

## **What is Truth?**

**John 18:28-40**

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Jonathan Swift, the great British writer, once opined, "Falsehood flies, and the truth comes limping after it." According to a brand new study, he could have been describing certain corners of social media.

This past Thursday, the magazine *Science* published the results of a massive analysis of English posts on Twitter. The study looked at over 126,000 original posts, tweeted and retweeted by 3 million users 4.5 million times over more than 10 years. Soroush Vosoghi, the MIT data scientist who conducted the study, said this week in *The Atlantic*: "It seems to be pretty clear that false information outperforms true information, and not just because of bots."

The MIT study looked at how fast a true story spread on Twitter compared to how fast a false one did, examining how long it took for each story to get 1500 shares. The false stories reached 1500 shares on average six times faster than true stories. In all, false stories were seven times more likely to be shared than factually true ones. What is the lure of the lie? Perhaps we prefer the lies that describe the world we want rather than the truth that reveals something altogether different.

The MIT researchers say they were motivated to undertake the research because of their own experience with the wild speculation and false reports that proliferated after the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, which spread panic, misinformation and even more terror as the entire city remained under lockdown while the perpetrators were hunted down. They were motivated to study the power of lies because they saw first-hand how destructive they were to individuals and communities.

Almost exactly a year ago, the cover of *Time Magazine* posed a simple question: On a black field the red letters inquired: "Is Truth Dead?"<sup>1</sup> It mimicked a cover from 40 years ago that asked: "Is God dead?" The irony of that in connection with this text is fairly clear. The accompanying story this year examined the crisis of a litany of demonstrably false statements emanating from the centers of power in Washington in the early days of the

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<sup>1</sup><http://time.com/4709920/donald-trump-truth-time-cover/>

current administration and how it was undermining trust and accountability in many quarters.

For the last year, folks have been talking about a book by Tom Nichols that was referenced in that article. Nichols, Professor of National Security Affairs at the U.S. Naval War College, wrote *The Death of Expertise* also in early 2017. In it, he asserts: “Americans have reached a point where ignorance, especially of anything related to public policy, is an actual virtue...To reject the advice of experts is to assert autonomy, a way for Americans to insulate their increasingly fragile egos from ever being told they’re wrong about anything. It is a new Declaration of Independence: No longer do we hold *these* truths to be self-evident, we hold *all* truths to be self-evident, even the ones that aren’t true. All things are knowable and every opinion on any subject is as good as any other.”

And we can all see where that has gotten us — we can reject evidence of the causes of climate change; we can reject evidence of Russian efforts to interfere with our elections; we can reject any fact that does not comport with our chosen world view. It would appear by all objective evidence that truth is losing the battle against falsity in our culture. A surrender of facts is clearly dangerous and troublesome, but is that the same thing as surrendering truth?

In that context we stumble into Good Friday in the Gospel of John, 19 days early. Today and for the rest of our Sundays before Easter, we will be journeying with Jesus through John’s version of Good Friday, the second longest day in John’s Gospel from Chapter 18, verse 28, to Chapter 19, verse 42. And today, early in the morning on that Friday, the religious leaders turn to Rome to do their dirty work and they bring Jesus to the Roman governor, who is only in town because the Passover is coming. Rome always likes to flex its power there on the holiday when the Jews celebrate freedom from the oppressive reign of the Egyptians. After all, they don’t want anyone getting any crazy ideas.

The religious leaders don’t want to be made unclean, which would prevent them from participating in the Passover celebrations, so they stay outside as Jesus goes before the supreme power in Judea, the one who answers only to Rome. This is not Pilate’s first rodeo with Jewish revolutionaries. He starts with the big set-up question so Jesus will hang himself. “Are you King of the Jews?” he asks. “Is that what your polling indicates or did you read that somewhere on Reddit?” Jesus responds, sort of. He never answers the question. “What have you done?” Pilate asks. Again, no straight answer. Instead Jesus talks about his unearthly kingdom. When Pilate follows up with the King question again, Jesus gives him what my colleague Joe Clifford calls his mission statement instead: “I came to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Then, in asking his question — this one we are struggling with — Pilate proves he doesn’t belong

to the truth. He has no idea. As Joe says, "Imagine that—an agent of empire who is a stranger to truth. The more things change, the more they stay the same."

Frederick Buechner, the great writer and theologian, thinks this is a very big deal. He points out: "Jesus did not say that religion was the truth, or that his own teachings were the truth, or that what people taught about him was the truth, or that the Bible was the truth, or the church, or any system of ethics or theological doctrine." Instead Jesus says nothing.

Way back at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis one of the things that defines creation is Yahweh—God—speaking a creative word out of the silence of chaos. In the Gospel of John, what did we say was the opening thesis of the whole gospel back in chapter one? In the Beginning was the Word — a voice out of the silence. And in John of Patmos' vision of the Revelation in the last book of the Bible what does it say? "And when the Lamb opened the seventh seal, "there was silence in heaven" (8:1).

There is silence before creation and in the ecstatic vision of the end of time there is silence as creation itself comes to an end and a new creation begins. And here in the middle, when the Word made flesh is asked, "What is truth?" he responds with silence.

What if Divine silence is a time of expectation, a time when some creative act of God is anticipated? What are we to make of this silence? What creative thing is Jesus about to do?

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says nothing more to Pilate in this particular interview. In fact, he will speak only one more sentence to anyone, to Pilate again about power. We'll get that next Sunday. Other than that, he will say nothing else until he is near death on the cross. Jesus will not say one more word about truth.

What if the creative thing that Jesus, that God, is about to do, is to show Pilate and us the answer. As Buechner notes "THE truth is what Pilate is after: the truth about who we are and who God is if there is a God, the truth about life, the truth about death, the truth about truth itself. That is the truth we are all of us after."

And Jesus seems to know that this time just telling simply isn't enough. So the One who has previously said He is the way, the truth and the life must now show us what he meant by that.

We still have that journey to take with him. But even here, even now in the waning hours of Jesus' earthy life, in the clutches of the powers that will surrender to fear, we know the end of the story. So, even as we imagine how Pilate struggles with his question, we know:

Is death truth?

Is the instrument of political torture and death, the cross, truth?

Is the greed of Judas truth?

Is the fear of the religious leaders truth?

Is the intimidating power of Rome truth?

What if the truth is something far greater, something beyond our complete understanding? What if Jesus' very silence and God's actions revealed in the empty tomb are not just a response to our death-dealing power games but the actual answer to Pilate's question — a demonstration that TRUTH is something that, try as we might, will never be put into definitive words because words alone cannot contain it. No doctrine, no profession of faith, even all of them in the Book of Confessions, can capture it because God's truth, THE truth, is the "yes" to every "no" we seek to impose on life and joy and justice and peace.

What if Truth is how God loves the world, loves you, loves me enough to die for it and for us; but even more remarkable, how God will not let that death define Jesus' life or ours. This is the truth that leaves us breathless, with a catch in our throats in those moments we experience the reality of being deeply loved. This is the truth that shines a light to reveal the ultimate powerlessness of every lie, every falsehood that Pilate's power-mad world can muster. This HE is the truth that gives us the confidence to stand up to those lies and the ones that echo in our heads or in the headlines or even in our social media feeds, suggesting that we are not enough; that only some are worthy of life; only some are worthy of safety or protection; only some are worthy of love; and, that for us to win at life, someone else must lose.

Pilate asked the wrong question because he thought truth was **something** he could hold, like his sword or a whip, not the **SOMEONE** who stood before him. Who is truth was the question he could not see to ask. And who is truth? The one who, even now, as day after day we still rehearse our tired and fear-stoked obsessions with lies and power and death, teaches us to tune our ears to hear, to confidently claim, to boldly be the bearers of that which, with all due respect to *Time Magazine*, will never die.

Thanks be to God. Amen.