

**Questions of the Cross:
PURPOSE**

John 18:28-38a

“What is truth?”

A sermon preached by
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The concept of truth has been dying a slow death for many years, but the idea of relative truth has become more noticeable in the past decade or so. In the early 2000s, comedian Stephen Colbert picked up on this cultural phenomenon by coining the term “truthiness,” by which he meant opinions that were asserted as truth with no basis in fact. “Truthiness” went on to become the Merriam-Webster dictionary's word of the year in 2006. Similarly, in 2016 in the wake of our presidential election, we learned the term “fake news,” which we hear all the time now. That year, Oxford Dictionaries named “post-truth” its word of the year. Shortly thereafter, commenting on the presidential inauguration, Kellyanne Conway famously spoke of “alternative facts.” *Time* magazine blazoned its cover in April of 2017 with the question, “Is Truth Dead?” Then in 2018, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani claimed in an interview that “truth isn't truth.”

Lest you think I'm just picking on Republicans, let's not forget Bill Clinton, an early relativist, arguing in his defense against impeachment that you cannot precisely define terms like “sexual relations” and “is.” Avoidance of the truth has no party affiliation. Truthiness abounds.¹

The modern era has seen two great challenges to our traditional and Biblical definitions of truth. The first is cosmology, our conception of the universe. Some of you may remember almost four years ago when we had a visit from David Wilkinson, the British Methodist pastor and astrophysicist. One of the videos he shared showed a couple having a picnic in Chicago, I believe. Then the camera panned out to show the entire city, then North

America, then planet earth, then the moon and stars and galaxy and a representation of the whole universe.

But it didn't stop there. Then the camera began to zoom back in, back to earth, back to the couple having the picnic, then smaller and smaller, into the skin and the cells and down to the atoms of the matter that made up the people.

The point was clear. There is so much more to the universe, both "out there" and "in here," that we cannot conceive of the complexity and intricacy of nature. Scientists tell us that the Big Bang that created the universe happened 13.8 billion years ago. If that is true, all of human civilization is just a tiny portion, a mere blip on the screen of time.²

The other challenge to our view of the world comes from evolutionary biology. Charles Darwin and his scientific progeny propose that life began from a single source, not created out of nothing and existent from the beginning in its various forms. Through a random process of mutation called natural selection, all forms of life evolved, and the ones that were the fittest survived.

Cosmology and evolutionary biology have historically been seen as the enemies of faith. I don't think we view them that way so much anymore. We realize that faith and science talk about the same realities in different ways. But astrophysics and evolution have taken their toll even on the secular view of humanity. If the earth is just one tiny piece of debris in the midst of billions of planets, systems, and galaxies, then we aren't very special, are we? If our creativity, intelligence and personality are just the product of random environmental factors, then we are

who we are by chance, not design. We're not privileged in any way. We're not the center of the universe after all.

“All of which,” Sam Wells says, “leaves any sense of meaning or purpose in existence hanging by a thread.”³ Why are we here? What is our purpose? What is the truth of our existence?

Confronted by all of these questions, some people (like us) turn to their faith for answers. Today we turn to this confrontation between Jesus and Pontius Pilate, who was the Roman governor of Judea.

Jesus had been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane under the cover of night. He had spent the night at the homes of Annas, the former high priest, and Caiaphas, the current high priest and son-in-law of Annas. Wanting a death penalty, the Jewish leaders took Jesus to Pilate, who was known to be ruthless and cruel and indifferent to faith. He normally lived at Caesarea on the coast, but he always came to Jerusalem for the major Jewish feast days, not because he was religious, but because there was always trouble.

The Jews, even though they were seeking to kill Jesus, could not enter the Gentile's house for fear of being defiled for Passover. (They didn't want to be sinful now, did they?) So Pilate came out to them. They made it clear right away that they wanted this man Jesus dead, and only the Romans could sentence him to death.

Pilate asked Jesus if he were the King of the Jews. And Jesus replied, “*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.*”⁴

This answer confused Pilate, so he asked, “*So you are a king?*”

And 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.*”⁵ Was Pilate listening?

Apparently not, because he asked, “*What is truth?*”⁶ Some have tried to portray this as a sincere question on the part of Pilate, that maybe he was beginning to get a glimpse of the truth of Jesus. I think that is being way too generous. The Gospels take it easy on Pilate anyway, if you compare the accounts of contemporary historians like Josephus. Pontius Pilate was no philosopher; he was a politician. His truth was whatever was expedient, and he had a mob of Jewish leaders on one hand and a mild-mannered carpenter from the country on the other. Within minutes, Pilate had washed his hands of Jesus, and within hours, Jesus was dead.

Then we see the truth. Jesus was not a king, at least as the world sees kings. He didn’t save himself. He was devoured by the evil hearts of religious people and the ruthless political forces of his day. As Sam Wells puts it, he died “in an obscure backwater of the universe, as a member of a self-important but not indispensable species, as a representative of a self-absorbed but ultimately peripheral race, at a relatively uninteresting juncture in planetary history.” Where’s the purpose in that? What’s the point, if there is one? Wells goes on to say,

“The significance of Christ’s agonizing death on the cross isn’t that it’s a knockdown outright winner for most meaningful moment in the history of the universe. Quite the opposite. It’s squalid, shameful, invisible and pointless. The people who put a massive Christ figure, with arms stretched wide, looming

over the city of Rio de Janeiro, got it all wrong. Jesus dies as he's born, on the edge, out of the limelight, an afterthought, a reject, pushed into the gutter. Rather than make the cross implausible, the work of cosmologists and evolutionary biologists in dismantling meaning structures actually enhances the [meaning] of the crucifixion. God is among us, not as a commanding statue [overlooking] creation, not as the climax of a compelling story, but as a pointless death among a defeated people in a ravaged nation."⁷

This is how God comes to us. Didn't Jesus say, "*My kingdom is not of this world?*" God doesn't come to us to meet our expectations, but to save our lives. Why would we think it would go the way of the world? As the Lord spoke through the prophet years before Jesus, "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*"⁸

So let's return to the original question. What is truth? Maybe it's not so much what can be defined as what you see when you are face-to-face with unconditional love.

Jennifer Fulwider grew up in a loving family of atheists. She learned growing up that religion was not true. God was just not part of the picture. Her bedtime reading as a child was Carl Sagan's astronomy book *Cosmos*. Science explained everything. Jennifer lived a happy, godless life until she became a mother. At that point, she experienced a radical shift in her thinking, which she described this way: "I looked down and thought: 'What is this baby?' And I thought, 'Well, from a pure atheist, materialist perspective he is a randomly evolved collection of chemical

reactions.’ And I realized if that's true then all the love that I feel for him is nothing more than chemical reactions in our brain. And I looked down at him and I thought: ‘That's not true. It's not the truth.’”

That moment proved to be a turning point for Jennifer Fulwider, and it eventually led her to faith in Christ. The scientific explanations of her childhood could not explain the totality of her experience with her child. There is not enough science in the world to explain the reality of love.⁹

Sam Wells quotes a 20th-century French poet who wrote, “There is another world, but it is inside this one.” This is the meaning and the purpose of the cross. On the cross Jesus goes to the heart of it all. He goes inside sin, inside death, inside pain, rejection, hurt, violence, hunger, agony and evil. He goes into the heart of our darkness, the vortex of meaninglessness. And if we are going to respond to the cross, we have to go with him. We have to look into that heart of love. We have to see the soul of that suffering servant on the cross. We have to become aware of this other world, this other kingdom, that is inside the one we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands. Jesus doesn’t go to the cross to make some big, bold statement about the meaning and purpose of life. He goes there to accept the horror and the pointlessness of life, to go inside existence, to drill down to the root of reality, and to discover the truth that is there.¹⁰

Lucille Clifton was an African-American poet who was widely recognized for her poetry before she died in 2010. In one of her poems, she pictures herself trying to keep her eyes closed, ignoring the truth. But then she finishes the poem with a voice

telling her, “You might as well answer the door, my child, the truth is furiously knocking.”¹¹

The truth is furiously knocking on our door. If we will open the door, we will see the heart of Jesus. What we see in the heart of Jesus is the interior and eternal kingdom that is not of this world. “What we see there is the surprise, [the] mystery, and [the] miracle of the Gospel. What we see there [in the heart of Jesus] is us.”¹²

¹ Matt Schneider, "What Is Truth?" Mockingbird blog. *PreachingToday.com*.

² Samuel Wells, *Hanging By A Thread: Questions of the Cross* (New York: Church Publishing, 2016), 39.

³ Wells, 40.

⁴ John 18:36.

⁵ John 18:37.

⁶ John 18:38a.

⁷ Wells, 40f.

⁸ Isaiah 55:8-9.

⁹ Justin Brierly, *Unbelievable* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2017), 71.

¹⁰ Wells, 42f.

¹¹ Hilary Holladay, *Wild Blessings: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 39.

¹² Wells, 43.