

## **“What Is Truth?” – Pilate**

Psalm 132:1-12; John 18:33-38a

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Some quotations are so famous that virtually all of us know who said them. Some of us will even remember exactly where we were and what we were doing when they were spoken. Surely everyone in this rocket city knows who said this and where it was spoken, “This is one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.” Many of you remember exactly where you were and what you were doing on July 20, 1969, when Neil Armstrong spoke those words just as he made the first human footprint on the moon. Some of you had a part in making that great event happen.

And who among us doesn’t recognize these famous words? “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial when he delivered those inspiring words on August 28, 1963.

And to many of us these words seem like they were spoken just yesterday. “Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” Can you believe it was twenty-two years ago that President Ronald Reagan issued that challenge at the Brandenburg Gate? And of course two years later, East Germany issued a decree that the Berlin Wall be opened.

This quotation is not as famous, though it is every bit as profound. “Death is no more than passing from one room into another. But there's a difference for me, you know. Because in that other room I shall be able to see,” said Helen Keller who was born blind.

Quotations become attached to persons and events. Sometimes they are famous like these. And sometimes they are infamous like this one: “What is truth?” asked the Roman governor Pilate of Jesus just before he handed Jesus over to be crucified.

Two thousand years after he asked that question, we continue to ponder the meaning of it and the significance of the man who asked it. I’m a

bit torn about this biblical character named Pilate. I'm not sure whether I should despise him or feel sorry for him. It's possible that he was caught in the middle of a most difficult situation—trying to determine the guilt or innocence of a young, idealistic religious leader. Then it's also possible that he was a cowardly opportunist who would do anything to placate his superiors and the masses—anything, even condemn an innocent man to death. I know I'm making a judgment statement now, but I've concluded that Pilate was a weasel, a cowardly man who desperately wanted to placate his Roman superiors and some of the Jewish leaders.

Pilate asked his infamous question early in the morning on what was arguably the most important day in human history, the day of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus had spent the night before with his disciples. There he gave them the great teaching about loving one another. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples," he told them, "if you have love for one another." He told them that he was about to be killed but not to worry because he was the way, the truth and the life. He washed their feet that night and shared the Last Supper with them. He prayed for them, and then late in the evening Jesus was arrested. Through the wee hours of the morning, the disciple named Peter, who claimed to be a staunch defender of Jesus, denied knowing Jesus, not just once but three times. And you remember what happened next. The cock has crowed. It was morning, the day of the crucifixion.

Suddenly, the scene in John's gospel shifts dramatically. We're no longer in a garden with shame-faced Peter. We're suddenly with Jesus in the governor's official residence, call in my translation the "headquarters."

The text I read is actually Jesus' trial, if we could really call such a trial. Notice sometime in the preceding verses that the Jewish leaders refused to go into Pilate's residence because he was a gentile. Entering a gentile residence would have made them ritually unclean. Notice that they wouldn't go inside a gentile's house, but they would condemn an innocent man to death! So cowardly Pilate, like a squirrel caught in the middle of the street, runs back and forth between the Jewish leaders who were outside the residence and Jesus who was inside.

In our text for today, Pilate was inside the residence with Jesus. "Are you the King of the Jews?" he demanded to know of Jesus.

Jesus could see how Pilate was being volleyed back and forth. He could see that Pilate wasn't acting out of his own authority, but in response to others. So Jesus asked Pilate, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

Jesus must have touched a nerve with these words because Pilate responded, "I am not a Jew, am I?" Pilate then went on to say that Jesus' own leaders had handed him over for questioning. And again, Pilate demanded to know what he had done.

Jesus then spoke of his kingdom and his followers. He told Pilate that if his kingdom had been of this world, his followers would have taken up swords and would have fought to the bitter end. But, he told Pilate, his kingdom was not of this world.

Pilate saw an open door and seized it, "So you are a king?"

Count this some day when you're not in a hurry. The word "king" is used nine times in this mock trial before Pilate, the heaviest usage anywhere in the Gospel of John. It underscores Pilate's real interest. He was not concerned with Jesus' claim to be Messiah, Teacher, Healer, or Rabbi. He was concerned with political threat. This could be political sedition on his watch. That wouldn't bode well for his future. Pilate's real concern was his own career and his own hide.

Do you remember what Nathanael said in the first chapter of John? His friend Philip introduced him to Jesus, and Nathanael exclaimed, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the *King of Israel!*"

And do you remember what happened after Jesus fed the five thousand in chapter six? He had to flee into the mountains because the people wanted to take him by force and make him their *king*.

And then earlier in the week, when Jesus rode the donkey into Jerusalem, the people shouted, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the *King of Israel!*"

Pilate knew what a king was. A king was a rival, a threat, an enemy to be put down. He knew that kings ruled by might and that the person with the mightiest army got to be king.

“So you are a king?” Pilate asked. Listen to Jesus’ response. This is what prompted his infamous question:

*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.*

And that’s when Pilate said it: “What is truth?”

Part of the difficulty in addressing this text is in knowing how that question was asked. It could have been asked humbly, a genuine inquiry: “What is truth, Jesus, tell me?” Or it could have been asked in cynical contempt: “What *is* truth?” Since I’ve concluded that Pilate was a cowardly weasel, I believe it was asked in cynical contempt.

“Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,” Jesus told him. And Pilate sneered, “What *is* truth?”

*Alethia*. That’s the Greek word. What is *alethia*, truth? This whole scene drips with irony. Pilate asked this question of one who had just claimed to be the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus wasn’t just speaking about truth; he was Truth. And no, Jesus wasn’t a king, not as Pilate thought of kings, but he was The King. And actually Pilate wasn’t judging Jesus here. Pilate himself was on trial that morning, and he continues to be on trial to this very day. Why? Because he the Truth stood before him, and he sentenced him to death.

And that is where this text intersects our lives. It is about *alethia*, truth, not just for Pilate long ago but for you and me today. That’s what we all really want to know, isn’t it? What is truth—ultimately? About faith and life? At some point in our lives this infamous quotation of Pilate becomes intensely personal. We too stand before the Truth and have to decide what we will do with him.

Going to the moon was important. The Civil Rights Movement was important. The liberation of East Germany was important. But I think Helen Keller and even Pilate would say that of greatest importance is our answer to this question—“What is truth?” It’s in your hands now. How do you decide?

## Closing Prayer

Towering Lord of history, you call upon us to decide, not out of emotion, but out of the bedrock of our experience and understanding. Come to those who struggle. Help someone here today to say yes to the Truth. Amen.