

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Midweek Lent 2
February 21, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
What is truth?

Pilate went back into the Praetorium and summoned Jesus. He asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

³⁴ Jesus answered, “Are you saying this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”

³⁵ Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?”

³⁶ Jesus replied, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight so that I would not be handed over to the Jews. But now my kingdom is not from here.”

³⁷ “You are a king then?” Pilate asked.

Jesus answered, “I am, as you say, a king. For this reason I was born, and for this reason I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

³⁸ “What is truth?” Pilate said to him.

—John 18:33-38

What is truth? This question has rung throughout human history. What is truth? We know that truth is important. A mom asks her little boy with chocolate smudges on his cheeks, “Did you sneak a cookie?” When he shakes his head and quietly says, “No,” she says, “Just tell the truth.” A wife sits next to her husband who has become so distant. She can tell something is troubling him. So, she gently whispers, “Just tell me the truth.”

Truth is important in all our human relationships; in fact, you can’t have a close relationship if you don’t tell the truth. Truth matters in every aspect of life from our work to the rules of the games we play. We seek truth in our relationships and in our judicial court system.

It doesn’t surprise us, then, that as the Son of God stands on trial before a Roman governor, the subject of truth comes up. Pilate wants to get to the bottom of things. He just wants to know the truth.

Pilate did not have an easy job. Since the time Rome had taken control of Judea, there had been many uprisings, rebellions, and self-proclaimed kings and saviors. Pilate may have heard of Jesus before; the stories of miracles, the large crowds, and the disturbances in the temple must have come to his attention. Perhaps more recently he had heard about the shouts of the crowds in the streets: “**Hosanna, save us now, Son of David!**” This would have concerned Pilate. It was the Passover. Hundreds of thousands of people were crammed into Jerusalem for this festival that celebrated how God had delivered his people from a foreign oppressor. To Pilate, the Passover celebration must have felt like a stick of dynamite ready to explode.

So when the Jewish leaders drag Jesus to Pilate’s palace early Friday morning, the governor wants to know what he’s up against. He’s got to get to the bottom of things. “What is going on? What am I seeing with the events that are taking place?” So Jesus stands before Pilate, and Pilate puts Jesus on trial.

He starts his interrogation with the question: “**Are you the King of the Jews?**” Pilate wants to know whether Jesus is a threat. A simple yes or no will do. But Jesus would like to have a different conversation. “**Are you saying this on your own, or did others tell you about me?**” Jesus would probably like to talk about what it means for him to be the King of the Jews—without the baggage of whatever Pilate had heard. But Pilate wants to get to the facts of the case. He wants to get to the bottom of what’s going on. “**Am I a Jew? Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?**” Jesus, you are the one standing in front of me. I’ll ask the questions here! I’m not the one on trial here, Jesus. You are. You will answer *my* questions. So, Jesus replies, “**My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight so that I would not be handed over to the Jews. But now my kingdom is not from here.**” Pilate seems intrigued. “**You are a king then!**” Can’t you just picture Pilate’s interrogating mind at work? Now we’re getting somewhere! Jesus answers, “**I am, as you say, a king. For this reason I was born, and for this reason I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.**” You care about truth, Pilate? You want the truth to be told? So do I. That’s why I’m here in this world. Then Pilate asks his famous question: “**What is truth?**”

Considering Pilate’s background, it’s unlikely he was asking some abstract philosophical question about the nature of truth. Pilate was a military man, a practical guy who had negotiated his way up the ranks of the political system and had a job to do. He knew how truth could be manipulated and used to one’s own advantage. He knew how politicians could twist the truth to fit their own agendas. Pilate looks at Jesus and says, “**What is truth?**” Your own people—your own religious leaders—are saying one thing, and you are saying another. Whom am I supposed to believe? “**What is truth?**”

During the season of Lent, and especially during Holy Week, we think a lot about the physical suffering that Jesus endured, right? —the beating, the scourging, the crown of thorns, and the cross. But also consider the emotional pain Jesus went through. Just picture the sadness he experienced.

You know the heart-ache you experience when someone doesn't tell the truth. We experience that pain even while we have at times caused that pain.

Just imagine what it was like for Jesus. He's on trial. Jesus came to testify to the truth. He *never* said a lie. He *never* twisted the truth to get what he wants. He always and only testified to the absolute truth.

And he knows all too well what the truth is. Here's the truth. Without Jesus there is only hell. Without Jesus there is only condemnation. Without Jesus there is only eternal suffering. That's why Jesus wants to speak the truth. There is only one way to God, one way to live—through Jesus.

And Jesus wants that for everyone. He wanted the crowds in Galilee to see that he brought more than earthly bread. He wanted the woman at the well in Samaria to know that he came to bring more than just H2O. He even wanted Pilate to see who he really was. Jesus came to testify to the truth.

Jesus knows that the truth can actually change people's lives. You know how this is. Have you ever seen a situation where someone was ruining his life, and you knew how to help him? If only he would listen and believe you! Right?

Maybe you know some people with addictions who are destroying their lives. If only they would get help to break the addictions! Maybe you know a husband who is destroying his marriage. If only he would focus on loving his wife! You only want these people to see the truth.

Now multiply that feeling by a million. Jesus knew he had what Pilate needed—what the world needed—more than anything. "Pilate, if only you were interested in the truth. Not the kind of truth that is distorted by humans in their selfish power plays but truth from God the Father, truth that reveals his heart of love for you!"

But Pilate could respond with only a feeble question: "**What is truth?**" And that question seems to end the conversation. If Jesus answered Pilate, we don't hear about it in the Gospels. Maybe he just looked at Pilate with eyes that seemed to recede into eternity and with love that reached into the depths of his heart. I don't know. But it is a really important question. What is truth? What is truth? It's an important question because the answer is astounding. "Pilate, *truth* is standing right in front of you!" Jesus once said, "*I am the truth!*"

Truth is not a fact, a formula, or a theory, but truth is a person. Truth is the Word made flesh. God made man. The final word from God and the source of salvation. Jesus is truth!

Oh, my friends, we live in confusing times. Facts are spun to get us to buy a product, or to support a cause, or to vote for a candidate. Maybe we've trusted people who presented themselves as someone other than who they really are, and we wonder, "What is truth?" Even the experts—scientists, doctors—often disagree about the best path forward. What is truth?

In this life, there are many things we can't know for sure. But we can know this: Jesus was born into this world to testify to the truth—to *be* the truth—to reveal that the very heart of God is love. How can you be sure? Watch as Jesus willingly goes to the cross to pay for your sins so that you can be sure there is no more penalty. Walk to the tomb on Easter morning to see Jesus declared the King of kings—to see life triumph over death. Jesus wanted Pilate to see. He wanted Peter and all the others to see. And he wants you to see. He is the *Way*, *the Truth*, and the *Life*—for you.

And that's important for us to remember as we go into the world. People need to know the truth. When they put you on trial, you can just simply speak the truth. Tell them who you are in Christ. Tell them who Christ is and what he has done. In times like these, when truth seems to be whatever anyone wants it to be, the truth to which Jesus testifies may be just the thing people are looking for. We know it's the thing they need.

What is truth? People need it. It is Jesus! Amen.