

“God’s Living Truth”
Thanksgiving and Christ the King Sunday
John 18:33-37 and Revelations 1:8

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+18:33-37

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=revelation+1:8

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(Sermon adapted from “The Riddler” by Leonard Sweet)

God’s Truth is more than intellectual propositions.

The third *Batman* movie, *Batman Forever*, offered viewers a new Batman, a new Robin, a new Batgirl and two new villains --- Two-Face and the Riddler. Played with typically over-the-top whackiness, Jim Carey’s Riddler came off as wonderfully twisted and crooked as his question-mark walking stick.

Even if he hadn’t been wearing lime green duds and sporting orange hair, the Riddler would have been the movie’s most colorful character. The Riddler was intriguing because he never offered any straightforward answers. He never directly addressed either his cohorts or his enemies. Every statement he made, every hint or challenge he gave Batman, took the form of a mind-bending riddle. If you wanted to know what the Riddler was trying to get at, you had to think.

Jesus appears to be a bit of a “Riddler” himself in today’s gospel lesson. Standing before the Roman prefect Pilate, the one official who can either condemn him to death or set him free, Jesus appears oddly obstinate. Pilate hurls at Jesus some direct, basic questions --- “Are you the King of the Jews?” “What have you done?” He gets back from Jesus only the most oblique of answers. At first, Jesus asks Pilate what he personally has heard or knows to be true. Jesus then offers an unsolicited description of the nature of his kingdom --- that it is “not from this world” and so of no political concern to Pilate.

Finally, when for a third time, Pilate confronts Jesus with a question-accusation that would seem to demand either a “yea” or a “nay” --- “So you are a king?” --- Jesus once again sidesteps Pilate’s question in order to introduce a new subject --- the topic of “truth.” Can’t you imagine Pilate’s frustration? Here he is trying to douse a political flash-fire and all Jesus wants to do is fan the flames by playing philosophical fiddlesticks.

The “riddle-me-this” type responses Jesus gives Pilate do more than drive the Roman official crazy. Jesus’ “answers” introduce new, more appropriate agendas into Pilate’s kangaroo court. When confronted with a wholly uncomprehending audience --- the Pharisees, scribes or others who challenged Jesus’ teachings and proclamations --- Jesus typically refuses to acknowledge his accusers’ inaccurate categories. Jesus transforms these confrontive situations even as he transforms the world.

As Pilate turns to leave Jesus and go back out to face the bloodthirsty crowd in today’s text, the Roman prefect wonders aloud, “What is truth?” What was God’s truth in this strange and twisted situation:

- The truth was not to be found in the fear and frenzy fomenting outside the praetorian;
- The truth was not to be found in Pilate’s courtroom.
- The truth was not to be found in the crowd’s choice of Barabbas the thief over Jesus the Christ.
- The truth was not to be found in the crown of thorns and purple robe Jesus was dressed in by the soldiers.
- The truth was not to be found in the inscription they nailed above him that read “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”
- The truth was not to be found in the sentence of capital punishment that placed Jesus on that cross on Golgotha.

Yet each of these events *did*, in its own oblique way, “bear witness to the truth.” God’s “truth” is a person and not a proposition we put forth, As a Roman functionary who dealt routinely in objectives and outcomes Pilate finds this difficult to understand. The truth for him is a clear cut proposition. Jesus, perhaps for the first time, introduces Pilate to the reality that the truth is not a Proposition, but a Person, and the Person of Truth was standing right before his eyes: Jesus is “The Way, the Truth, the Life.” (**John 14:6**)

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+14:6

We in the modern world are very like Pilate. We expect our definition of truth is based upon solid provable facts. We want principles and propositions in order to define what is true. Yet God's truth lives among us today? God's truth is a complex paradox of a Jesus who was put to death by the Romans and who was raised from the dead and is alive today. Think you're going to get a simple, straight forward, easy answer now? Instead of an answer to the question, "What is God's truth?" allow me to offer you three familiar songs. Each song offers a unique if oblique glimpse into God's truth about life as we know and experience it every day. (Thanks to John Dodson, Los Altos, California, for this idea.)

God's truth overcomes the futility that is present in our world.

Our first song is quite musically advanced, intonationally complex and theologically laden. It is probably one of the very first songs you ever learned, complete with all its hand motions. Sing with me: "Itsy Bitsy Spider"

**The Itsy Bitsy Spider went up the water spout;
Down came the rain and washed the spider out.
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain;
So the Itsy Bitsy Spider went up the spout again.**

This is a cute song! Children love to sing it. But, look at it from the spider's perspective. The truth is that the spider is getting nowhere. The truth about life from the spider's perspective is that life is just one boring thing after another. The ancient Greeks composed a myth to express this truth. The tale of Sisyphus ends with the hero condemned forever to struggle to roll a huge stone up a steep hill. But every time he reaches the top and it looks like his task is finally accomplished, the stone rolls all the way back down to the bottom. Sisyphus begins each day by once again facing his "Sisyphian task" pushing that same rock back up that same hill. Do you know about this portion of the way the world actually is?

- Ask the office worker whose desk sports an "In" box and an "Out" box if life isn't just the same old routine.
- Ask the homemaker who tries valiantly to keep the family's house picked up and looking decent if life isn't just like the "Itsy Bitsy Spider."
- Ask the person who works on the assembly line if a part of life is not just doing the same thing over and over again.

Who doesn't know what it's like to start over and over again, constantly climbing "up the water spout," even though we know that the rain is coming. Is truth the "Itsy-Bitsy Spider"? This song only allows us to see a portion of the truth about life. Let's look at another song from our childhood.

God's truth overcomes the suffering in this world.

Truth also comes to us in the song, "Rock-a-Bye-Baby"? Here's another cheery children's song that has a long, cherished career as a soft and soothing lullaby. But have you really listened to the words?

**Rock-a-Bye Baby in the tree top;
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock.
When the bow breaks, the cradle will fall.
And, down will come baby, cradle and all.**

This is supposed to soothe a fussy baby to sleep --- a song about a baby falling out of a treetop?

Isn't a truth about life the fact that sometimes terrible things *do* happen? Life can unexpectedly jolt us with tremendous loss, pain, betrayal, death. The child's lullaby does not say "if the bough breaks, the cradle will fall." It proclaims "when the bough breaks..." To be alive and living in this world is to live in the midst of falling branches, failing relationships, fragile hearts. Isn't it true that "life is difficult," that life can be tragic?

The New Testament bears witness to this aspect of the truth by both opening and closing with tears. Like life itself, the gospels begin with a cry: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they are no more" (**Matthew 2:18**) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+2:18). Also like life itself, the Bible ends with a cry: "I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, 'Sovereign Lord...how long will it be before you judge and avenge...'" (**Revelation 6:9, 10**). (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=revelation+6:9;10)

Most of us know clearly the taste of tragedy in our lives. We know of the pain of:

- Children dying;
- Youth choosing poorly;
- Middle aged persons diagnosed with life threatening diseases;
- Elderly person's struggling with continual physical and mental losses.

Do I need to go on listing life's tragedies? May I remind you that Jesus himself suffered the reality of life's tragedies when, in pain and despair, he called out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" All of us know that life and death are intertwined. There are "valleys of the shadow of death" in life for all of us. The reality is life is full of surprises --- but not all of them are good. And, the truth in those moments is that God is in Christ reconciling and redeeming the world!

God's truth is found in praise and thanksgiving to Christ Jesus who is the truth!

There is one more truth song, the words written by Princeton Professor Henry Van Duke, the music by Ludwig van Beethoven. The song is called "Ode to Joy."

**Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory,
Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before thee
opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive
the dark of doubt away.
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the
light of day.**

What is truth? "Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love." The ultimate truth is that no matter how serious the grind, no matter how horrific the tragedy, God's love shines through. We can experience joy and gladness and peace in the midst of an "Itsy-Bitsy Spider" world, a "Rock-a-Bye-Baby" life. With God's Truth present in our lives, we can give thanks for all of life. We do not need to deny reality. We do not need to get lost in paranoia. We can give praise and thanks to God at all times in all situations. God's truth is real in all of life because God's Truth experienced all of life.

I challenge you this week give thanks to God all week. Yes, I know that life is tough right now. Yes, I know that we are in a really harsh economic climate. And, yes I know that many people are facing the harsh financial realities of lost dreams and even lost homes. The reality is that this is not the first time Americans have faced hardship.

I invite you to go back in your mind to the beginning of our country. Remember that small band of 102 ill-prepared settlers who, on a cold November morning, established a tiny outpost at Plymouth Rock where they spent a grim and grueling first year. They had to learn and live the harsh reality about life in the "New World." Their crops failed. Their seed rotted. They fell ill from disease and malnutrition. Despite the new land, new hopes and new horizons, there life just seemed to be itsy-bitsy spider like. Although they came to this New World with high ideals, with tremendous reserves of faith in God's providences in their undertakings, the unexpected harshness of the land, the hardness of their new life, their heartsickness for home meant that death came to over half of the first group of Pilgrims. The lullaby of religious freedom turned out to have verses just as mournful as "Rock-a-Bye-Baby," as they buried their wives, husbands and children in the frozen ground of Massachusetts.

But for those who stuck it out --- who experienced these tough truths of life --- there came a time when at last they could hear strains of another ode-to-joy tune weaving its way through their souls.

O Joy, that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to thee; I trace the rainbow through the rain, And feel the promise is not in vain, That morn shall tearless be.

(V. 3 of George Matheson's "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go")

Calling together their colony and joining together with those who were here first, the native peoples whose generosity of spirit, knowledge of their environment, and material goods had made the Anglos' survival possible, the Pilgrims genuinely and joyously gave thanks for their new life in the New World.

The ode-to-joy truth we all can give thanks for this week and every week of the year is that God is present with us through Jesus Christ our Risen Lord who is God's Truth.

- God's love is continually in our midst through the Risen Christ.
- God's forgiveness is eternally available through the Risen Christ.
- God's peace pours out in an unending stream through the Risen Christ.
- God's joy can fill up all the cracked and imperfect corners of our lives through the power of the Risen Christ.

God's truth is alive in the person of the Risen Jesus Christ. God's truth is more complex, more personal, and more involved than a simple proposition or formula. But, formulas and propositions do not save us from death, disease, boredom and the futility of life—Jesus does! Give thanks all this week for the Risen Savior, Jesus Christ, your Lord.