as a result get to choose whether we get to die to our sin or not. If Pilate doesn't bow to the demands of the chief priests and the crowd, then Jesus will not die as he was born to die. If Pilate stands firm in his belief that Jesus is innocent and let him go free, there is no death on a cross, and our sins do not die with Jesus on the cross, and so we would not have salvation.

But something is going on behind the scenes that Pilate himself cannot perceive. He does not have the freedom of will to decide whether Jesus must die or not. He has no freedom to choose any course of action he pleases to take, except the course of action God has given him. You see, the second Jesus came before him, Pilate instantly became an instrument of God's will. He immediately was locked into God's grand plan for the world, and there was no escaping it. Sure, Pilate could argue with Caiaphas the high priest about Jesus' innocence. He could pass Jesus off to Herod to deal with. He would sweat bullets over the decision to kill Jesus or not, and even wash his hand of any guilt. But Pilate would inevitable have to sentence Jesus to the cross, because it was all a part of God the Father's plan. God chose Pilate to be the governor at that time. God chose him to deliver the finally sentence. And Pilate could do nothing about assuring us Christ's

death and our resurrection in the end, and that's the truth.

“What is truth?” Pilate asks Jesus, and Jesus doesn't say a word. Jesus can't say a word, because Pilate already leaves his presence to visit with the Jews outside and declare once more – and declare futilely – that Jesus is innocent.

Did Pilate watch Jesus die on the cross from his Praetorium's terrace, or from a high vantage point in the city? We can only wonder what Pilate was thinking at the time Jesus was hanging on a cross. By passing sentence on the Savior of the world, Pilate was opening an unexpected door for us and for himself. He was opening a door to see heaven, and possibly to enter it one day. He was giving himself the chance to see God in all his majesty and splendor, and to see life as perfect, without death, without tears, no more pain, no more fears. And Pilate was giving himself the chance to see Jesus not as a simple man standing before him but as the Son of the Most High God, sitting on the right hand of God, inviting all including Pilate to come into God's presence, if they only would accept God's only Son as the Savior. What is truth? Pilate could have had Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth, if he had only opened his heart to it.