

At the end of one year and the beginning of another, invite us, God, into a new season where we enter into the devastating holiness enthroned deep in our heart of hearts where Truth reigns. Amen.

Although we're going to be focusing on the Gospel this morning, I wanted to make sure that you heard these beautiful words from King David, said to be his last words before he died.

Now since David goes on to fight battles and do other kingly activities later in the book of 2 Samuel,

the chances are slim that these are truly his last words.

But that doesn't take away from their beauty.

"One who rules over people justly... is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land."

You can just smell feel the freshness of the day and the sweetness of the air.

We can only hope our last words will be as memorable.

There are lots of websites where you can spend hours scrolling through the last words – wise, silly and otherwise – of all kinds of people from rock stars to Roman emperors.

But it was Henry David Thoreau's last words that caught my eye, especially in light of today's readings.

When his aunt asked him, "Are you concerned about the next world?"

He replied, "One world at a time." One world at a time.

It almost feels as if we are living in 2 worlds recently.

There is a universe where the facts are facts **and**

it seems as if there is a parallel universe where the facts are alternative facts.

Do the laws of thermodynamics and quantum mechanics apply in both? Unclear.

It's v disorienting.

Because everything from election results

to the shootings at Sandy Hook elementary school are in dispute

and no matter how solid the evidence is,

it can always be dismissed with a claim of bias or fraud.

And just to compound the feeling of disorientation and living in multiple universes

there are the wonderful Meow Wolf billboards around town which say things like –

If you were here, you'd be now by then.

Christians have often been described as living in 2 worlds at the same time.

In the first few centuries after Jesus died,

most Roman citizens saw Christians as pagans for not worshipping the true gods, Zeus and his cohort;
they considered Christians to be cannibals
because they ate Jesus' body and blood in their services;
and traitors because they did not swear their loyalty to the Roman emperor.
Their loyalty was to a different kingdom.

The idea of being in one place but belonging to 2 worlds
seems to echo Jesus' conversation with Pontius Pilate
from the Gospel this morning.

"My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus tells Pilate
at the beginning of their extremely roundabout conversation.
They can't seem to hear each other very well,
or at least Pilate can't grasp what Jesus is saying so they go back and forth.
Pilate makes a statement.

Then Jesus responds with what are indirect or inscrutable statements
and there doesn't seem to be much progress.

The fascinating thing about this scene is that as Pilate struggles
to understand this man who says his kingdom is not from this world,
he physically reflects this tension, this duality in his actions.
The trial takes place at the praetorium, the Governor's Palace.
Jesus is being held inside it, under arrest.

A crowd comes to demand his death.

They, as observant Jews cannot enter the praetorium
because they would be defiled
and would not be able to eat the upcoming Passover meal.
So they stand outside.

Pilate has to move back and forth between Jesus inside and the crowd outside.

He hears what they have to say
and then he hears what Jesus has to say, back and forth.

John describes the trial in 7 scenes.

Scene one – Pilate is with Jews.

Scene 2, Pilate is with Jesus, and back and forth.

His movement from one to the other echoes what it is like
to live in 2 kingdoms at once – moving back and forth from one to the other –
a tension that is also often true for us.

Many worlds, many truths.

The passage we read this morning ends with Jesus using the phrase
"whoever belongs to the truth," which raises the questions –

What is your truth? What truth do you belong to?
It feels like we are in a war over the truth with pitched camps on several sides.
Some people say we live in a post-truth era.
There is the truth according to Fox News.
The truth according to MSNBC.
But no matter where we turn, finding the pure, undiluted truth is elusive.
Because all of the news sources have their own bias,
their own take on the truth, so it's never quite the absolute truth.
We have gotten so caught up in the search for factual truth that we have almost
become slaves to it. Where is it? What is it?
And we have gotten so caught up in political or societal truths
that we may have forgotten about the most important truth –
the existential truth of meaning that lives deep in our souls.

It's kind of odd that today's reading from John ends at v 37
because in the next verse Pilate asks his haunting question, What is truth?
A question for every time and place.
Did Pilate ask the question out of contempt or curiosity, hunger or anger?
It doesn't really matter because Jesus doesn't respond.
That is, he doesn't respond with words.
He doesn't engage Pilate in a philosophical dialogue,
or offer the governor a pithy bumper sticker.
Instead, he embodies his reply with the whole of his life:
You're looking at it, his silence implies.
You're looking at the truth. I am the truth.
In other words, truth isn't an instrument, a weapon,
or a slogan we can smack on a refrigerator magnet. The truth is Jesus.
The life of Jesus, the way of Jesus, the love of Jesus.
He himself is truth's most complete and complex embodiment.

If you look at the verb that's translated "to belong" in Greek
it's actually part of the verb TO BE - to be in, to be for.
So the truth we seek is not something to be grasped or acquired
but our essence – who we are, how we act.
This is the real truth that Jesus offers us and showed us.
A truth that can set us free as Jesus says earlier in the Gospel of John,
a truth that empowers us to act out of the same deep and radical freedom
that Jesus himself knew.

The truth that Jesus calls us to belong to
is the truth he embodied in his life, death, and resurrection.
It did not serve to bolster his own power and authority, rather,
it humbled him, it emptied him, it took away his life.
Jesus' version of truth never sidestepped humility, surrender, and sacrificial love.
He didn't secure his own prosperity at the expense of other people's suffering.
He didn't allow holy ends to justify questionable means.
He didn't make honesty optional when the truth struck him as inconvenient.
And he never aligned himself with brute, dishonest power
to guarantee his own success.
He was the truth, a perfect mirror in which people saw themselves
in God's own light, in which we see ourselves in the light of God.
in which we see the sobering, energizing, humbling, freeing and ultimately
beautiful truth about ourselves.