

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

November 5, 2020

*A Service of Noonday Prayers for Our National Life, John 18:12-13, 19-23, 28-38a*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

We wait. Mid-air above this great abyss, *we wait* ... unsure if this circus' trapeze rope will find our grasp after all, allowing us to swing toward some new purchase where we will dare hope once more ... or whether its bar will only brush our fingertips – *just out of reach* – leaving us to fall again, only this time to depths more painful and more enduring than those of recent memory.

Hearts restless ... arms reaching ... legs kicking without hold ... *we wait.*

In our Gospel appointment from John, the Jewish leaders also wait: wait for the restoration of their Passover devotions ... wait for the Roman authorities to calm the Temple disruption stirred by one of their own, this troublesome teacher whose name has become dust on their tongue ... they wait.

Following that Nazarene's arrest, Jesus' disciples also wait: wait to discover if his grim claims about his fate will come to pass ... wait for the bittersweet affirmation of that prescience as another proof of his messiahship, yet at the cost of his life, a nearness of heart and hand they already realize they have taken for granted ... they wait.

And so, too, Pontius Pilate, this Roman functionary, waits ... waits for an answer to his question, that uncertain, hanging chad with which he concludes this morning's lesson, tinted as it remains these two thousand years later with its exasperation, its longing, its flecks of dreading sincerity – his question:

*What is truth?*<sup>i</sup>

In the small volume, *Telling The Truth, The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (first published in 1977), Frederick Buechner imagines this Pilate who narrows his gaze and looks across his desk at Jesus.

The puppet governor of Judea, Pilate “starts to reach for a cigarette [before remembering he had made a decision that very morning to quit, after awaking to a chest that felt like an open wound]. He picks up a pencil instead.”<sup>ii</sup>

With the Jewish holiday now underway, he thinks about his town's religious people, and decides "that what passeth [all *his*] understanding is [these] Jews themselves, who have never had it so good[ as they do with him – they should be sending him bunt cakes and gratitude cards, not complaining and constantly leveraging him as they are]. He [thinks] that what passeth [all *his*] understanding is how they can go on knocking themselves out for a God who [supposedly] runs history, when it is precisely history that has *run [all] them over*[, leaving] them with [nothing more than] ancient superstition[s] ...

"[At that moment, he learns from a member of his staff that t]here has been [a] demonstration at one of the city gates with some up-country messiah at the center of it, and the question is how to handle [the mess] without making it worse. The [Temple leaders] are playing it safe by passing the buck to Caesar[, which means Pilate will need to have an opinion on the matter] ...

"[Pilate sends word that] he will see the man himself if that's what they want. [In fact, i]f they want him to see their God[, then] he will see him, too. The more the merrier ...

"[Spinning his leather chair to look out his office window, he sees a ragged child talking to one of the soldiers, and [Pilate] wonders if it [is] one of the epidemic children, disease clinging to its clothes like lice. A pigeon perched on the windowsill fans one wing out, the tucks it in again. ... [and Pilate's mind drifts to its familiar places: indignations long coddled, leisure plans, his petty disappointments in his children ...in his wife ... in himself.]

"[Turning back to the day's business,] he finds he is no longer alone. [The palace guard are bringing] the up-country messiah in for questioning. ... [B]efore he knows what he is doing, [Pilate forgets his morning intentions,] takes a cigarette from an onyx box, and lights it.

"The [messiah] stands in front of the desk with his hands tied behind his back. [H]e has been roughed up a little[, h]is upper lip absurdly puffed out and one eye swollen shut. He looks unwashed and smells unwashed. His feet are bare – big, flat peasant feet although the man himself is not big. There is something almost comic about the way he stands there, bent slightly forward because of the way his hands are tied[, as if] he is looking for something he has lost, a button off his shirt or a dime somebody slipped him for a cup of coffee. If [it] were just the two of them, Pilate thinks he would give him his carfare and send him back to the sticks where he came from, but the guards are watching, and on the wall the official portrait of Tiberius Caesar is watching, the fat, powdered face, the toothy imperial smile ...

"Pilate says [to the man,] 'So you're the king of the Jews' ... [He asks] because there hasn't been one of them yet who hasn't made that his claim – David come [back to return Judea.]

"The man [replies], 'It's not this world I'm king of,' but his accent is so thick that Pilate hardly gets it, the accent together with what they have done to his upper lip. As if he has a mouth full of stones, the [man continues], 'I've come to bear witness **to the truth**,' and, at that, the procurator of Judea takes such a deep drag on his filter tip [that the heat from the glowing tobacco burns his yellow fingers. H]is head swims for a moment[, and he fears he] may faint.

“[Pilate] pushes back from the desk and crosses his legs. There is the papery rustle of wings as the pigeon flutters off the sill and floats down toward the cobbles. Standing by the door, the guards [pay no] attention ... Cigarette smoke drifts over the surface of the desk – [over a] picture of his wife when she still had her looks[; over an imperial-seal emblazoned paperweight he received as a gift] from Caesar[; over] the clay plaque with the imprint of his first son’s hand on it, made while [the boy] was still a child in nursery school.”<sup>iii</sup>

Pilate stares at the man through the haze and asks his question:

*What is truth?*

Waiting for an answer, the echo of his words hang in the air like the smoke.

Buechner’s imagination does not draw its power from our externalizing the portrait of Pilate and singularly correlating the governor to one contemporary officeholder or another – that’s the distraction, an indicting drift into *our own* coddled indignations. No, for any so daring, Buechner invites us to recognize our ambivalent *share* in Pilate’s question of Jesus, asked “half because he would give *his life* to hear the answer, and half because he believes *there is no answer*, and would give a good deal to hear that, too, because it would mean just one thing less to have to worry about[, one less thing to keep him from his plans.]”<sup>iv</sup> We join Pilate in the asking and, with the same complicit share, we join him in his *waiting*.

Life is always one waiting or another – this quadrennial circus or the time between some other, new dread, and then the one after that – but the waiting is not always the hardest part. When we await word about our COVID-19 test or about our loved one in a fragile surgery, and we ultimately receive *good* news – thanks be to God, it turns out we were negative, or, thanks be to God, she made it safely through – then, yes, we take a deep, relieved breath and remember those hours of unknown as the scariest moments of the experience, maybe even the most fraught and frightening of our lives.

However, when we ultimately receive *bad* news, we pine for the waiting. We long for those days and hours between when our happy oblivion ended and our fears found their confirmation – when we waited and could still nurse hopes, however faint. See, when the news for which we waited turns bad, our worry turns to grief, and the latter is not a mere possibility, but a fact – not a flinch, but *a gash*.

Be clear: while we share a complicity with Pilate, he is no model for our waiting. Whether in Buechner’s light or John’s, there is no drama with this man. He made his decisions long ago, and he chose the lonely comforts of an autocracy, surrounding himself with like-minded sycophants naïve enough to believe their turn at the microphone and on the seat of power will come as inevitably as that emptiness he cannot shake, that open wound, not only in his nicotine chest, but in the terrible void where his soul once was. For Pilate, he leans into the silence and sees only himself – his needs, his fears, his conveniences – no matter who must suffer to keep it so. And no one will suffer more for his selfishness than will he.

Jesus, the truth-bearer – *Jesus* models how God calls us to wait. Arrested and beaten, aspiring for the cross no more than the throne, Jesus remains unwaveringly focused on God’s hope for the world. Despite the obvious peril to himself, he answers Pilate truthfully – indeed, with the very truth the governor seeks: and it is, *silence*. Jesus “doesn’t say a blessed thing[... which] *is the blessed thing* ... [for] before the Gospel is a word, it is silence [and waiting] – not an ordinary [waiting, a] silence as nothing to hear, but the silence of the man with the split lip” ... the man with the swollen eye.<sup>v</sup>

Jesus leans into that space between him and Pilate, and, no matter his treatment nor his fate, he fills that space with openness and generosity ... with mercy and hope ... with justice and love ... with the promise of Beloved Community – *with the very fulfillment that Pilate, in his heart of hearts, longs to experience*. And, yet, that Pilate cannot, choosing fear before daring faith, before believing in a sufficiency beyond his own.

Trinity Church, if we will wait with Jesus, rather than with Pilate, reaching through this silence not for an outcome, but for God – then even now, we will find our purchase ... our hold ... our footing in a Kingdom not of this world – in a hope that will never fail.

That we would so wait,  
I pray in the name of God,  
*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> John 18:38.

<sup>ii</sup> Buechner, Frederick. *Telling The Truth: The Gospel As Tragedy, Comedy, And Fairy Tale*. New York, Harper Collins, 1977, pp 8-14.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. I condensed these seven pages of the book into about one page of the sermon. The shorter [bracket sections] indicate words that I adapted for context (verb tense, transitions, punctuation, etc). The longer bracket sections indicate my embellishments – in the spirit of Buechner’s original (I hope!), and drawing on details or images he used elsewhere in the text, as I could.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.