

**“What Is Truth?”**  
**John 18:33-37; II Samuel 23:1-4**  
**Christ the King Sunday**

**II Samuel 23:1-4**

<sup>1</sup>Now these are the last words of David:

The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favorite of the Strong One of Israel:

<sup>2</sup>The spirit of the LORD speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue.

<sup>3</sup>The God of Israel has spoken,  
the Rock of Israel has said to me:

One who rules over people justly,  
ruling in the fear of God,  
<sup>4</sup>is like the light of morning,  
like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,  
gleaming from the rain  
on the grassy land.

**John 18:33-37**

<sup>33</sup>Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

<sup>34</sup>Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”

<sup>35</sup>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?”

<sup>36</sup>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.”

<sup>37</sup>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.”

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## The Sermon

Have you ever felt like you were trying to make a connection,  
to have real communication with someone,  
and couldn't quite get there?

Did you feel like you had what seemed like it should have been everything you  
needed?—

you had the will to make it happen;  
you had their full attention, and they had yours;  
you had the desire to hear them,  
and to be heard and understood by them—  
you had all these things going for you,  
*but you didn't have the language?*

Sometimes, that's called "parenting a teenager."

And sometimes it's called "being a teenager."

But it's also the visit in the nursing home, or the hospital, or the Hospice room,  
where you are barely able to understand the person with whom you have  
communicated more deeply, and more beautifully, and more subtly, and more  
truthfully than with any other person in your life?

And now, in the face of an oxygen mask, or a morphine drip, or a physical  
limitation, you need something other than what you have always been able to rely  
on: the voice, the words, the tone, the expression, the silent but infinitely deep  
shared history. Suddenly, those words and cues that you have relied on for  
communication are not there anymore, hindered, and you need something else—  
you lack a common language that's accessible to both of you.

I will forever cherish the memory of my grandfather—for whom nothing was ever  
as good, right, or decent as it had been 50 years earlier—standing at the sink one  
day, as Alzheimer's had begun its long march through the fields of his once  
intricately powerful mind.

He was trying to peel an orange with a peeler, but he went the wrong way, like the  
way you would cut a grapefruit to eat it with a spoon; so he was expecting to be  
able to pull out the pieces one by one, and the whole thing turned into a mess, and

finally he just put it all down the garbage disposal and said, in a voice of calmly resigned irritation: “They don’t make ‘em like they used to.”

That was obviously my grandfather. But those were the early days in which we were starting to lose the language by which he and I could hear and understand one another in the ways to which we’d been accustomed.

It happens when you have people who live in two different universes, seeing the same world with the same people, but viewing it from entirely different places.

It happens when people get too comfortable assuming they know what someone else is thinking—so, for example, having found that I’m not feeling like I am being listened to or heard by you, I quit trying; and instead, I develop a whole narrative around what I deduce to be

- what *you* are thinking;
- what *you* realize or do not realize;
- what motivates *you*;
- what *you’re* trying to do;
- what *you* must be doing behind the scenes.

Once I become confident that I’ve got you and your motives all figured out, in my mind, that becomes who you are.

And I don’t just come out and ask you about it, because once I’ve settled on my narrative of who you are and why you do the things you do, then if you say anything that doesn’t fit into my narrative about you, I just assume you’re lying.

And now it’s like we don’t even speak a common language.

And we might as well be living in different universes.

Have you ever felt like you were trying to make a true and honest connection with someone, and couldn’t quite get there?

In the very early morning after the night that Jesus was arrested, Pilate, the Roman governor, was in the Governor’s palace, and he had Jesus brought to him and said: “Are you the king of the Jews?”

Earlier that night, not long after what we now call the Last Supper, Jesus had been in a garden with some of the disciples when Judas came with a detachment of soldiers and police carrying lanterns and torches and weapons.

His earthly ministry was arriving at its culmination.

The religious establishment didn't have the authority to put someone to death, but they wanted to get rid of this troublemaker.

The political leadership had the authority, but didn't have any national interest at stake in getting rid of Jesus, other than the fact that that's what gigantic, heavily armed occupying powers do. But they did want to keep the peace with the religious people whose homeland they occupied.

I imagine they looked at Jesus—soldiers, citizens, leaders, authorities—and may have thought to themselves, “It's too bad for that guy: he's just a pawn in the game of governments and nations and politics.”

After his arrest that night, and some interrogation and abuse by the religious authorities, they turned over to the governmental authority.

It was early in the morning when they came to Pilate's headquarters. Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?”

They said, “If this man were not a criminal, we wouldn't have handed him over to you.”

Seems a little bit defensive—they didn't even answer the question. Pilate said, “Take him yourselves, and judge him according to your law.”

And they said, “We are not permitted to put anybody to death.”

And so Pilate went back into the headquarters, and called for Jesus.

Have you ever felt like you were trying to communicate with someone—  
you had the will to make it happen;  
you had each other's attention;  
you seriously wanted to hear and understand them;  
*but you weren't speaking the same language?*

Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

And Jesus said, “Are you saying this on your own, or have others spoken to you about me?”<sup>i</sup>

Pilate said, according to Eugene Peterson’s translation, “Do I look like a Jew? *Your* people and *your* high priests turned you over to me. What have you done?”

No one knows the mind of God, but what do you suppose might have gone through Jesus’ mind when Pilate asked that question. What have you done?

Did he see the faces of people who had been fed on his miraculous bread, who had feasted with miraculous wine at Cana?

Did he see the faces of parents whose children he had restored to life and health?

Did he see the eyes of a blind person who could now see?

Did he remember the faltering but joyful legs of someone who had not been able to walk for years, but now, because of what Jesus had done, wanted to run and dance?

Did he see, in his mind’s eye, the faces of his beloved fellow travelers—even Peter, who at that precise moment was out there somewhere not too far from Pilate’s headquarters, drowning in shame at having betrayed his best friend?

Your own people have handed you over to the executioner, King Jesus.

What have you done?

The Biblical evidence is unanimous and conclusive: whatever he had done to get himself into this position, he would gladly do it all again.

He said to Pilate, “My kingdom doesn’t originate from this world” (CEB). “My kingdom doesn’t consist of what you see around you” (MSG).

“If my kingdom were from *this* world, my followers would fight so that I wouldn’t be handed over. My kingdom is not from here.”

We are looking at the world from different universes.

And Pilate said, “So you are a king?”

I love Tom Long’s observation of a pattern in John’s gospel, when people are questioning Jesus, which he calls, “question-answer-dumb response.” The disciples do it just as reliably as the Pharisees or anybody else.

And now, even face to face with the highest government official in the land, even in the culminating hours of Jesus’ mission to the world, it holds true.

“Are you the king of the Jews?”

“I am not the kind of king you would understand.”

“So...you are a king?”

Question, answer....

And Jesus said to the one person on earth who would make the final, authoritative decision either to bring about his death or spring him from the whole rotten, corrupt ordeal: “*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.”

And Pilate asked the only question that anyone in his position could have asked:

“What is truth?”

Today is Christ the King Sunday, or Reign of Christ Sunday, the last Sunday of the Christian liturgical year.

For Christians who follow the seasons of the year, it is a culmination.

We have logged a year’s worth of triumphs and missteps,  
ambiguous accomplishments and noble failures,  
friendships sewn tightly together and torn ragged,  
profound faithfulness and pathetic self-righteousness.

Some really nice things, and some not very nice things, all put away under the banner of Liturgical Year B in the lectionary, Advent 2014 through Christ the King Sunday 2015: another year that is now in the books.

When I attended a college of 38,000 students, I was one of exactly four of them who took the undergraduate course in Serbo-Croatian, the language of my grandparents who had come from Yugoslavia.

I had already learned from my grandmother a handful of sentences, how to count to ten, and a couple of pretty good words for when you burn your hand on a hot skillet. But I wanted to take advantage of having to meet a foreign language requirement and being at a school that actually offered the language of my ancestors.

The head of the whole Slavic Languages Department was the teacher, meeting with us four students in his office at 8:00 in the morning four days a week. Three of them were master's level students pursuing their third or fourth Slavic language. The other one was not. I turned out to be a terrible, terrible student of Serbo-Croatian.

For years I felt guilty about that, particularly when Yugoslavia descended into violent chaos.

I wrote a letter to Dr. Cooper at one point about five years later—this was the era when people still communicated that way—thanking him for having been a great teacher, patient and, I suspect, somewhat merciful. I was delighted a few weeks later to get a response, in which Dr. Cooper very kindly mentioned that if I was ever on campus again, I should look him up. Hey, wonderful!

So sure enough, one day I stopped off at the college on my way somewhere, and went and knocked on the office door, and was allowed to come in and chat for a bit with my former professor. We had a couple of pleasant minutes, and I was thinking to myself, you know, here I am, one of the worst, least productive students this distinguished scholar ever had to put up with, and here he is being so kind and forgiving, sitting with me so welcomingly after what a huge disappointment I must have been to him.

After the pleasantries, I said something that was a bit more specific, and I could tell it didn't really register with him, and finally he said: "I'm sorry...*who* are you?" He had absolutely no idea.

I reminded him about the letter, and how he had so graciously responded; and I said, “As I said in the letter, you may remember me as the worst student you ever had.” Before I could finish, he gave me one of the most generous gestures I’ve ever seen: he made a motion with both hands like he was pushing something to the side, and he said, “That’s all put away in a drawer somewhere. That’s all forgotten.”

And all of a sudden, five years of carrying around this heavy burden, the sense of what a total disappointment I had been, was all set aside. All of that failure and inadequacy was just done with: not erased from the permanent file; the transcript will always be what it is. But it’s past: it’s finished and put away.

He still had no idea who I was. But he had just taken away a burden by assuring me that those books were now closed, and there was no reason ever to pull them out again.

Next Sunday, we start a new liturgical year, and a year from today, Jesus will again crown the year by saying to Pilate, “For this I was born into the world”—to testify to the truth, and to surrender his life for us, and to be raised again, for you, and me, and all creation.

As we bring to a close the worship cycle of another year, what is it time to leave in a file drawer? What books need to be closed on 2014-15, so that a new one can start over next week on the first Sunday in Advent, the first day of the season of preparation for the coming of Christ?

On this culminating Sunday, having gone through  
the cycle of the church year,  
the four seasons of another trip around the sun,  
and whatever seasons of your life have just played out,

I invite you to kneel with me again, at the foot of the cross of our savior,  
our sovereign,  
the Holy Mystery who has given us everything  
and owes us nothing,  
not even an explanation;

Who is infinite and eternal,  
infinitely beautiful and true,  
eternally loving and restoring, regenerating and re-creating;

Whose love is greater than ours,  
but not so much that we cannot love as he did;

Whose majestic Word is vaster than our words,  
yet not so much that we are powerless to speak.

We are grateful servants, joyful subjects, willing participants in God's great project  
in this broken world with these beautiful people made in the image of God.

A prayer for the Reign of Christ:

Almighty, ever-living, sovereign God,  
it is your will to gather up all things  
in your beloved one,  
reigning in the universe  
in the power that is love.

Mercifully grant  
that the whole of creation,  
freed from slavery,  
may serve and praise you  
through Jesus Christ,  
who is alive with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever.

Amen.<sup>ii</sup>

God of mercy, God of peace:

By your sacrificial love, you have given us new life.

May we abandon our fears and doubts  
to the embracing salvation of the Cross  
and the loving words of your Son.

May our words of hate

Become tender consolations,

And may our worries fade into everlasting peace.<sup>iii</sup>

Strike from us that which tends toward greed,  
remove from us the thoughts which despise,  
empty our souls of depravity.

Remind us by the gentleness of others

where the good of Your kingdom  
is yet at work in hearts and minds.  
And may Your forgiveness lighten our spirits  
and free us to newness of life.<sup>iv</sup>

Our hearts are so often hardened to you, O Lord.  
In our stubbornness and arrogance  
we pretend to know what is good and what is right  
in the world You made.  
Grant us forgiveness for these and all our sins;  
grow in us the humility to see with grace  
where we have failed and where we may yet endure  
in goodness, kindness, mercy, and forbearance.<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> In this section, I am making abundant use of both Eugene Peterson's translation in *The Message Bible* (MSG) and that of the Common English Bible (CEB), as well as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which is the primary translation I use for study and preaching.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://liturgy.co.nz/reflections/christ-the-king>

<sup>iii</sup> Steen, Jeffrey (2014-11-01). *Prayers and Meditations for Taizé-Style Worship* (Kindle Locations 3-8). Kindle Edition.

<sup>iv</sup> Steen, op. cit., locations 18-23. Kindle Edition.

<sup>v</sup> Steen, op.cit., locations 43-47. Kindle Edition.