

*Now Simon Peter was standing in the high priest's courtyard and warming himself.
 So they said to him, "You also are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not."
 One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked,
 "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" Again, Peter denied it, and at once a rooster crowed.
 Then they led Jesus from the house of the high priest to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning.
 They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.
 So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?"
 They answered him, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you."
 Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law."
 The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death."
 This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.
 So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"
 Jesus answered, "Did you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?"
 Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and chief priests have delivered you over to me.
 What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world,
 my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews.
 But my kingdom is not of this world." Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?"
 Jesus answered, "You say I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world -
 to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"
 After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him.
 But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover.
 So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?"
 They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.*

John 18:25-40

"What Is Truth?"

Pastor Stephen Ridge

As I sat where you sit last week and listened to Carl Mende read John's gospel and teach about these passages, I continued to wonder how a fisherman from Galilee came to know so much about the workings of temple politics, how in John's gospel more than the others we are shown an inside view of the high priest's palace and the Roman Praetorium where Jesus stood trial and endured abuse just before and just after dawn on Good Friday. We are told in the other gospels that in the garden, once Jesus healed the ear of the high priest's servant and gave himself into the soldier's custody, his disciples ran off into the night.

But Peter didn't run far. Prevented by Jesus himself from standing and fighting at Jesus' side, Peter ran into the shadows only to crouch and wait for the temple posse to turn their backs and head for the high priest's palace in the city across the ravine. Then Peter emerged from the garden to follow the torch lit parade at a distance until they passed through the city gate where Peter could blend in with the curiosity seekers who followed Jesus and the soldiers and the torches to the door of the high priest's house.

By that time, Peter wasn't alone. John tells us there was "*another disciple*" in that parade who was "*known to the high priest*," John tells us. It's a tricky business because John never uses his own name in his own gospel, though most of us are convinced that "*the disciple...Jesus loved*," the one John keeps talking about, is John himself. So the question becomes, "Could the disciple '*known to the high priest*' also be John?" Leon Morris doesn't think so. Morris doesn't believe that the son of a Galilean fisherman could conceivably be on familiar terms with Israel's urbane and corrupt high priestly family.

But I think the disciple who saw Peter out in the street that morning and got him through the door and into the high priest's courtyard could be John. After all, John's gospel has had Jesus return to the holy city and the temple porch early and often from start to finish. It was John who somehow had the connections to know that Caiaphas had urged the priests and rabbi's in open council that it was better that "*one man*," Jesus, "*should die for the people*," than "*the whole nation should perish*." The old priest was terrified that a hot head from the riff raff would provoke the Romans into violence and I think someone in that room who knew John repeated Caiaphas' words to the young apostle, who wrote them into his gospel as an unintentional prophecy about Jesus.

It was John, last week, who saw one of the high priest's stewards smack Jesus in the mouth for daring to remind old Annas that he had violated due process. And John, in our passage today, reports verbatim an interview with Pilate that only could have been learned by someone with enough clout to get inside the room where Jesus and Pilate exchanged words and ideas. The high priests were out on the sidewalk staying kosher, but perhaps John tailed along with the temple servants who heard Jesus confront Pilate. Leon Morris thinks it more likely that someone more prominent like Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea had the clout to be there. But I've grown to suspect that John was the disciple who was connected to the high priestly family. As I've already noted, it would explain some of the ways John's gospel is different in outlook and perspective than the other three.

One important difference occurs in the very first verse of John's gospel. It was John who began his gospel saying nothing about Joseph, or Mary, or shepherds, or a manger, or childbirth. Instead, John locates the human Savior he knew and loved and trusted in the eternal, existential past. *"In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. This One was in the beginning with God!"* And what we're only occasionally told is that this terminology, this notion that God's heart and mind had been expressed as a living, breathing "Word" was not original with John the Apostle. It was first voiced by a Jewish philosopher/theologian named Philo Judaeus who taught and wrote in Alexandria, Egypt in the years just after Jesus was born.

You see, Philo had read Plato, a Greek philosopher who had observed that the universe seemed to be estranged from some perfect hidden design. And what Philo said to Plato in so many words is "Right you are! There is a hidden design beyond what we can see in the universe, and that design is expressed in the Word of God. Not just the written Word, the Law of Moses, but there was a living Word, a prophetic Word given by God that makes the world make sense. Philo had read in the prophets that the Word of the LORD "*came to*" prophets like Samuel, Nathan, Solomon, Elijah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and on and on out to the end of the Old Testament, and so Philo speculated that God's Word lived and breathed in ways that transcended the written scroll.

Now it's important to note that Philo's writing was human speculation, not inspired, not God's word, sometimes brilliant, more often misguided and misleading. Years later in Acts 17, Paul will teach the philosophers in Athens that the best we can do on the strength of our own intellect is to "*grope*" for God and for truth, Paul said. But Philo saw truth in Plato's groping, and I think John saw truth in Philo's groping, truth that allowed God to inspire John to see in the heart and mind and life of Jesus a Word that makes life make sense. So Jesus not only brings that Word that heals and saves, he is that Word that leads us to what is really true.

So on that fateful morning when Jesus was arrested and tried, both Peter and Pilate make the critical mistake of seeing Jesus as a physical king hoping to physically conquer the powers that be. "*Are you a king?*" Pilate will ask him. And Jesus will teach him that Christ is that "*Word*" that speaks of a reality foreign to the sort of power Peter wants and Pilate fears. "*My kingdom is not of this world.*" Jesus taught, "*if my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews.*" The struggle Jesus describes to Pilate is what Peter just attempted in the garden hours before.

And neither Peter nor Pilate will be wise enough to understand, or strong enough to save Jesus from the destiny that waited for him that morning. Pilate will head out to the sidewalk to see if he can't manipulate the priests and rabbi's into sparing Jesus an execution that is unwarranted and undeserved as far as Pilate can see. We learn in Matthew's gospel that the governor held in his basement three men, likely Zealot insurrectionists, likely guilty of murder, who were due to be crucified that day.

To Pilate's dismay, the priests and rabbi's led the crowd in chanting that Jesus should be executed and the Zealot ringleader, Barabbas, should be freed to kill again. "*What is truth?*" was the last question Pilate addressed to Jesus. And the answer is, more often than not, truth is entirely beyond us in this world of sight and sound, drama and fury. Peter would learn, only after a weekend of tears and shame, the truth that God wanted something different from him than heroism and strength going out.

And Pilate learned the bitter truth that the power Rome had given him had not come with the courage and character he needed to lay his hands on justice. Going forward, there would be blood on his hands that no amount of water would wash away. Jesus had taught him: "*...for this purpose I have come into the world - to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.*" But Pilate wasn't listening, didn't know who he was dealing with, couldn't see his way clear to justice or truth. Peter, for all his failures, would do better than that and so should we, if we'll only listen to the Word God sent us.