

Voice 1: The Jewish leaders led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Roman governor's palace. It was early in the morning. So that they could eat the Passover, the Jewish leaders wouldn't enter the palace; entering the palace would have made them ritually impure.

So Pilate went out to them and asked,

Voice 2: "What charge do you bring against this man?"

**Congregation: "If he had done nothing wrong, we wouldn't have handed him over to you."**

Voice 2: "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your Law."

Voice 1: The Jewish leaders replied

**Congregation: "The Law doesn't allow us to kill anyone."**

Voice 1: (This was so that Jesus' word might be fulfilled when he indicated how he was going to die.) Pilate went back into the palace. He summoned Jesus and asked,

Voice 2: "Are you the king of the Jews?"

Voice 1: Jesus answered,

Voice 3: "Do you say this on your own or have others spoken to you about me?"

Voice 2: "I'm not a Jew, am I? Your nation and its chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?"

Voice 3: "My kingdom doesn't originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that I wouldn't have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn't from here."

Voice 2: "So you are a king?"

Voice 3: "You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice."

Voice 2: "What is truth?"

Voice 1: After Pilate said this, he returned to the Jewish leaders and said,

Voice 2: "I find no grounds for any charge against him. You have a custom that I release one prisoner for you at Passover. Do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews?"

Voice 1: They shouted,

**Congregation: "Not this man! Give us Barabbas!"**

Voice 1: (Barabbas was an outlaw.)

**(Common English Bible)**

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Ten days ago, a few of us met with the pastor and elder of our partner church in Santa Clara, Cuba, via zoom. We agreed to do this monthly, on third Fridays at noon. I hope many of you will connect at some point. We heard about the crushing inflation in Cuba, salaries up 5x, prices up 10. And we talked about the war in Ukraine. Given Cuba's close alliance with Russia, I wondered what their perceptions might be. The pastor acknowledged that most of their official news sources are Russian and that, therefore, this war is being represented as righteous and just. But occasionally they access some other news and realize that many civilians are suffering profoundly and know this can never be right, it cannot be God's will. So the Presbyterian Church in Cuba, like the Presbyterian Church in the USA is preparing a statement against the war.

A few days later I learned that the Russian Patriarch, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, is closely allied with Putin and has explicitly blessed this war. A war that, in one month's time, has already claimed more, likely twice more, Russian lives than the total American lives lost in all the post 9.11 conflicts over the course of 20 years, a war that has devastated massive numbers of Ukrainians— 10 million people displaced— 10 million, in a month!!! And so many civilian targets decimated. Some are calling this fratricide because Russians and Ukrainians are kin. How could the church, any church, ever bless such destructive, death-dealing behavior? The Russian Patriarch claims that Ukraine is a nation of sinners and they need to be brought back into the Russian fold in order to be purified. Apparently the Russian Orthodox Church sees itself as the only branch of Orthodoxy not corrupted by barbarians (in earlier centuries of conquest— for example, when Constantinople became Istanbul)... And sees European influence today as deeply corrupting. Ukraine also has spiritual significance for the Russian Orthodox church because Kyiv, considered the birthplace of Russian Orthodoxy, is where Prince Vladimir the Great was baptized in 988, which initiated the Christianization of “Holy Rus” which included the territories of modern-day Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. So while from one angle it may appear that this war is about Putin seeking to re-establish the boundaries of the previous Soviet empire, the land grab of a zealous leader; there is a theological claim about the rightful unity of all these territories. Religious power and political power have aligned to deadly ends.

It is certainly not the first time that this has happened. Consider the role of the national church in Germany in the first half of the 20th century. Consider the way American aggression has been baptized by American churches. Nationalism and Theology are a dangerous combination. But this is not only a modern phenomenon. We see it at play in our Gospel reading today. Religious leaders bring Jesus to Pilate's palace, the winter residence of the Roman governor for the region. That these are two distinct spheres of power is emphasized by the unwillingness of the religious leaders to go inside the palace grounds for fear that they will be made impure on the eve of one of the holiest festivals of the Jewish year. Pilate comes out to them and asks them why they have brought Jesus to him. They don't level a concrete charge. "If he hadn't done anything wrong, we wouldn't have handed him over to you." Like what? What did he do wrong? Pilate seems irritated— judge him yourselves, he says. He hasn't been given any grounds to be concerned about this guy. He doesn't want to be bothered. Then the religious leaders respond in a most puzzling way, "The Law doesn't allow us to kill anyone."

We know, because we've been reading this Gospel for a few months, that the religious leadership has decided that Jesus needs to die. It seems, in fact, that they were concerned that the movement he was building would attract unwelcome, repressive attention from their occupying power, Rome, and they thought it better for him to die than for their whole nation to be destroyed. Interestingly though, it was the raising of Lazarus from the dead that cemented their conclusion that Jesus needed to die. There's something particularly threatening in our death dealing world about someone who appears to wield the power of life over death.

We know that they took up stones to try to kill Jesus earlier in the Gospel. And there is and was, actually, great debate among rabbis about whether the death penalty is sanctioned by Hebrew law, but perhaps the religious leadership wanted Rome to do the dirty work— Rome was a particularly vicious, death dealing machine. They could have said something like, "He's threatening the authority of Rome and destabilizing this region." That might have gotten Pilate's attention. But they don't say that. They just say he's guilty and he needs to die and you need to kill him.

So Pilate decides to question Jesus. And he starts by asking, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus asks him where he got this idea. And that's a good question. It doesn't appear that the religious leadership has called him this. Perhaps a claim to kingship not blessed by the emperor would be a legitimate cause for concern. Pilate is looking for grounds and Pilate is irritated by Jesus' reply. He admits he has no idea why Jesus has been handed over to him. Then Jesus says, "My kingdom doesn't originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that I wouldn't have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn't from here." To which Pilate replies, "So you are a king?" It seems Jesus is unwilling to accept the title of king as it is understood in this world. Kingdoms in this world are built by force, defended by force, and often deal in death and lies. The kingdom Jesus has come to establish is based on truth and life. Pilate responds by asking the famous question, "What is truth?"

There are many ways to interpret this question, but Pilate was an agent of empire; empires are propaganda factories. Truth becomes a wobbly, uncertain commodity in empire. He maybe genuinely has no idea what truth is. But he was looking at it. I've heard more than one pastor and scholar point out that he asks the wrong question—the question is not what, but who is truth? Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus stays silent in the face of this question.

And so Pilate returns to the religious leaders claiming to have no grounds to execute him, offering to release him as it was custom to release one prisoner on the Passover. He calls him not Jesus of Nazareth, but King of the Jews. He can't let go of this earthly understanding or perhaps he is mocking the religious leadership by using this language. And the crowd asks for the release of Barabbas, an outlaw, an actual, known criminal, perhaps a folk hero, but... if they had a choice, he was an odd one.

This is the thing about humans. We often make odd choices. We often choose death over life. We often think violence the only tool that works and put our trust in earthly leaders who are wielding power irresponsibly. We often use the name of God to bless that which bears no resemblance to the good news of life and truth embodied in Jesus. And every time this happens... things get nasty. Bloodied bodies nasty. Homes

destroyed nasty. Concentration camp nasty. Bombing maternity hospitals nasty.  
Nuclear weapons nasty.

Last week our Cuban kindred, who are under the thumb of multiple oppressive empires, reminded us that our mission is to advance the kingdom of God, that kingdom of which Jesus testified before Pilate, that kingdom that is not of this world, that is the domain of life, and justice, and peace. There are brave Russian Christians bearing witness to this kingdom at risk to their own lives just as there were brave German Christians doing the same in the midst of the Second World War and as some American Christians have done and are doing in the face of some of the worst atrocities perpetrated by our own government. As time slips into the future in our world oriented towards death, may we set our sights on the one who is truth and apply our energy to the cause of Christ's kingdom.

**Source in Addition to Scripture that Influenced this Sermon**

I'm grateful for a conversation with my mentor Dr. J. Patout Burns who helped me understand some of the dynamics within Russian Orthodoxy.

John Chryssavgis, "The unholy ideology driving both Putin and Patriarch Krill in the Russia-Ukraine War" in *America: The Jesuit Review*, March 21, 2022, accessed on-line, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/03/21/ukraine-russia-war-putin-church-242632>

Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr. "Episode 334 What is truth? (John 18:28-40)" on their *Bible Worm Podcast*. <https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-334-what-is-truth-john-1828-40/>