

Not From Here

John 18:33-38

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I had a reliable professor tell me once, never read from the gospel according to John without the frame of its opening verses. Most of you have heard these verses before, or even know them, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. I'll paraphrase these verses this morning so that we can read our story today in its proper frame.

Jesus is the Word of God, the same Word of God expressed at the dawn of creation to make light and life. In other words, what we witness in the person of Jesus Christ is not something fleeting in history, but something eternal, a glimpse of God's expressed purpose for being and living. This eternal life we witness in Christ is described as light shining in the darkness. This true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world, says John. According to this gospel, the Word at the root of God's creation and Christ's revelation gives enlightenment and life.

John 18:33-38 (NRSV)

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' 34 Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' 35 Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' 36 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 Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' 37 Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, '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.' 38 Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

Jesus quickly turns his arraignment hearing about kingship into a trial about truth. When Pilate asks Jesus the root question in his trial, are you king of the Jews, Jesus asks Pilate to meet him on the plane of truth – do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me? When Pilate asks Jesus what he's done to be handed over to Roman authority, Jesus answers with the truth, it's not what I've done that brought me here, it's where I've come from, another world, my kingdom is not from here. And when Pilate tries to catch him, and get him to admit he's a king, Jesus answers, king is your word, truth is my word. You ask about kings, but I testify to the truth, and those who listen to my voice belong to the truth.

The late writer and genius David Foster Wallace tells this modern parable. Two young fish encounter "an older fish swimming the other way," and the older fish asks in passing, "How's the water?" Then one young fish asks the other young fish: "What the heck is water?"¹ This parable is quite applicable, it would seem, to the passage we read from John today. The old fish Jesus reveals to the young fish Pilate that they are swimming in truth, and Pilate responds by asking, "what the heck is truth?"

Wallace tells the parable of the fishes to point out that truth and life are about "awareness, plain and simple, awareness of what is real and essential, what is hidden in plain sight all around us, which we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: 'This is water. This is water.'" Wallace talks about the human condition as being "lord of our own skull-sized kingdoms," limited by the confines of our own mind, incapable of grasping on our own the vast space of truth until it is revealed to us. Wallace uses the old cliché that "the mind is a wonderful servant," a wonderful vessel for following the truth that gets revealed, "but a terrible master," a terrible thing to follow.²

While your mind, says Jesus to Pilate, is preoccupied with kings, I am here to be occupied with the truth.

And the truth, my kingdom, says Jesus, is not from here, not from this world, not from any mind. The truth is from God, and here in your world and in your mind it remains hidden in plain sight, until some old fish points it out. When the truth is pointed out, the truth hidden in plain sight that God so loves the world, we come to understand the limits of our own mind and world, and open up to the possibilities of a world inhabited by a loving God.

Encounters with the hidden truth can highlight the limits of your own mind, and open up the possibilities of a world inhabited by God. Some of you have heard me tell about the night my car died in the parking lot after a baseball game. I had left the car lights on, and when a friendly neighbor offered to jump the car, I couldn't see anything and put the cables on the wrong nodes, and killed the battery (some of you good listeners might remember that this engineering blunder is a recurring theme in my life that I would encounter again in Honduras³). And on a night that could be described with the phrase when it rains it pours, while I was waiting for AAA, it started pouring rain. Stranded, less than pleased with myself, soaked and cold, any good truth remained hidden that night, so I decided to just stand in the rain and wait.

Until it was that an old man in tattered clothes started making his way toward me. I was sure he wanted either money or trouble, and the way this night was going, something like that would have been a fitting end. But when he reached me, I discovered he was not from here. He walked over, this homeless man, to give me his umbrella, a beat up old thing, so that I wouldn't have to stand in the rain anymore. I'm a little more used to it, I would guess, he said. I was dumbfounded, and so moved that we talked for an hour until the tow truck came, and wouldn't you know the tow truck was blaring, of all things, gospel music. That old fish's name was Robert, a prophet of the small good things that lie hidden in plain sight every day that it rains.

Jesus says he was born to testify to the truth, and those who listen to his voice belong to the truth. Christ knows that in the spiritual realm, a truth that is not from here, not from your mind, cannot live and reign in you unless you listen and let it in. Our text today is an appropriate reminder on a day when we use the title Christ the King, that Christ is not born to be king, but to be witness, he wields not a sword or a scepter, but an index finger pointing to the truth about God. Christ only becomes king when we listen to his voice and let our eyes be opened to the truth, the truth that so often remains hidden in plain sight.

Elam Davies, master orator and former pastor of Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago, ended his preaching ministry with a memory from his native Wales. It was an evening about to bear a glowing sunset. Dr. and Mrs. Davies had driven to the top of a local Welch landmark to catch the spectacular display of the sky's horizon. They had driven there to catch a glimpse of the inexpressible beauty they knew would appear in the sky, and just as God's kaleidoscope was spreading across the sky, something else came into view. An old jalopy-looking car pulled up alongside the Davies. "An elderly couple got out. They moved to the rear door of the car, where lay their son, a son clearly of their later years, a child full-grown yet physically so incapacitated he could not sit up on the seat. The two of them contrived with great effort to slide his legs around and hold the door open so he could face out and see the sunset. And just as the sun and all of its magnificence was about to give its final burst of glory, the father lifted his son's chin and held it up, so that he too could see the sunset."⁴ Then, the parents seamlessly shifted hands, and the mother held his chin up too. The Davies had come to that place to see a glorious light, and indeed they saw a light more marvelous than they had imagined.

This week, let us be thankful for the spectacular light that lies at the end of everything, and for Christ and all the many hands that hold our chin up to see.

¹ Rev. Joanna Adams introduced me to this illustration, in a recent sermon at Morningside Presbyterian Church. The full story of the commencement address by David Foster Wallace, in which this parable originated, can be read in this NYTimes article:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/26/books/review/Bissell-t.html>.

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/26/books/review/Bissell-t.html>.

³ The story of my trip to Honduras appeared in the following sermon from July 19:

http://winnpres.org/dmdocuments/090719_Mark_6_30-44_What_Do_You_Have.pdf.

⁴ Rev. Dr. Elam Davies, former pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, “The God With Whom We Can Be Confident,” May 6, 1984.