

The King of Glory

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

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II Samuel 7:8-16

John 12, 13, 18, 19, selected verses

“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.” Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

John alone places Jesus inside the halls of secular power early in the morning, separated from the religious authorities who stand outside the Gentile court of law for fear that they--who are seeking the death of the Lamb of God--be defiled and unable to eat the Passover meal. In his gospel, irony is a staple; the details of light and darkness are laden with significance and turned inside-out by paradox; the line between those who belong to the truth and those who have gone after the lie is drawn relentlessly and scandalously in scene after scene. Of the scene we have just witnessed, the quintessential interpreter of John's gospel Raymond Brown would have us notice, in particular, “the separated forces of darkness and light”; the separated forces of religion and revelation I would add. “Pilate must shuttle back and forth,” writes Brown, “for he is the person-in-between who does not wish to make a decision and so vainly tries to reconcile the opposing forces.” We know his character intimately: the shuttling back and forth, the indecision, the dwelling in-between, the necessary compromise, the attempt to reconcile opposing forces within and without.

Therefore, we would do well to pay attention ourselves this morning to the light and the darkness, the truth and the lie, the claims of human surmise (be they secular or religious) and the claim of the God revealed in Jesus Christ upon our days. We best pay attention today, lest early in the morning on the first day of the week, we be found still shuttling back and forth between reason and religion, wondering with Pilate what we have missed of *truth* in the voice of him who is risen from the dead.

Truth, true, and real are words from the same root that appear frequently in the Gospel of John. We have talked about this before. To be specific, the word for truth in Greek—*aletheia*,—is found 7 times in the Synoptic gospels and a whopping 25 times in John. In Hebrew the comparable word for truth has a moral dimension and means “that which makes something trustworthy and reliable.” The Old Testament's rock solid definition of truth, says Brown, assures us that “God is absolutely true in the sense of being worthy of confidence and of being faithful to his promises.” The Greek word for truth, on the other hand, describes what is unveiled...what is not concealed...what is revealed. In Greek truth involves contemplation rather than moral action.

Now it happens that John was primarily influenced by Judaism and so there is a nuance to his use of the Greek word. For John the meaning of truth has to do with a mystery and a wisdom revealed by one who is trustworthy and reliable. I take this to mean the mystery and wisdom of God have been revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. A whole cast of characters seeking truth populate John's gospel, but on this morning the character in question is Pilate who first seeks not truth with a capital “T” but seeks a statement of fact that will stand up in court. Pilate needs to know the charge being made against Jesus by the religious authorities, so he asks if what he has heard about Jesus is true. “Are you the King of the Jews?” He has no idea that the question is fraught with centuries of human longing for One whose coming in the name of the

Lord—specifically as the King of Israel—would confirm the truth, the trustworthiness of the God who had promised a royal throne in perpetuity to another king named David. Neither do we!

So to understand this, to grasp what is at stake in the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate, we need to connect a few ancient dots. Beginning with David's reign over Israel and the choice of Jerusalem as God's habitation on earth, God's people began a new era, says Old Testament professor Bernhard Anderson, requiring a new theological understanding. Wanting

to unify his kingdom on the basis of the religious loyalty of the tribal confederacy, [David] brought the Ark of the Covenant—the portable 'throne' on which Yhwh was thought to be invisibly enthroned in the midst of the people during their wars and their wanderings—into his new capital of Jerusalem with the intention of housing it in a temple. Jerusalem was not to be just the city of David but 'Zion, the city of our God,' the locus of Yhwh's real presence in the midst of the people.

But instead of David building a dwelling place for God, God promises to build a "house" for David: "I will establish his royal throne in perpetuity," says the Lord. "I will be Father to him and he will be Son to me." Unlike previous covenants, the covenant between God and David's line would be unconditional: God's hesed, God's loyalty shall never be withdrawn.

Ever after, as God's people remembered the entrance of the Ark of the Covenant through the city gates and finally into the temple that Solomon built for God's presence, they sang antiphonally: *Lift up your heads, O Gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. Who is the King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.* The sounds of "Hosannas" cannot be far behind, because the question of an earthly king, sent by God to make good on the covenant that established David's reign in perpetuity, was up at every turn in the history of God's people.

Yet for John, the king who entered Jerusalem on a donkey long ago was a king counter to the king that would reestablish David's landed reign in perpetuity. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," God's people cried that day, to which John pointedly does not add "the Son of David" as Mark and Matthew do. Rather with an irony we easily miss, John has the people shout: *the King of Israel!* Why irony? John alone places Greeks in the crowd, who had come out to greet him as they would have greeted a Hellenistic sovereign entering the city. This is the beginning of Jesus drawing all people to him. These are the sheep mentioned earlier by the Good Shepherd: sheep not of his fold, sheep for whom he will lay down his life, not as Israel's king but as the king who quit his throne to bring the light of God's glory into the world, so that we stumble not in darkness.

Therefore John turns the story of Palm Sunday into the story of Jesus' refusal of the political power inherent in the Davidic throne. He does this by way of what is known in Scripture as a prophetic action that none will understand until after his death and resurrection: he finds a young donkey and sits on it. This is not a sign of humility as it seems to be in the other gospels, but a sign of saving grace for the whole world. Citing a line from Zephaniah where the king is a king of *all* who seek refuge in him, "the Johannine Jesus would have the crowd...acclaim him not as an earthly king," says Brown, "but as the manifestation of the Lord their God who has come into their midst to gather the outcast."

By the time Pilate asks Jesus if he is King of the Jews, we are in on the truth: the

mystery and wisdom revealed in him who is trustworthy and reliable is about to be enthroned on a cross. “What have you done,” Pilate asks Jesus, still trying to get the facts, but the facts were of no account in the presence of truth, before whom Pilate now stood. “For this I was born,” says Jesus, “and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” “What is truth?” Pilate asks, a question “not to be understood as a profound philosophical question,” says Brown. “It does echo the imperiousness of the Roman when challenged; but ironically it is self-condemnation.” Pilate’s question is our own when we think we are at our philosophical zenith, asking after truth as though Jesus were dead and not alive. Shuttling smartly between the claims of religion and reason, we seek the truth about God unmindful of the voice of him who is the answer to our every question and our most anguished prayers: God’s Word become flesh and dwelling among us, full of grace and truth.

To know the truth that he is means belonging to him...living in relation to him, hearing his voice. This is the sort of claim which cannot simply be pronounced true over us even by the institution created to make such pronouncements, nor is it a claim which can be proven by a zealous band of believers. Rather we stand singly before him who has come to stand before us. In his presence, we do not know so much as we are known: known in all of our brokenness and need, with our pants down, our knees trembling, our hearts breaking. “It’s to do with knowing and being known,” says a character in Tom Stoppard’s *The Real Thing*:

I remember how it stopped seeming odd that in Biblical Greek [actually Hebrew!] knowing was used for making love. Whosit knew so and so. Carnal knowledge. It’s what lovers trust each other with. Knowledge of each other, not of the flesh but through the flesh, knowledge of self, the real him, the real her, in extremis, the mask slipped from the face. Every other version of oneself is on offer to the public. We share our vivacity, grief, sulks, anger, joy...we hand it out to anybody who happens to be standing around....But in pairs we insist on giving ourselves to each other. What selves? What’s left? What else is there that hasn’t been dealt out like a deck of cards? A sort of knowledge. Personal, final, uncompromised. Knowing and being known.

We glimpse this, perhaps, with each other. But in Christ the incredible paradox of human existence is revealed: that the only one who really knows us...truly loves us. So the first thing to say about the truth that is trustworthy and reliable is that the God’s truth is a person in whom we are known and by whom we are loved: personal, final, uncompromised.

In the second place, the truth unveiled in him is a truth that calls into question every other claimant—including ourselves—to the center of the universe. Truth’s test, says Scottish theologian John Baillie, “is the resistance it offers to the otherwise uninhibited course of my own thinking, desiring and acting. [It] is what I ‘come up against’ and what takes me by surprise, the other-than-myself which pulls me up and obliges me to reckon with it and adjust myself to it because it will not consent simply to adjust itself to me.” Since the Enlightenment, you and I have learned to adjust ourselves to most every other claim to truth that comes down the pike. The gospel resists this and makes a scandalous claim: God is true, John writes. Human beings know this not by way of an abstract and speculative principle but because in Christ we come face to face with a self-emptying love at the center of the universe. There are no rivals. Hence our seeking for a greater truth comes to an end in the truth of the God who is love.

Then finally, and weary of shuttling back and forth, we are invited to bet our lives on the grace and truth revealed in him because in him, God has bet God’s life, once for

all, on the us—*all of us!* This does not change the fact that we may freely decide, moment by moment, whether he is the truth we were born to follow or not. Chances are good that many of us may go to the grave unable to decide, once and for all, to follow him. But at the heart of the gospel set down by John is the astounding revelation that the God who is true decided long ago—in the beginning—to be with you and for you in Jesus Christ.

Lord, Your presence is so real [prays poet Czeslaw Milosz]
that it weighs more than any argument.

On my neck and my shoulders I feel Your warm breath.

I pronounce the words of Your book, which are human,
Just as your love and hate are human.
You yourself created us in your image and semblance.

I want to forget the subtle palaces created by theologians,
You do not deal in metaphysics.

Save me from the images of pain I have gathered wandering on earth,
Lead me where only Your light abides.

Who is the King of glory? He is the King of glory!