

What is Truth?
Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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John 18:28-40

Pontius Pilate was neither good, nor empathetic, nor particularly wise. But he was powerful. Appointed by the Emperor Tiberius to the office of Prefect of the region of Judea, his term began 4 years before Jesus started his public ministry; he held the position about 11 years, until some 4 years after Jesus died.

He lived in and ruled most of the year from Caesarea Maritima, which was the coastal capital of Judea, about 70 miles away from Jerusalem. I've been to the archaeological site – twice. Back in its day, Caesarea was an engineering marvel, developed from an old fishing port by Herod the Great around the time of Jesus' birth, and converted into something like an Ancient Las Vegas.

It boasted a harbor rivaling Alexandria and Athens, entirely constructed from cement made of quarried lava and lime – and it's remarkable that so much of it remains today. Soaring over the harbor was an enormous stadium which held chariot races and gladiators matches, and an even more enormous ornate palace, in which the Prefect, Pontius Pilate lived and ruled the region.

Someone had to quarry the stone and the lime, build the forms for the cement under water, carry the stone, and pay for it. Actually... many someone's did the labor and paid the exorbitant taxes-- the people, the peasants, who lost limb, life, and livelihood to build the infrastructure that maintained a peace brought about through brute force called the *Pax Romana*.

At the end of his reign, Pilate was recalled to Rome by the Emperor for an insidious act of violence. As the story goes, Pilate and his people claimed that an archeological relic of Moses had been found at the holy site of Mount Gerazim, and when the faithful flocked to see it, he ordered his military to surround and slaughter them. For this, he was

ordered back to Rome, tried in high court, exiled (and ordered to kill himself).

Pilate was incredibly insensitive to the people he ruled. He conscripted soldiers from neighboring Samaria, which often caused a rift between local civilians and the military (remember that the Jews and Samaritan hated each other).

Pilate even brought engraved images of the Emperor into the city of Jerusalem, ordering them to be erected in the Temple, a travesty if ever there was one.

Pontius Pilate said that anyone who did not worship the Roman Emperor would be killed. When the people protested, saying they would rather die than desecrate the laws of Moses, he barely averted an uprising by making the penalty a long imprisonment instead of the death penalty.

Pilate was the Internal Revenue Service, Governor, and Supreme Court all wrapped up in one. He oversaw the collection of taxes, commanded a military unit of about 3000 men, and held trials of those accused of treason against the Roman Empire.

The local Jerusalem-based court of law was called the Sanhedrin. They ruled on Jewish spiritual matters, and although they were relatively independent of Pontius Pilate; the High Priest was politically appointed by Rome. These two judicial systems were woven together, almost symbiotically. High Priest Caiaphas, the head of the Sanhedrin, was known to take advantage of Pilate's personality, his predilection for believing propaganda, and his hunger for power.

Pilate reluctantly went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, the holy time in which Jews celebrate their ancestors overthrowing an oppressive ruler. He'd much rather have stayed home in his seaside palace, but he recognized that Jews could compare the harsh treatment by the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh to their current situation in which they suffered under Rome. This festival made him nervous.

So, he was primed for a fight, and the predictions about this year's event included a high chance of violence, perhaps even insurrection. So he left his gilded tower in Caesarea Maritima and arrived in Jerusalem, the center of the faith of the people he ruled.

He came with his own National Guard to "*keep the peace*" and squelch any violence aimed at the state, marching into the city in the glory of a military parade, with banners and horses and rows of high stepping saluting men carrying arms.

The next morning he received a report that there were protestors gathering outside his door. The riotous rabble were awaiting a decision about a heretical rabbi who had been arrested overnight and questioned by the Sanhedrin.

This rabbi, named Jesus, had been arrested for calling himself the King of the Jews; he had been questioned for his religious teachings, and brought to Pilate not only as a heretic but as a traitor.

High Priest Caiaphus, or one of his representatives, might have reminded Pilate that tax evasion was treason, that Jesus had called tax collectors to leave their posts and follow him.

Pilate questioned this rabbi himself, "*Are you the King of the Jews?*" Jesus, the much smarter of the two, answered in true rabbinical form with another question, "*Are you asking this on your own or did someone tell you this about me?*" Pilate's dismissive answer, that he was not a Jew, implied he did not know that much about their customs and titles, nor did he really care.

Pilate told Jesus he was being accused by the High Priest, and then he asked him what he had done that was so bad that his trial was rushed so that the case had to be settled before Passover festivities could even begin.

And then... Jesus said the most dangerous thing he could, "*My kingdom doesn't belong to this world.*" In the realm of Emperors and Prefects, this is a *dangerous* statement. It questions those who hold the power of governance, of tax collection, of judicial activity. It delegitimizes the one in power and looks elsewhere for that leadership.

Pilate, at first, did not see anything wrong with how he answered, this was a local problem not a national one. It was an issue within this bizarre faith that didn't worship the emperor, had a silly spiritual law against graven images, and prayed to a God who blessed the poor, the weak, the elderly, the enslaved.

And Pilate knew that the only god of his realm, Emperor Tiberius, blessed the wealthy, the powerful, the strong, and those who were loyal to him. And Pilate wanted to be blessed by that god.

This skinny, dirty, backwoods "*King of the Jews*" did not threaten him. The crime did not rise to the level of him needing to do anything about it. And yet, when Jesus said, "*I was born into this world to tell about the truth,*" Pilate began to wonder about the intel he had been fed. What was real and true, and what was fake news?

Who had the truth, this humble rabbi or Caiaphus?

The crowd, stirred up by the propaganda of it all, joined the cry to put Jesus to death and release Barabbas.

Now Barabbas, barely a blip in this story, was a bauble dangled before the crowd to distract them; John wrote that he was a bandit, reminding us that bandits are known to steal the attention of the sheep away from the calming voice of the Shepherd.

Pilate asked the people how he should decide. The crowd, in their mob mentality, took responsibility for Jesus' death, and Pilate symbolically washed his hands of the affair.

Jesus had said, "*My kingdom is not of this world.*" His kingdom blessed the poor, the powerless, and the peacemakers. His kingdom relied on relationships that built on the truth... which is love.

Claiming to be a citizen of that kingdom, rather than a party to the power and propaganda of this world, is a dangerous action. May God protect all who take a public stance on the side of God's Love, and save us from modern day Pontius Pilate's. Amen.