

“What is Truth?” based on John 18:33-38a and Daniel 7:9-14

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on November 21, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Pontius Pilate ruled Judea on behalf of the emperor for a decade. He was one of the longest serving governors and did so with tyranny. He was ambitious and from a very ambitious family in Italy. Just a little more than 100 years before Pontius was named Governor of Judea, his ancestors, the Italian Samnites, had tried to overthrow Rome.

About 50 years later, another one of his relatives helped kill Julius Caesar. Now, having risen up from conquered people and slaves, he was now in a family of nobility. Pontius Pilate’s family line was moving upward in the Roman aristocracy, just as the Julians and Claudians had done to become Rome’s emperors.

Pilate did not hesitate to do things his way, exert his authority of the people in his province, even when this sometimes went beyond even the emperor’s wishes. Yet, here is Jesus of Nazareth before him, a vagrant and a street preacher in Pilate’s eyes, with a motley crew of 12 or at most 70 followers, a bunch of nobodies.

And Jesus fluster’s Pilate. Pilate asks if he is the King of the Judeans, and Jesus says, “Do you say this from yourself, or did others say it?” In modern language, we might say it like this, “Did you come up with this on your own or did someone have to tell you?” Pilate’s only response is to try to exert his Roman chops, that he is *not* a lowly Judean. He points out to Jesus that he is of the lower class, and still his people handed him over.

It wasn’t typical for Jews in Judea or Galilee to openly cooperate with Rome. Of course, *openly* is the key word, since part of Pilate’s job in this time, was to appoint the high priest, and he did this only once in 10 years, reappointing Caiaphas, meaning the two likely had a very good relationship. So, here it is, in a moment when Pilate holds, it seems, all the cards of power over Jesus – political and religious – yet, Jesus makes it clear that every advantage Pilate thinks he has, is meaningless.

The literal Greek here is, “My Kingdom is not from out of this world,” and so, ‘from out of,’ or ‘from’ as is easier to say, means that it is not produced by this world. Jesus is not trying to distance himself or his rule from the world we are in, but he is noting the origins of his power, comparing it to the origins of Pilate’s power and Rome’s. Jesus tells Pilate that his reign, and the emperors, is not truly a reign at all. It’s a construction of their own brutality, oppression, and violence.

“If my kingdom were from out of this world,” Jesus continues, “then my attendants would fight.” But they don’t fight. If Jesus had power like Rome did, he’d have to have his people fight. But Jesus tells Pilate that if Rome’s power mattered, then his attendants would overpower it, but his Kingdom is not from here. It is not produced by human might. Yes, they will be defeated, but not by a sword.

Now, I’m going to enter into a little confessional booth with you for a moment. I have a temper. It’s a lot better than it used to be and something I work on. So, when I argue that

there is no acceptable form of anger for a believer, I do so, knowing full well that I am the first and foremost who needs to hear it.

What I've learned in acknowledging my flaws and trying to subdue my temper, is that my temper largely stems from my insecurities. It flares up when I realize I have done something wrong, when I've a mistake, or failed to prevent a mistake from happening. Ultimately, the person I'm really mad at myself, but it's hard to tell. It can be intimidating when I, or anyone else, throw a tantrum. But if we're honest, this is a false power. Intimidation is a fleeting authority, and not from out of God.

Case in point: When I was 14, my temper was probably the worst it had ever been. I went to basketball camp in Syracuse, NY, and I got more technical fouls than UNC's own Rasheed Wallace. Still, my worst explosion came after I my dorm room had been robbed. I had left my room to go down to the Carrier Dome that morning and I did not do as my mother had told me to do. I did not hide my wallet in my extra special hiding place she had devised. I was in a rush, and I just threw it quickly under my bed. That morning, 10 rooms in my hall were robbed. Every wallet was taken, including mine.

I ran frantically into my room to first check the super special hiding place and it wasn't there. I had hoped, that even though I remembered just throwing my wallet under my bed, that I had listened to my mom and I would still have my money. Sure, I felt violated, but my temper was because I knew I could have prevented it, or at least that's what I thought, if I had just listened to my mom. I stormed down the hall screaming, when a kid came out, not just any kid, but the biggest kid at the camp. He may have been only 6'5, but in my mind, he was 7 feet tall, and in my rage, I barked at him loudly, and he ran back into his room, locking it behind him.

What I expressed that day in my rage was a kind of power, but this was Pilate's power, Rome's power, the power of the empire, of intimidation. That power is fleeting and worldly, and it depends on the fear and even pain of others. Ultimately, this power comes out of the pain, fear, and insecurities of the intimidator. Jesus makes it clear that this is not the source of his reign, his Kingdom. As Jesus did earlier in John's gospel, after the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus refuses to be a king as the world knows kings or rulers, but unlike earlier, he is ready to acknowledge his reign, and do so with real power – with love.

"You say that I am a King," Jesus says, adding, "For this I have been born and it is for this that I have gone into the world, in order that I may bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is 'from out of the truth' hears my voice. All Pilate can do now, is not contest Jesus, but question everything: 'What is truth?' Pilate says.

The truth that Jesus speaks of is the truth of the Kingdom of God, of God's presence with us. This truth is bigger than merely dying and going to heaven for all of eternity. This truth is about what we pray for every time we say the Lord's Prayer. The truth is 'God's will being done on earth, as it is in heaven.' Pilate's words are the 25th and final time Truth appears in John, and I believe this is because what follows next is the actual truth. Every reference from

Jesus up until now leads to this, his coming death on the cross and resurrection on the cross as his enthronement as the true King, not by his violence, war or intimidation, but by self-giving love.

The first use of the word in John's gospel says that Jesus came 'filled with grace and truth.' This truth is the presence of the Kingdom of God, over which Christ reigns eternally. This truth is what is foretold in Daniel, when one like a Son of Man, the title that Jesus claims for himself, will sit in the throne of God, be placed at or in the right hand of God, the power of God, as one who is One with God, but also a human like us.

This is the conqueror of empires, but not as they conquer, not with the boastful words of the beast, coming from its horn, another symbol of power. While the worst empires are destroyed and given to fire, a means of purification, it says some beasts or empires live on, but they are stripped of their dominion, so that all peoples, nations and ethnic groups, will serve the Son within them, the Christ, even though they remain in worldly empires.

My siblings in Christ, to see Christ as our King is to make our allegiance first to him. This is not a personal faith to keep tucked away as our means of getting to heaven, but a lived reality, to be part of reconciling the world to our God of self-giving love. The early Christians were persecuted, not because they believed in Jesus, but because they lived like Jesus, talked in this passage today, acknowledging no power or authority in Rome or its ways.

The empire was threatened when the Christians said, "it is not our king, our emperor, our republic, that rules the world we live in, but Jesus, whom this world crucified, and yet, rose again and lives. He is our King, our God, who is with us." To say that Jesus is Lord, is to say that Caesar, who claimed the same title, was not.

Jesus didn't come to offer spiritual advice to unlock God's favor, or ethical maxims to show us how to be perfect, and he did not come to give us a fast track to heaven to escape this earth. The grace and truth that is in John's gospel, which Jesus witnesses to are that God has come to us, by grace as an unmerited gift we don't deserve. It is that God has come to be our King to rule by love, by a self-giving love that does not act as the world acts, but a love that overcomes death and sin.

Jesus is the true prophet, speaking God's word directly, as the Word made flesh. He is the true temple, the meeting place of heaven and earth, where God is and also where we are. Jesus is the true priest, as the mediator, fully God and fully human like us. He is the true sacrifice, the lamb of God who is complete and without sin. Jesus is the true King, ruling alongside the people in the power of love. Jesus is the true image of God, to know God is to know him.

This is the truth of Jesus that Pilate cannot understand. In the gospels, Jesus's own followers struggle to understand this even. They struggle to think of the Creator of all things entering into creation to be part of it, not to exploit it, but to submit to its limits of being a created being, even death, in order to lay claim to the rightful rule over this world, not by a flash, or by

a fighting of fire with fire in a clash of worldly powers, but by revealing a Kingdom that is upside down.

It is a Kingdom where the poor and the sick get first access, where sinners are welcomed and restored. It is a kingdom where the king is present with the people, not far off, away from life's messes.

What is truth? Truth is realizing that the power of God is not revealed by force. Even in the Exodus, the Lord did not force the Egyptians to believe, and in this new Exodus, truth is not forcing the Pilates of this world to believe, by using their own arguments, threats, and intimidation against them. The truth is to believe that Jesus is King, now already, eternally, and the full realization of his Kingdom is yet to come.

The truth is trusting that he who was the true temple, calls us not to be warriors, but temples. We are to be temples where the same Spirit that raised Jesus will dwell in us and change us, by pouring God's love in us, so that we might be changed first, and then be empowered to change the world for our King. We do this not with the tools of Rome and Pilate, of empires and nations, of an angry 14-year-old boy, using the tools of force, violence, defensiveness, and aggression, which have their power from out of insecurity and fear.

The truth is that we follow the king who tells us that we are loved and who promises life. Indeed, our King calls on us lay down our lives with confidence that he will raise us. He is a King who loves us with humility and grace, and calls us to do the same, and asks to proclaim good news of God with us in what we say and do. This is the ministry of reconciliation, our calling that will truly change the world. Amen.