**John 18:33-40 March 10, 2021**

**Witnesses on the Road to Golgotha III: Pontius Pilate**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Shouldn’t he have been the hero? We’ve looked at the villains these past 2 weeks. Caiaphas the High Priest, he schemed to kill Jesus using his religious authority. Judas, the disciple, betrays him and gives Jesus into the hands of the evil men who want to do him harm. But Pontius Pilate, the man we look at tonight, the one with the authority to put Jesus to death, shouldn’t he have been the hero? After all, as we have been singing and meditating upon tonight in our hymn, it’s a simple question, “O Dearest Jesus, what law hast thou broken?” Pontius Pilate would want to know the answer to that simple question. He had the power. He even, as we just heard, after questioning Jesus himself says, “I find no guilt in him.” He’s on the right path. We find in Matthew chapter 27:19 that he receives word from his wife to have nothing to do with this “innocent man”. What was the problem? He witnesses Jesus, he sees what he’s charged as, an insurrectionist, a violent rebel who wants to overthrow the Romans, and then he sees him standing before him and he doesn’t know what to make of him! “Are you King of the Jews?” He almost can’t believe whatever answer Jesus gives, this is just a plain looking man, this is the powerful one? Him? Pontius Pilate is smarter than to believe the lies of the religious authorities, the ones who were a pain in his side. So what happened? How does hero turn to villain? How does a powerful authority give in to the demands of evil people? How does truth get distorted for a man of authority so much, that upon hearing Jesus say, “everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” He responds, “What is truth?” And the greater question for us tonight, when do we ponder that question? When do we get distorted on the truth? When have we found ourselves the villain of the story?

Jesus of Nazareth was on trial for His life. The religious leaders of Israel had convicted Him in their court as a blasphemer, a crime worthy of death, according to their selfish and evil standards; but because they were a conquered people, the Jews lacked the authority to carry out the death sentence they desired. So they petitioned the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, to carry out that sentence for them. Pilate heard their charges against Jesus, and he focused on the one that could possibly have mattered to Roman interests: the charge that Jesus claimed to be a king. Jesus testified that He was, indeed, a king, but that His kingdom was not of this world. Instead He came to bear witness to the truth. He testified that everyone who cherishes and holds to the truth would listen to Him. Pilate’s response set the tone for everything that would follow. He asked, “What is truth?”

You see, Pilate knew the truth concerning Jesus. This wasn’t an earth-shaking confession such as Peter made when he said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Nevertheless, Pilate spoke the truth about Jesus when he said, “I find no fault in Him at all.” This was the bare-bones truth. Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against Him by the Jewish authorities, and Pilate was fully aware of that fact. But what could that mean to a man who asked, “What is truth?” In a sense, Pontius Pilate is the father of what we call post-modernism, an ideology that says reality is relative and depends on who the interested parties are and what their interest is. You see, Pilate knew the truth, but he didn’t let that get in the way of what he believed is in his own best interest. The trial against Jesus should have ended then and there, the moment he ruled that Jesus was innocent of the charges. It had already gone on longer than it should have. There was no case, no cause for criminal procedure. With all his authority as Caesar’s representative in this region, Pilate should have released Jesus without hesitation.

But Pilate was a weak man, a coward. Though he carried the emperor’s authority with him he was afraid of an insurrection during his watch—especially since the Jews were gathered in Jerusalem in greater numbers than usual because of annual observance of the Passover. A rebellion during the festival had the potential to be deadly—not only for the soldiers under his command, but also to his career. So in order to keep the peace in Jerusalem and appear powerful and merciful at the same time, he offered the crowd a choice between the just and innocent Jesus, whom he called “the King of the Jews”, and Barabbas, called a robber by John and an insurrectionist and murderer by Mark. Perhaps he was surprised when the crowd shouted for Barabbas. But because he was weak and only wanted to placate the crowds, he had no choice but to let an innocent man face a punishment he did not deserve. Pilate heard the truth, but he was not interested in the truth, nor did he belong to it. The man who could have been the hero, became a villain after all.

Truth is a precious gift of God, but it is a gift that is often unwelcome, a gift that comes under constant attack. Do you belong to the truth? Do you hear and cling to the voice of Christ? It is not easy to walk in the way of truth. You know this all too well. Be angry at Pilate if you must, but do not ignore the truth. The truth is, as we learned and confess in the Close of the Commandments, “God is a just and jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Him.” The truth is, you are as responsible for Christ’s crucifixion as Pilate. You are as responsible as if you had brought the false accusation against Jesus. You are just as responsible as if you had cried out for Barabbas. You are as responsible as if you had ignored the truth of the innocence of Jesus and surrendered Him yourself into the hands of sinful men with selfish and evil motives. You bear the curse of sin, inherited from your first parents Adam and Eve. With them, you look for some kind of greater truth than what God has revealed to you in His Word. You look for the truth in the treasures of this world. You look for the truth from fellow sinners. You live in a world that denies that there is objective truth; a world that denies that there is a universal right or wrong; a world that says that what is right for you may not be right for me; a world that says what Christ calls “sin” is the product of the time in which Jesus lived, and if He lived today He would say something different—and it’s so easy to buy into the “wisdom” of the world. With Pilate you have heard the Word of truth, but in the imagination of your hearts, deluded by your own self-interests, you ignore the voice of truth, the Word of God, to pursue your own sinful desires. Jesus, the innocent King of the Jews, the Son of God, is the voice of truth. That should be truth enough.

And if that truth is not enough, then listen to this truth: On the cross, Jesus suffered the wrath of God which your sin deserved. Ultimately, the cross is not the result of vengeful Jewish chief priests or misguided former disciples or cowardly Roman governors. They may seem to be the villains of this story, and even though they acted in selfish and sinful ways, they are just acting as God’s instruments to bring the innocent, faultless Christ to the cross. God is at work behind their actions to carry out His judgment against your sin and the sin of the whole world upon His Son. That’s right, tonight I’m here to reveal that you are the villain of the story, and so am I. The cross is the result of God’s great love for you, the people He created. The cross is not a victory for the chief priests and the leaders of Israel. It is not a victory for Pontius Pilate. It is not even a victory for the devil or the world, though this world’s prince and those who belong in his domain may delight in the suffering of Jesus. The cross is Christ’s victory: victory over the devil’s temptation to save Himself, victory over the satanic desires of the chief priests, but most especially victory over the sin whose wages would condemn us into everlasting death. The innocent, sinless Son of God bore that sin to the cross, dying the death your sin earned for you. Through Baptism you died that death with Him; and because the innocent Son of God died that death for you, through Baptism you are raised up with Him.

The truth is, Jesus is the innocent, sinless Son of God. The truth is, through Holy Baptism, your sin becomes His burden, and His righteousness becomes Your innocence before God. When the world asks you, “What is truth?” your answer becomes, “Jesus is the truth.” Cling to the Truth, for in Him you have abundant life. And tonight, as we are past the midway point of Lent, know this with certainty, Jesus broke no law on his own, but took the world’s guilt and wrong upon himself, to save us. That’s the truth.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.