

## Reign of Christ (Year B)

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*John 18:33-38*

*Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' 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?' 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.' 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.' Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'*

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Last Friday, Tricia, our friend from Atlanta, and I saw "Of Mice and Men" at Bay Street Theatre featuring our very own Terry Brockbank. It was a wonderful show and seeing it reminded me of a term in the world of theatre known as the "fourth wall." Perhaps the best way for me to describe it to you is for you to imagine that this space is a stage. From where you are, there are three walls; one on either side of you and one behind you. Whether you know it or not, there is an invisible "fourth wall" that separates the audience from the stage and, therefore, from the actors and the action. This fourth wall allows the audience to passively observe the narrative of the play while the actors proceed to live in their fictional world. However, in the 19th century there was a movement called theatrical realism. In this time, a technique known as "breaking the fourth wall" was popularized. During a particularly dramatic moment, the play would "freeze" and an actor would approach the audience and address them directly, thus, breaking the "fourth wall."

Perhaps a more contemporary example of breaking the fourth wall might be in the classic comedy film, Ferris Bueller's Day Off. As the movie opens, Ferris Bueller goes about his business getting ready to spend a glorious day skipping school. After perfectly delivering his well-practiced routine of convincing his parents he is sick, they leave the room and Ferris Bueller directly looks into the camera and tells us, "they bought it!" Throughout the entire opening scene, we watch him get ready for his grand day out and he shares with us his methods for feigning sickness in his pursuit of playing hookey. From the very get go, this breaking of the fourth wall connects us rather intimately with this much-loved character of Hollywood. As we continue the movie, we feel as though we are truly the ones accompanying him on his adventure.

Although I'm not sure that Ferris Bueller was fully versed in the dramatic techniques of 19th century theatre, his actions cause the "fourth wall" to be broken as the barrier separating stage and audience is torn down and the audience is thrust into the action of the story.

The writer of today's text from John's gospel was, I think, well ahead of his time for he breaks the fourth wall as well. Only, instead of doing so in a 19th century theatre or in the bedroom of Ferris Bueller, the writer of today's text does so in the headquarters of Pontius Pilate as he is interrogating Jesus prior to his crucifixion. From behind the fourth wall, we are witnesses to a frustrating exchange where both characters attempt to dodge each others' questions.

“Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate asks.

“Do you ask this, or someone else?” Jesus asks in return.

“I am not a Jew, am I? What have you done? So you are a king?” Pilate asks.

Through all of this back and forth, Jesus maintains his cool while Pilate (and perhaps you and I, as well) get thoroughly confused, perhaps even to his (and our) wits' end. Suddenly, we watch Jesus take control of both the tempo and the texture of the conversation as he changes the subject to truth. Apparently, as we listen from behind the fourth wall, Jesus tells Pilate that he has come to testify to the truth and that all who belong to the truth listen to his voice. It is at this crucial moment, that Jesus freezes, the lights dim, and Pilate turns to us, you and me, and asks us directly, “What is truth?” The writer of today's text cleverly breaks the fourth wall as suddenly you and I are now responsible for answering Pilate's “simple” little question! What is truth? Three little words that open up quite the can of worms! Well if you and I are to answer this question then we certainly have our work cut out for us, don't we? We live in a world that screams its version of the “truth” at us every day.

- This is truth! screams the magazine on the gas station shelf that tells young women and men that they must be skinny and “sexy” to be loved.
- This is truth! scream the terrorists who bombed Paris and wreak havoc in far too many other parts of the world.
- This is truth! scream the Israelis and the Palestinians who shoot missiles at each other.
- This is truth! scream the politicians saying we should not accept Syrian refugees.
- This is truth! scream the lies of this world.

When you think about it all of these self-acclaimed truths (which you and I know to be lies!) are based off of static truth as belief. For example...

- What the magazine with the pencil-thin model is claiming to be truth is based off of the belief that we must be thin, airbrushed, and fake in order to be accepted and loved.
- What the terrorists are claiming to be truth is based off to the belief that violence is the answer to every problem and every conviction.
- What the Israelis and Palestinians are claiming to be truth is based off of the belief that each is entitled to certain things.
- What the politicians saying we should not accept Syrian refugees are claiming to be truth is based off of the belief that all Syrians are terrorists and we should fear that which we don't understand.

I submit to you that each of these beliefs that we cling to in our human desire to have the answers leaves us frustrated, antagonized, militant, and, perhaps worst of all, exclusive. I submit that when we enslave truth within the confines of mere belief, we make ourselves comfortable behind this “fourth wall.” We observe truth, we theorize it, we speak of it from a safe distance without truly getting our hands dirty.

But when Pilate breaks the fourth wall in today's passage and asks us “what is truth?” we are challenged to rethink truth, to step away from truth as mere belief and live into truth *as action*. When we

step back and look at John's gospel as a whole, we see truth not as something that is believed. Rather, John would have us experience truth as something that is *done*. Simply put, truth is not a noun but a verb. In the beautiful irony of this passage, Pilate speaks of this movement away from truth as belief towards truth as action with one of the questions that he asks Jesus. If you look back at the passage, Pilate does not once ask Jesus what he believes, rather in seeking the "truth," he asks Jesus what he has done.

You see, a curious and unpredictable thing happens when the fourth wall is broken: you and I are no longer at home in the audience. Rather, we are called by name to approach the stage and *do* something. We are called to do truth and not to fight over it. We are called to *do* the truth that Jesus embodies in a very physical way.

- For the Truth that meets us in the passage did not spend his final hours with his disciples teaching them doctrine; he spent these last precious moments breaking bread and pouring wine.
- The Truth that meets us in this passage is not preparing to state his beliefs; he is preparing to die.
- The Truth that meets us in this passage will not give a grand treatise stating his beliefs; he will hang on a cross.
- And the Truth that meets us in this passage will not send out a post-resurrection email stating what we are to "believe" at the sight of the empty tomb; he will rise from the grave and defeat death and save us and invite us to respond.

We worship Jesus Christ, the Truth, the Alpha and the Omega, who alone is our King, whose only credentials are that he is the one who has always done truth, is always doing truth, and will always do truth forevermore. It is for this reason that you and I are gathered in the presence of the Lord this day to praise the One who allows truth, true truth, to be done.

- For where work is done in the name of the Lord in a manner consistent with Jesus' actions, there truth is being done!
- When members of Shelter Island Presbyterian Church gather to put together bagged lunches for those with no homes who find shelter at Maureen's Haven, there truth is being done!
- When a Methodist church in Atlanta quotes the Quran on their marquee by displaying one of its many verses that calls for peace and unity among the nations, there is truth being done!
- When we have gathered to loan over \$900 through [KIVA.org](http://KIVA.org) to help folks in third world countries, there is trust being done!
- When we invest \$20,000 to repair a roof over a kitchen that is used to bring nutritious, affordable meals to senior citizens as well as prepare Meals on Wheels every week, there is truth being done!
- As members of Alcoholics Anonymous gather in our Fellowship Hall every Friday night to support, encourage, and uplift one another, there is truth being done!
- When another session member accompanies me to take communion to a homebound member after a worship service, there is truth being done!

Truth is being done because breaking the fourth wall creates motion...it creates a motion that is created by God, redeemed by God, and sustained by God. But, friends, I announce to you that this motion, this creative and grace-filled truth of "doing" is only possible when we agree to leave the seats of the audience and approach the stage. So I ask you, what are the "fourth walls" in our lives that still need to be broken down? What are those barriers which need to be shattered that, once demolished, will allow us to do the truth that God calls us to do? Friends, it is both my duty and privilege to announce to you that God's truth is being done this day and you and I are invited to leave the audience, cross the fourth wall, and *do* truth!

Truth is being done not by our merit but by the saving grace of Christ our King who embodies truth, who *lives* it! We will live into this truth yet again this year as we approach the season of Advent. As we approach Christmas, Advent will prepare us for the breaking of an even larger fourth wall, a wall that could never be brought down by you, me, Pilate, or any of the Jews or Romans; Advent prepares us for the night when God erupts into the world, our world, in a very real way that breaks down the fourth wall between heaven and earth. And as this fourth wall is broken, we will prepare to be taken out of the audience and into the story, a story where truth is being done, a truth that was and is and is to come. To him, Christ our King, be all glory and dominion both now and forever! Amen!