

“In Over His Head”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
John 18:28-40
March 11, 2018
Fourth Sunday in Lent

“I’d never seen anything like it,” the professor said. He was telling a small group of students at Brown University, including my closest friend, Jahred, a story that was decidedly unrelated to their chemistry class. The professor had these baseball fans eating out of the palm of his hand from the moment he’d said, “Did I ever tell you about my time as a minor league ballplayer?”

He’d been the best hitter on his team in high school, but in professional baseball he was struggling. It was 1966 and he was in Single-A, a level below our Birmingham Barons. He stepped into the box against a nineteen year-old from Texas. This kid threw a fastball that the professor could barely see. Strike one. The next pitch was even faster, but he felt it’s force as it came in high and tight, mere inches from his collarbone.

This was when the professor knew he had a problem. He was in way over his head against this kid. He stepped out of the batter’s box, ostensibly to knock some mud from his cleats. But really, he was considering the path he’d chosen in his life. He realized that he was not going to make it to the big leagues. He was not going to be famous. But this youngster, this flamethrower by the name of Nolan Ryan probably would. He was in trouble, and not just because he was almost certainly going to strike out. This kid was throwing so hard, but he was also clearly a bit wild. The professor figured he’d be gone in, at most, two more pitches, either via called strike three or with some sort of grotesque injury. Not a religious man, the professor whispered to nobody in particular, “If I live through this at bat, I swear I’ll go back to school and throw myself into the world of science.”¹

And then there’s the matchup between Pontius Pilate and Jesus of Nazareth. Here’s your scouting report on Pontius Pilate:

Pilate had come to govern the area just a few years earlier. He was a Roman prefect who reported directly to emperor Tiberius. He was a military thug who eventually would be removed from his position for being too harsh — *too harsh for the Roman Empire*. While governor of Judea, Pilate spent most of his time at Caesarea Maritima, a beautiful city with a great harbor on the Mediterranean all built by Herod the Great about fifteen years before Jesus was born. Pilate lived it up on the coast. Caesarea Maritima was built to bring a touch of civilization to this weird eastern province. It had a palace and a Roman marketplace and a big amphitheater and a hippodrome for horse and chariot racing. A governor could hang out there at the beach and almost forget that he was in charge of those troublesome folks with their odd religion over in dusty and dry Jerusalem.

But Passover had come, and when those problematic monotheists with a tendency for rebellion were celebrating holy days which remember that time they threw off the shackles of a king and won their freedom, Pilate knew he had to be there to show off the power of Rome. And he came with all the power — judicial, financial, and military. There were no budget deals, no negotiations, no compromises needed for Pilate as governor. He answered to nobody but the emperor. He was the most powerful man in Israel.

¹ This is how Jahred and I remember the story. There’s a good chance some of the details here are apocryphal!

And in this encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, Pilate is in *way* over his head.

Jesus, the prisoner. Jesus, who has just been denied by his most ardent disciple. Jesus, who has run afoul of the religious authorities that maintain a complicated peace with Rome.

The authorities won't enter Pilate's Gentile Jerusalem headquarters for fear of becoming ritually unclean, but their complicity in this mess defiles them. They hand Jesus over to Pilate in order to have their dirty work done. Unwittingly, they are handing Pilate over to Jesus. Pilate desperately wanted to stay out of this whole thing, but as we know, an encounter with Jesus has a tendency to draw one in and to reveal depths previously unconsidered.

Pilate asks if Jesus is the King of the Jews, and Jesus wants to know where this question comes from — from inside Pilate's head, or from someone else. Pilate is quickly on his heels and tries to make it clear that he is not invested. He's not one of *them*. He asks, "What have you done?"

"Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.'

It makes a difference here how we understand "not from this world." We could decide, as groups of Christians have, that Jesus is indicating a separation between himself and this world: that there's the broken world and then an otherworldly Jesus who has nothing to do with this world and so, if we follow him, we can escape the messiness we see. Instead, I think Jesus is talking about from where his power and authority come. He is of God, of the beginning, of the light, and he has come into this broken world out of great love for it and in order to be in it and through it and part of it.

Pilate only hears the word "kingdom" and he thinks he's back in control. He *gets* kingdom language. He knows a king. His boss is the king. He knows how kingdoms operate. He knows how Caesars come to power. It's all political maneuvering and out-flanking adversaries and scrambling and clawing for the throne to become the top dog. Then it's a game of subjugating those who misbehave and placating those who will offer their support. Kings are ruthless, if they're going to last, and they are driven by a thirst for power, finding a means to consolidate it, and using force to protect it. "So...you are a king?"

Jesus has spent this Gospel of John redefining words for his followers. He has taught them that light and sight mean something different from what they've previously understood. He's taken the term "shepherd" — usually used to describe the powerful kings of Israel's past — and talked about laying down his life for the sheep. He's shown his disciples that a master can wash their feet in love and servanthood. He's challenged people's understandings of water and bread and resurrection and life.

"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." Jesus has a different definition for "king" and "reign" and "authority." These words have nothing to do with Tiberius or armor or riches or currying favor with petty lords or thuggish governors. They have to do with love and sacrifice and seeking out the lost and seeking relationship and belonging to the truth.

Pilate is dumbfounded. He is left sounding like a freshman philosophy major or an herbally-enhanced concertgoer or the poster child for postmodernism: “What is truth?”

We started this Gospel of John back in December. We were finishing up the first chapter eight Sundays ago — fifty-six days ago, in mid-January. We read about John the Baptist pointing to Jesus and two of John’s disciples deciding to just start following. Noticing his new followers, Jesus turned and asked them a question. That Sunday I said we’d be coming back to that question in seventy-seven days, on Easter Sunday. We’re almost there. Since then, we’ve revisited Jesus’s question a couple of times. The question was: “What are you looking for?”

As we have hinted at since then, this gospel is about the project of reframing that question to “*Whom* are you looking for?” If you get nothing else from his gospel, John wants you to know that the answer to all of the important questions is “Jesus.”

What is life? *No, who is life.*

What is living water? *Jesus is.*

What is light? What is resurrection? What is the bread of life? *Jesus. Jesus. Jesus.*

“What is truth?” Pilate asks. And we post-enlightenment thinkers scramble for a chalkboard to start making a list. Oh, and we’d make a really good list too. It would be full of poetic turns of phrase and it would be open-hearted and open-minded and it would have some excellent Presbyterian words like “sovereignty” and “brokenness” and “reconciliation” and “hope.” But truth for Christians is not a proposition or a set of parameters. Truth is a person. Not a *what*, but a *who*.

Pilate doesn’t get it. But he seems to perceive a glimmer of it. He sees innocence. But he can’t bring himself to act to protect the truth. He can’t muster any action, with all his armies and riches and power. So he passes the buck back to the religious authorities. And so, the truth is sacrificed.

Pilate saw a glimmer, but in the end, he decided that truth was disposable. His Roman *tuches* is on the line, and he does whatever will keep him comfortably in power and cause him the least trouble, even if it means an innocent man must die. The crowd chooses the kingdom that comes from this world, the one of violence and cynicism and manipulation. The kingdom that is dispensable and rides the wave of outrage and self-preservation and callousness.

In only three weeks now, we will discover that despite the work of Pilate and the religious authorities and the fickle crowds and the fearful disciples, truth will prevail. Divine love, an unwavering, non-disposable truth, will rise from the tomb of its attempted murder and spark a wildfire of truth-telling that includes each and every one of us.

I hope you saw the photo on the front of your bulletin today. It’s from Caesarea Maritima. It’s all that remains of the palace that Herod built, where Pilate was the iron-fisted ruler from the shore. What is truth? Pilate’s answer to that question has left him some rubble and the fact that all his notoriety and fame are fort his interaction with Christ.

When it comes to encountering Jesus, we are all in way over our heads. Of course we are. So we keep pursuing truth. We keep love and sacrifice and relationship and bread and cup in front of us. We turn aside from what Pilate seeks and humbly ask for what Jesus offers. We remember our inclination toward what is fleeting and disposable and what erodes by the seaside. And in our lives and our families and our communities we look to gain what prevails and persists and will lead us into life. We look to these as our truth when we find ourselves at the tomb, and at the cross, and in the garden, fearful and unsure of whom to believe. Amen.