

# Seven Questions

John 18:28-40

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This year during Lent, we are drawing from worship resources with theme “Dwelling in Dissonance.”

The word “dissonance” comes to us from the world of music and has to do with when two notes sound discordant, like they don’t belong together, don’t fit, where we’re longing for harmony, for resolution, for the way things are supposed to sound.

In 1990, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney wrote a book called “The Cure of Troy.” It is an adaptation of ancient Greek tragedy called *Philoctetes* which was written during the Trojan War of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Heaney’s adaptation contains this line:

History says, Don’t hope  
On this side of the grave...  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up,  
**And hope and history rhyme.**

This, for me, is a perfect depiction of “dissonance.” We believe that hope and history *should* rhyme. But they don’t.

Lest you think I am prone to spending my time reading Irish adaptations of ancient Greek tragedies, alas, I don’t. I encountered that line in a U2 song called Peace on Earth:

Jesus in the song you wrote  
The words are sticking in my throat  
Peace on Earth

Hear it every Christmas time  
But hope and history won't rhyme  
So what's it worth?  
This peace on Earth

I seem to need my poetry delivered with drums and guitar to make the medicine go down.

Anyway, Heaney's poem and U2's song speak to the dissonance of human experience.  
That which we most long for we have not experienced.

So, we're sitting with that dissonance this year during Lent, the ways in which hope and history don't rhyme, in our lives, in our world, and in the story of Jesus' last week.

We're making our way through about a chapter and a half of John's gospel from Jesus' arrest to his crucifixion. Something we usually do on Maundy Thursday (and will do again this year) we're doing throughout Lent.

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As I pondered our text this week, I kept coming back to the questions that show up in the story.

A good question can often be as important as the answer or response it provoked. Have you noticed this?

Last weekend at our retreat, I was often struck at how one good question could create a space for all kinds of possibilities. A question as simple as, "What's your favourite story in the bible" led to fascinating conversations.

At the jail, when I'm struggling to know how to approach a chapel or when the group dynamics feel like they might be a bit of a challenge to manage, I often think, "Okay, Ryan, just think of one good question... That's all you need, one question!"

A few months ago, we had a get together for Naomi's birthday and I invited each person who came to respond to a question in advance: "What's one thing that's become clearer to you as you have aged?"

(I stole this from David Brooks' book *How to Know a Person!*)

It was really interesting to see how people responded and how reading the answers out loud changed the tone of the evening.

A question can make all the difference in the world. It can clarify, reveal, expose.

My sermon title this morning is “Seven Questions.” When I came up with that title on Thursday, I had decided to organize my sermon around the seven questions that show up in our text today.

Yesterday, I noticed that there are actually eight questions in this passage. But the bulletin had already been printed, so the title remains “Seven Questions.”

Seven is a biblical number for completion, so it makes sense on a theological if not a mathematical level. 😊

At any rate, the questions, as we will see, tell a story.

Let’s set the scene. Two weeks ago, we looked at the story of Peter’s denial of Jesus in the courtyard while Jesus was being interrogated by the Jewish high priest.

Now, Jesus has been dragged from the Jewish high priest Caiaphas’s office and hauled before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the province of Judea.

He is alone. His closest friends have deserted or denied him.

The religious leaders want Jesus to be executed for blasphemy, but their law forbids them from doing it themselves. So, they have (rather conveniently and self-interestedly) set aside their differences with Rome for the moment and made their appeal to their oppressors.

I listened to an interview a while back with a scholar from Stanford University named Cynthia Haven who talked about scapegoating and about how as human beings we often bond around shared hatreds.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.econtalk.org/rene-girard-mimesis-and-conflict-with-cynthia-haven/>

I don't think we have to look far in our culture to see evidence of this. Nothing brings people together, whether on the right or the left, like a common enemy!

Cynthia Haven points out that Herod (the Jewish puppet king) and Pilate (the Roman governor) bonded together around the crucifixion of Jesus. This is particularly evident in Luke's telling of the story where it says that these former enemies became friends around the scapegoating of an innocent man.

At any rate, Jesus has moved from the Jewish high priest to the Roman governor, and the state is set for the first question.

**First question: "What charges are you bringing against this man?"**

This is a question asked by Pilate to the Jewish religious leaders. It is asked by an occupying power to those who are occupied.

And it's a question that seems laced with irritation.

First, Pilate is likely only in Jerusalem, instead of his usual home of Caesarea (between Haifa and Tel Aviv today), because it's the Jewish festival of Passover and huge numbers of Jews have come to the city that he rules.

He's there for crowd control, basically. He doesn't want unrest, but he senses it is lurking at his door.

Second, he has to come out to them in the courtyard because they won't risk ritual defilement by entering the house or establishment of a Gentile.

I cannot imagine this thrilled him. He's probably not keen to referee a Jewish religious squabble. We can imagine Pilate is in a bit of a foul mood here.

*Why are you troubling me with this issue? What charges are you bringing against this man?*

The Jewish leaders answer with a non-answer. "If he weren't a criminal, we wouldn't have brought him to you."

Pilate is not impressed. *Fine, you don't want to answer the question, go deal with him yourselves.* Pilate wants no part of this.

Now, the Jewish leaders are at least honest. *Our law does not permit us to execute him. Much as we dislike you Romans and your occupation, we need your muscle to deal with this guy.*

How interesting, the level of hypocrisy and cognitive dissonance these leaders were prepared to tolerate.

At the mention of execution, Pilate turns from the Jewish leaders to Jesus himself. Which leads to our second question.

**“Are you the king of the Jews?”**

At this point of the proceedings, Pilate senses that he can’t get rid of this problem easily, so he decides to dig in.

I suspect he is testing to see if Jesus is an actual political threat or just some crazy rabbi agitating a conquered people.

*Is this someone I need to be worried about starting a revolt against Rome?*

What do you say, Jesus?

Jesus, as he often did, responds to a question with a question. Our third question.

**“Is that your own idea, or did others talk to you about me?”**

Jesus is not afraid of Pilate or the power he wields. He does not cower or try to ingratiate himself to Pilate to save his own skin.

He responds boldly and provocatively. *Do you even know what’s going on here? Are you asking your own questions or those people put in your mouth? Are you actually interested in whether or not I am a king or what kind of kingdom I am bringing? Speak for yourself?*

Jesus is also, I think, pointing out that Pilate is being used here. By the Jewish religious leaders. By his fear of a growing mob and political unrest.

It’s a remarkably bold move in response to a very powerful man.

Pilate responds with a fourth question.

**“Am I a Jew?”**

This question reeks of superiority and contempt.

*Am I a Jew?*

Obviously not. I’m a representative of the mighty Roman Empire, not a conquered people and their strange ways. I don’t care about any of this! Your leaders brought you to me. I’m just trying to deal with a problem.

Stop stalling and get to the point! Which leads to the fifth question.

**“What is it you have done?”**

Pilate moves from asking questions of the Jewish leaders what Jesus had done to asking Jesus himself.

Why are you here? What wrong have you done?

Again, frustratingly from Pilate’s perspective, Jesus doesn’t answer the question. He starts talking about his kingdom being of a different kind, about how his followers would fight if his kingdom was an earthly one, about how his kingdom is “not from here.”

He ignores Pilate’s current question and indirectly answers his previous one about whether Jesus is the king of the Jews.

Pilate jumps on this in his sixth question.

**“So you are a king?”**

And then Jesus starts talking about the truth. It’s like every time Pilate zigs, Jesus zags.

He doesn’t say, “Yes, I’m a king. He says, “the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

At this point Pilate sounds both exasperated and cynical as he asks the seventh question, a question that has resounded down through the ages.

### **“What is truth?”**

You can imagine the scorn dripping from his lips. *Truth? Interesting. And where exactly has this testifying to the truth landed you? Here, in front of me, with your life in my hands.*

For Pilate, truth is power. Truth is the *pax Romana*, the “Roman peace” achieved through violence. Truth is the ability to impose one’s will on another.

*What is truth?* Then and now, many assume, “truth is defined by the ones who hold power.”

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The broad picture painted by these seven questions is a dissonant one.

It is one of misaligned expectations, hypocrisy of all kinds, of wildly different assumptions about power, what it actually looks like, who holds it, about the truth—who tells it and who doesn’t.

It’s a text where questions are dodged (in the case of the religious leaders) or reframed (in the case of Jesus) or mocked (in the case of Pilate’s “what is truth?”).

It’s a text that feels unfinished. Jesus doesn’t respond to Pilate’s question about the truth. I wish he would have.

I wish he would have chosen this opportunity to say what he says elsewhere. “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one come to the Father except through me!”

But he doesn’t say this. Not here. He lets Pilate have the last word.

It all feels.... Dissonant.

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I often tell the guys at the jail that the bible is a map and a mirror. Many of them have had little to no exposure to Scripture and can find it a bit baffling, at times.

It is a map in that it shows us the way to walk. It is a wild, complicated, messy story that has as its heart the person of Jesus Christ.

It points us to Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It points us in his direction, over and over again. This, Scripture says, is the source of your forgiveness, healing, and salvation.

It's also a mirror in that it unflinchingly shows us who we are.

It lays bare the human condition in all its beauty and brokenness, all its truth and falsity, all its longing for what it was made for and its self-interested destructiveness.

Today's text is a map and a mirror.

It is a map in that it holds Jesus before us as the source of truth. We are drawn to his innocence, his bold, prophetic courage, his kingdom that doesn't rely on violence and manipulation.

We want to be on the side of truth. We want to be on Jesus' side. We sense that Jesus alone can make hope and history rhyme.

This text is also a mirror in that it is not too hard to see ourselves in any of the unflattering characters in this story.

In Pilate's impatience and cynicism, his desire for order. In the religious leaders' hunger to get rid of their scapegoat.

Perhaps we also see ourselves in their confusion. We wish Jesus would speak plainly, be more obvious, stop beating around the bush.

We certainly see ourselves in everyone's irritation when Jesus doesn't dance to their tune. I think we all, if we are honest, prefer God on our terms rather than God's terms.

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You're likely wondering about that eighth question that I referred to earlier.

The eighth question is from Pilate and is addressed to the crowd, and I thought it would be a good way to end my sermon this morning.

**“It is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews’?”**

Pilate gave the mob a choice. Do you want me to release Barabbas (and all he signifies) or Jesus (and all he signifies)?

Barabbas was a political revolutionary. Some translations say “bandit” or “robber.” Others say, “had taken part in an uprising.” Mark and Luke further refer to Barabbas as one involved in a riot, probably “one of the numerous insurrections against the Roman power.”

Barabbas symbolizes one answer to Pilate’s question, “What is truth?”

Truth is resistance.

Truth is political power.

Truth is rising up to defeat your enemies.

Truth is seeking to impose your will upon others.

Jesus symbolizes another.

Truth does not impose but invites.

Truth is love in its deepest and most self-giving form.

Truth is God giving God’s very self for the world.

Truth is a kingdom that does not need to be inaugurated or defended by force.

Two thousand years later, we only know Barabbas’s name because he was released to appease a mob.

We know Jesus’ name because he inspired a movement that has changed the world, and because he gave birth to a church that believed and believes still that he is indeed, the way, the truth and the life.

We also have a choice. Whose truth will we embrace and live by? Which map? Which mirror?

May we always choose Jesus. The way, the truth, and the life.

Amen.

