

Revelation 1:4b-8

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and

ever. Amen.

*Look! He is coming with the clouds;
every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.*

So it is to be. Amen.

'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

John 18:33-38 (NRSV)

*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, "What is truth?"*

The Word of the Lord...

I've been on a mission trip out of the country once in my life. I took my Florida youth group to work in Mexico although we stayed in Texas at night. Every day we drove about an hour down to the border and across into a village made of cardboard houses that were built around the city dump. In my office is a picture of two little girls scouring that dump for any remnant of food. They turned to me and all I had was one piece of gum. They treasured it as I stood there awkwardly wishing I had something more to give and also, to be honest, wishing I was anywhere but there where I felt completely powerless.

By the end of our week the travel, the overbearing heat and being in charge of a very challenging group of teenagers was taking its toll. Our final afternoon in Mexico I quit, walked into the van, slammed the door, turned on the engine and turned on the air conditioner. In the face of the poverty we were working in – no electricity, no plumbing – that was a stunningly arrogant move. And yet it gets worse.

The van was approached by a young woman I recognized from the village and her two young children. She was making hand gestures pointing to herself and to the children and then to me

and I kept shaking my head no. "No dinero, no," I clearly stated. No money from me. And although I didn't say, "Go away," my body language was clear.

Kids started loading into the van and I would bark at each one to shut the door, don't worry about her, we have nothing to give her. Finally we were loaded and I turned so that I could not see her but I knew they were waving.

As our van mercifully drove away I was relieved that I no longer had to linger in her Truth.

Scripture says: *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?... Are you 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, "What is truth?"

The Truth about Pilate is that he was not this nice. The writer of the Gospel of John is adamant in his belief that Jesus came for all and therefore has erred on the side of letting almost all blame fall at the feet of the Jewish leaders of the time. The truth is that Pilate was a vicious servant of the Roman Empire whose only goal was to keep the crowds that were flooding into the region for Passover from causing too much strife and making him look bad. He didn't care who lived or died on his watch – or how brutally it happened.

Are you the King of the Jews?

Pilate's action of following up this question with the corporal punishment of flogging and worse belies the seeming earnestness of his words. The commentary *Feasting on the Word* offers us some clarity:

"Roman's chief authority in Palestine... Pilate is pressing Rome's full authority against Jesus when he asks the question. Boldly, Jesus withstands the pressure and does not answer the question. Rather, he challenges Pilate with a question of his own. Taking control of the conversation, he wants to know the source and motivation of Pilate's inquiry."¹

Through John we are a witness to Eternal Kingdom Truth cutting right through earthly kingdom tensions.

The challenge for us is that in 2009 we live more so in Pilate's tension than in Christ's revelation. What I mean is we can state that the Lord our God is the Alpha and the Omega – who was and is and is to come – we can *proclaim* that as our truth. But it is a constant struggle to live it – and in the greatest of ironies the earthly kingdom culture that pushes us into making these poor decisions of worshiping false idols is the very same culture that judges and takes note of our petty actions over our powerful words.

We speak of Christ's Truth but we live in Pilate's tension.

If we are not actively seeking Truth, learning about Truth, talking about Truth... then what by default becomes our truth?

Who are we really reading/learning/talking about that's our truth?

Is gossip our truth?

Is lament and bitterness our truth?

Is pride and self-righteousness our truth?

If someone did an audit of our financial, emotional and time spreadsheets – what would they say is the truth in our lives?

Video games, television, shopping, the computer, work, sports – does the Truth we proclaim on Sunday mornings match up with our actions through the rest of the week?

Pilate asked him, "So are you 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."

Truth can be transforming. But we have to make the choice to listen for its voice.

Having ears to hear means facing the truth about who we are and what we have become and then trying to live into who it is that God is calling us to be.

Prayer. Worship. Religious Education. Fellowship. Reading Scripture.

All of these are ways people of faith live in the Truth and show that Truth to a world that so desperately needs it.

It is this Truth that holds us accountable as we sort through the minutiae of life. We must be willing to listen. Again from the commentary: "We must be alert, open, and willing to walk into this truth through a discerning obedience that listens wisely, and (is bold enough to) encounter truth as the challenge and gift God gives to us through infinite love and grace."²

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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."

In order to belong to the Truth, we must listen for the Truth.

We must look deeply at what is right and wrong in our actions and attitudes toward others and within ourselves.

A few years ago in Mexico we were mercifully driving away from the poorest of the poor and headed back over the border to Texas. Sitting next to me in the van was one of our mission do-gooders. You know the type, the ones who never complain and are always blessed no matter how big the bug bite or debilitating the heat. I was sitting next to that guy and for the first time

during our entire trip he did not have a silly grin on his face. I didn't ask, but he offered anyway that he had brought a Polaroid camera with him and had run out of film and the camera had jammed and now he felt he had let everybody down.

Now this was a few years ago, not the 70's, so it was beyond me why anyone would lament a jammed Polaroid camera and as you can imagine in my state of mind I commented as such. He shook his head at me and reminded me that the folks where we just were had no access to cameras and so one of the things that brings them joy is when he takes pictures of them and of their children and gives the pictures to them for them to keep. For most, it is the first time they have seen themselves clearly and an opportunity to stop time for a moment when their children are laughing and smiling, not worrying about the constant hunger in their bellies or when they will lose their innocence of youth to the violence and realities that surround them.

As he explained this I was flung into one of those flashbacks that you see in the movies and I realized that the words and the hand gestures from the woman at the side of the van with her two young children were not about money. All she wanted was for me to take her picture.

A wave of disgust at my own self washed over my body and I had to keep myself from getting physically sick. I moved my head into my hands only to bump the side of my face against the cold, hard truth – for in my hand was a camera.

Pilate asked him, "So are you 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."

Like me in the van that day we all fall into the trap of allowing the clatter and clang of the earthly kingdom to overwhelm the voice of Truth. For me it was the shouts of cynicism and screams of self-righteousness ringing in my ears that drowned out the Truth that day.

Grace and love can be subtle.

It takes a conscious effort to hear the Truth.

And sometimes, we hear it way too late. God forbid.

God forbid.

I wish I could say that I no longer allow the voice of Truth to be ignored. But that would just be another line in the self-righteous chorus. What I can do is give you evidence of grace, love and redemption.

Following our trip to Mexico our do good mission man had managed to have an entire truckload of medical supplies ready to be donated to the clinic where we did a lot of our work that week. The day after Thanksgiving on a few months later we began our journey up out of Florida, across the Gulf of Mexico coastline and then back down through Texas. I had a change of clothes, a few magazines... 2 Polaroid cameras and the biggest bag of Polaroid camera film you have ever seen.

Down through Texas, hours spent trying to cross over the border with medical supplies, through dusty roads and finally into the area where we had worked. They knew we were coming... and because God is way too good to me there was the woman with her two young children jumping up and down and waving to me. In exchange for their hugs and absolution of my sins I gave them pictures. Plenty of pictures.

I did not deserve their grace – but then grace has never been something we earn.

Pilate asked him, "So are you 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."

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (Matthew 5:3-10)

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come... To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom... to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.... Amen.

¹ Robert A. Bryant. *Feasting on the World – Year B, Vol 4*. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. John 18:33-37, "Exegetical Perspective," p. 335.

² Emilie M. Townes. *Feasting on the Word – Year B, Vol. 4*. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. John 18:33-37, "Theological Perspective," p. 336.