Four times in the past six years (twice in 2015, once just last November), I’ve focused on what I’m about to launch into. I looked it up to see how repetitious I’ve become. In fact, it’s the main reason I save my sermons, to make sure I’m not saying the same thing over and over.

But who am I kidding? That’s all I do. I have only a handful of sermons, really—just dressed up in different ways. And if I can’t remember how many times I’ve said something, why would I think you’ll remember it better than I do. I mean, it’s just not that memorable. . . . or I’d remember it, remember what I said. Still, I knew I’d picked up this line with some regularity over the years. And now I’ve come to think that maybe I’m meant to keep at it, at least until I make some better sense of it, or I give up.

Here it is: Pilate says to Jesus, after some jockeying back and forth . . . mostly forth, from Pilate, as Jesus is a man of few words in his interview with Pilate.

Pilate says, asks, “What is truth?”

Speaking of memorable, I find it to be one of the most memorable lines in all four accounts of the Passion. In all of scripture, really. And Pilate, that old shill in the audience, a kind of stand-in for all of us, asks the question for us.

There’s been a lot of talk between the two of them about monarchy, who’s a king, who’s not a king, if Jesus is a king, what kind of king is he, and so on.

He’s told Pilate, “My kingdom is not from here,” to which that beleaguered government official says, right away, “So you *are* a king?” (picking up on the one thing, the one technicality, that might help him send Jesus to the gallows).

Jesus rolls his eye (they left that out of the text), breathes a sigh of exasperation, and says, “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.”

And . . . here it comes . . . Pilate asks the $64,000 question: “What is truth?”

The reason I think this is such a big deal is that I think we all ask that question over and over again in many different ways. On one hand it’s like asking, “What really matters in this world?” On another hand it might be something like, “Tell me what’s expedient here.”

We’ve just come through (man, was *that* an optimistic turn of phrase) . . . we are *continuing to go through* an era of flexibility in truth, so to speak. Alternate facts. *My* truth. *Your* truth. It just goes on and on. What’s the truth about this pandemic? Is sick really sick? Is alcoholism a moral failing or is it an addictive disease?

What I’m trying to say is that we continue to ask if something is true long after we have proved that it is. We human beings, I mean. It’s as if by asking it over and over the truth will change to something we like better.

What is truth isn’t the $64,000 question; it’s not even the final question (my final answer) on “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” In many ways, it’s *the* question.

Here are some questions about truth: Is this all there is, this blink of an eye of 70 or 80 or 100 years? If that is so, is my best bet to acquire all I can for myself and my family? *Or*, if that is so, do I find meaning in helping others regardless of the cost to myself? Do I pursue as much knowledge as I can, as much wealth, as many friends? Is it some combination of all of that and all that I haven’t mentioned?

What’s the truth?

After Pilate asks Jesus the big question, he doesn’t stick around for an answer. Maybe Jesus has clamped his mouth shut. Or maybe he’s just about to open his mouth to give him the answer we all want to hear. But the next line in John’s gospel is simply, “After he [Pilate] had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, ‘I find no case against him.’”

Whatever Pilate may think the truth is at this point, seeing Jesus’ innocence is part of it. Evidently. Because that’s what he does—walk out to the crowd, and that’s what he says—these are bogus charges.

Things turn really ugly after that. We know the story well.

This time around, I heard Jesus’ answer to a different question posed in a different context, and the question wasn’t Pilate’s straightforward one—“What is truth?”

John’s more committed to this question than I had remembered. The other occasion I recalled is also in this gospel—that material between the Last Supper and the Passion that we call Jesus’ farewell discourse. Jesus tells his disciples, “I’m going away now, but you will come and be with me.”

And Thomas, good old doubting Thomas, says for all of us, “Look. We don’t know where you’re going. How can we know the way?”

And here it comes, Jesus’ answer: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

There we go. Though I didn’t intend it when I wrote those three words, that is the case: there we go. To that . . . place where Jesus goes. And I don’t mean place as in “heaven in the sky,” as in “pie in the sky, by and by.” I mean place, as in, if you’ll excuse the reference, a place in the heart, a place in the world. When Jesus mentions “the life” along with “the truth” I think he’s saying something about the way (there’s that word again) we live our life now.

And he offers Thomas and the twelve and all his followers (including you and me) more than a roadmap, more than printed instructions to get there. He offers us himself. Follow me, he says: “I’m the way.”

So, in a real sense, we’re on the way right now.

Back to John and his way of depicting Jesus. It’s John’s gospel that opens with that soaring language, that preamble that rumbles down to us through the centuries: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Just a few verses later, John writes, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” Just a couple of verses later he speaks again of “grace and truth” coming to us through Jesus Christ. And then at several points he speaks of “spirit and truth,” of testifying to the truth, and then, famously, having Jesus say to his followers, “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” In John’s gospel, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as the Advocate, as the Spirit of truth.

It doesn’t feel like I’ve gotten any closer than I had in previous attempts to sort out Pilate’s, but maybe it’s matter of tiny increments, baby steps along the way.

After last night I’m left with feeling that Jesus’ being the king of truth is wrapped up in that last action after pre-execution meal with his disciples. He washes their feet and says, “Love each other. Love each other as I have loved you.”

Maybe that’s the truth of which he is the king, which he embodies and to which we are called. + + +