

The Four Horsemen of the Modern American Apocalypse

Horseman #3: The End of Truth

John 18:33-38

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

We're still talking about the end of the world here at NDPC—which is a normal August. If you've been here this month, you know that we're talking about apocalypse—about ominous revelations. We're discussing hard things—the corporate captivity of your attention through devices, the erosion of social truth and cooperation that comes that comes when we make the individual vastly more important than the collective. These are signs that all is not well with America. These warning signs cut across our political and cultural divisions and harm every one of us.

The 3rd horseman of the modern American apocalypse is the end of truth. Truth is under attack. Truth is being abused and mangled in such a way that it is harder to recognize or claim. The love of truth should be a shared virtue. But truth is being mocked, scored, and crucified.

The struggle over truth isn't new. We've been arguing over it at least as far back as ancient Athens, when Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle blended theology, science, and ethics to articulate the best ways for human beings to live. Truth claims of the Greek philosophers were still being discussed during the Roman Empire; they may have been bouncing around in the head of someone we know as "John," who wrote a gospel about Jesus. As John tells Jesus' story, toward the end, Jesus appears before a Roman governor named Pilate, and the two men end up talking about truth:

33 Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Judeans?' 34 Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' 35 Pilate replied, 'I am not a Judean, 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 leaders. 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?'

A powerful Roman governor, surrounded by all the apparatus of Roman power—its laws, its soldiers, its economic domination—interrogates a penniless Jewish wisdom teacher. If this peasant claimed to be a "king," he is guilty of sedition toward the authority of the Roman emperor; he must be killed. Jesus does a Muhammed Ali rope-a-dope. You say I'm a "king," but, if so, a king from an entirely different world. Jesus is opening a crack: perhaps the Roman worldview isn't the only one there is—perhaps there is another "truth," a whole other way of being human with its own beauty, integrity, wisdom, and power? Maybe you,

Pilate, here in your governor's mansion, in your fine clothes, and the glinting points of the solder's spears, can't see it.

Pilate asks a question—I don't know if it's cynical, or if he's genuinely curious: "what is truth?"

What is truth? Is it singular—"the truth?" Is there one? Is truth multiple—are there many? The diversity of the world surely suggest the latter. But if there are many truths, who gets to decide which one prevails? Must we always be fighting over truth?

Move your attention back to our present moment. I can't remember a time in my life where there was more threat to truth than now.

I never imagined a time when a world leader could be against science. Science is a gift of God—it delivers us from superstition; science brings incalculable good to humanity. The coolest thing about science and scientific consensus is that it is not open to your opinion. Scientific truth is proven with theory, study, testing, and revision. There's a reason you don't get to design your own airplane; people who understand science get to decide what airplanes look like and that is why they fly instead of crash. We don't get to have an opinion about whether the climate is warming. Carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels accumulates in the atmosphere and causes temperature increases and we've known this is true since the 1820s. It has been measured again and again and again. You don't get to have an opinion on whether vaccines work and are safe. Vaccines have been in use since the 1700s, they have reduced global infant mortality by 40% in the last 50 years and have saved 150 million lives and have effectively eliminated some diseases.

It's fair to have some suspicion about scientific consensus. For a long time, America's leaders allowed businesses to pour deadly toxins into lakes and streams and soils and the government said, "fine." Because our government has concealed scientific truth to protect powerful corporate interests, there is just enough doubt for a cynical leader to claim "global warming isn't happening" as he vacuums billions of dollars from companies whose profit model depends on the earth's destruction. Attacking the scientific truth of climate change and vaccines will kill neighbors, friends, and eventually us. Science is a holy good; it is one way God reveals Godself to us. Christians must defend scientific truth.

The current threat to truth is more expansive than the assault on science alone. Basic knowledge is being attacked, in fields of learning as diverse as law, journalism, economics, political science, psychology, sociology. To understand how this is happening, we should talk about how truth works in the social sciences. It's not like the "hard sciences," where truth is measured in a lab. In the social sciences, truth emerges through the process of sharing knowledge—truth is a cooperative activity; ideas are shared and tested by others in your field. These people who know a subject deeply are "experts." Knowledge depends on a network of *institutions that connect experts*—universities, professional societies, media, courts; they work together to figure out which ideas best serve the common good. In this

network, there is room for diverse ideas, but within the network everybody agrees to rules: every idea must be tested, no one person gets the final say. Another way of saying this is that we have built a world in which truth requires *epistemic humility*. Deep down, you know that your knowledge is partial, you can't see everything perfectly; to truly understand something requires the wisdom of the whole. You don't possess truth; you participate in it.

Seekers of truth participate in a cooperative process. You draw on experts in every field. If you're the president and you're hoping for a healthy economy, and you get job data from the Bureau of Labor statistics, you don't fire the person who shared the numbers and hire someone to make up numbers that you like more. When historical sites tell painful stories of actually happened there, but that story makes you uncomfortable, you shouldn't re-write history to make it easier on your fragile ego. When you don't like a court decision that finds you guilty of business fraud or guilty of sexually assaulting a woman and publicly smearing her reputation, you can't just say the courts are corrupt. When you lose a free and fair election, you can't claim it was rigged and try to overturn the results. In all these ways, you subvert this extraordinarily powerful network of knowledge that our culture has constructed. Truth has to be a shared pursuit. It has to be pursued with epistemic humility. When truth becomes about you, you become an enemy of the truth.

A lot of us have been wondering how truth got so fragile? How have we come to a place where science and the network of institutions that hold society's common knowledge are so threatened? One reason is the information environment has been created by the internet. When the internet emerged, we were drawn in by the promise of an interconnected world in which knowledge would not be held only by experts, but could be democratized and shared. If the internet only consisted of Wikipedia and Khan Academy, you might think the promise had come true. But what the internet actually brought was a bunch of good information hiding in a whole lot of lies. Things you see on Instagram or YouTube aren't always true. Anyone can post anything. The burden falls on you to discern truth from lies. The fact is that we think we're good at this, but we're not. A macro study found that we can tell if someone's lying about 54% of the time—which is 4% better than flipping a coin. Even worse is that when a lie confirms something we want to believe—we're happy to accept it as truth.

See, we're getting deeper now. This is not about liberals or conservatives. This is about human beings, and our ancient struggle with this thing called "truth." Truth is big; it has many facets. But truth is also slippery, elusive. Truth must include science, but it's more than science; truth must include the common knowledge held among interlocking institutions committed to mutual testing of ideas and epistemic humility. But it's more than that. For human beings, truth is also a story. We long for meaning, and meaning comes through stories. Stories do something that data and theorems can't. Stories connect to our emotions, they are our "why." When our neighbors in America feel abandoned by decades of globalization and someone promises to fight for their jobs, promises not to send their children to die in foreign wars, promises to keep foreigners out and swell national pride, promises to make men feel strong, to make their racial group powerful—for some of us that

story feels “true.” If the only church that didn’t abandon your community tells you that Jesus is on board with your racially-infused American patriotism, that narrative truth just got a divine blessing.

This is why we’ve gotten cynical about truth. Sometimes it feels like all we can do is throw up our hands and say, with Pilate, “what is truth?” It’s all relative. You’ve got your truth, I’ve got mine. Maybe, in the end, it really is just a question of power—which of us has the power to exert our truth over the other? Which of us has the power to censor? Which of us has the power to manipulate information to suit our needs? Which of us has the power to punish the other for deviating from our version of truth?

Let’s go back to this scene that John shows us with Pilate and Jesus. What do you think: was he cynical about Jesus’ truth claim, or was he curious? When this poor, powerless, but clearly deeply wise man stands before him, stands surrounded by all of this apparatus of imperial power, and says, humbly but directly, there is “another kingdom,” what do you think was going on in Pilate’s mind? Does he remember moments in his own life when he perceived a different kind of power—his mother’s compassion, a friend’s forgiveness, the beauty of a gift freely given? But of course, Pilate couldn’t ask Jesus about this other truth. Pilate’s whole world depended on upholding the truth of Rome and silencing the truth of Jesus.

Perhaps we must add one last dimension to our understanding of truth. What does your truth do when it engages another truth? Is your truth like Pilate’s—like Rome’s—that cannot abide by another truth, that tries to silence it or crush it or kill it? Does your truth rely on the censor, the spear, and the cross. Or is your truth like Jesus’? Does it face another truth with calm confidence in its own integrity? Does your truth require love—even that you love those who may, for now, be strangers to the truth?

Don’t give up on truth. Truth is a gift of God. Truth takes science seriously. Truth is a cooperative activity that requires epistemic humility. Truth tells a story that helps us find deeper meaning for our lives and for the world. Truth faces its opponents not with force, but with love.

What is truth? Please, keep asking; hold in conversation a partner who says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”