

Sermon: There. Are. Four. Lights.\*  
Text: John 18:28-40  
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Context: WWPC  
Lent III  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"*

John 18:38

Many of you know that there was a time in my life when I watched *Star Trek: the Next Generation* almost religiously.

The hit series ran for seven seasons. Of its 178 total episodes, perhaps my all-time favorite was called *Chain of Command*.

It was actually a two-part episode, so let me give you the short version: While he is on a covert mission, Jean Luc-Picard, the Captain of the USS Enterprise, is captured by the Cardassians. (Just to be clear, the Cardassians are not to be confused with the famous Hollywood family with a similar-sounding name. Rather, they are a fierce, extraterrestrial race, prone to war and violence--so maybe not so different after all.)

After his capture, Picard -- played by the great Patrick Stewart -- is brought before an enemy commander named Gul Madred, played with slow-burning menace by David Warner. The Cardassians want information on the defensive capability of Minos Korva, a planet they plan to invade. And Gul Madred intends to get that information.

He is a towering and utterly intimidating interrogator. One look at him up close and I suspect I would give him anything he asked. But I am not Jean-Luc Picard.

Madred's prisoner is strong and uncooperative. So he initially relies on a variety of torture methods to extract the information he is seeking from Picard.

When these fail, he resorts to a different tactic to break Picard's will. It's a kind of truth test. Madred shines four bright lights into Picard's face, and then asks his prisoner to admit that he sees five.

Of course Picard refuses. "There are four lights," he consistently replies. But each time, it costs him. Because each time Picard refuses to give Madred the answer he wants, the fierce Cardissian commander administers an electric shock that convulses Picard into a ball of pain.

This pattern repeats for some time. "How many lights do you see?" "There are four lights." "I'm sorry, that is not correct." BZZZZZZZZZZ. "There are five lights."

You can see that Madred's strategy is working. The pain is taking a toll on Picard, steadily wearing him down.

This continues until one day Madred enters the cell where he's holding Picard and declares that he no longer needs the information he's been seeking to coerce out of his uncooperative prisoner.

"I've just received word, there's been a battle," he tells Picard. "The Enterprise is burning."

He goes on to say that his troops have successfully taken Minos Korva, despite Picard's unwillingness to provide him with the information he was after. And because he's a cruel warlord, he adds that Picard has suffered in vain.

Madred then shares the dispiriting news that he intends to continue holding Picard as a prisoner. But even now, he declares, Picard has a choice.

He can live in relative comfort. They'll feed him well, and make sure he has books to read. Or he can live in misery. He can dress in nice, comfortable clothes, and continue his studies in philosophy and history. Or he can remain alone and hungry, and dressed in rags, indefinitely.

The offer gets Picard's attention. He raises his gaze and looks at his interlocutor, his torturer, directly in the eyes.

"What must I do?" he asks plaintively, sounding every bit like a broken man.

“Nothing really. Tell me, how many lights to do you see?”

Haggard and exhausted by his ordeal, Picard turns his gaze to the lights, clearly weighing the truth of Madred’s claim, and what it might mean for him.

Just then a security team comes in to escort the great captain back to the Enterprise. The military crisis has been averted and a deal has been struck to secure Picard’s release.

Madred’s last gambit was just a cruel ruse. He wanted to win, to register a final victory over his stubborn opponent.

But he does not get it. Just before he is lead away, Picard looks up, gathers himself and famously declares:

“There. Are. Four. Lights.”

Watching this scene again recently, I thought that the writers had made a mistake. That it would have been better for Picard to make that declaration right before the security detail came to release him.

Except that this scene is not the end the story. After he returns to the Enterprise, Picard arranges to meet with, Deana Troi (played by Marina Sirtis), the ship’s counselor. To lead his crew effectively, he knows that he needs to unpack his experience of being held captive and to recover from his trauma.

In the privacy and safety of the counselor’s office, he admits the rescue came just in time. That he was on the cusp of making the deal. Not because he was seduced by the offer of a life of comfort, learning and pleasure. But because for a short moment, he saw five lights.

For a long time, I assumed this scene that John gives us of Jesus before Pontius Pilate was not entirely dissimilar from Picard’s experience at the hands of Commander Madred.

I assumed that this was a coercive interrogation. That Pilate was after the information he needed to justify what he was about to do. He sought answers that would give him cover for his decision to put this disruptive, seditious rabbi to death. The proceedings were a formality, really, nothing more than a cruel ruse, since everyone, including Jesus, knows what’s coming.

But I realized in re-reading the passage this week that this assumption may be wrong, or at least there may be another way to read it.

The soldiers and temple police who have arrested Jesus in the night first take him before the high priest, and then, early in the morning, they take him to Pilate's headquarters.

Pilate goes out and meets them, questions them. And then he retreats with Jesus into his private quarters.

There is a case to be made that, unlike Gul Madred, Pontius Pilate is not necessarily a cruel interrogator. Not a dominant power-broker who needs to win.

Because on one reading, this scene has a kind of disarming intimacy about it. It's as if Pilate genuinely wants to learn more about this man whom he's heard so much about. And it's Jesus who is the cheeky one, the provocateur.

"Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks.

*Depends. Who's asking?*

"What have you done?"

*My kingdom is not from this world.*

"So you are a king?"

*If you say so. As for me, all I will say is that I came to testify to the truth.*

Which leads to arguably the most famous question in the Bible:

"What is truth?" Pilate finally asks.

Narratively, it feels like the whole scene is a set up to get us to this pivotal point; that this is Jesus' "there are four lights" moment.

Just a few days before this interrogation takes place, Jesus declares to his disciples that he is the way, the truth, and the life.

Now, standing here before the very embodiment of earthly power and dominance, Jesus could explain what that means. He could define the truth, shed light on its very nature, for everyone who is desperate to find it, to understand it, to live by it.

Which is why what happens next is so surprising. Either Pilate is not interested in the answer, or Jesus is unwilling to give it. Either way, we don't get an answer to his final question.

And maybe that's the point.

Yes, maybe Pilate is afraid of the truth. Maybe he knows Jesus is right, that there is a power greater than himself, a power to whom even he owes allegiance. So he doesn't wait for the answer.

Or, ever the rabbi, maybe Jesus uses this crisis moment to underscore that in the quest for truth, questions are more important than answers. That you can't always nail truth down, or easily explain it, you have to search for it.

Or maybe he knows that the line between the truth and certainty is razor thin. And the line between certainty and dogmatism is thinner still.

Or maybe he wants us to answer the question for ourselves.

“What is truth?”

*You tell me.*

Yes, God's truth is revealed to us in scripture, and, especially, in the life and teachings of Jesus. But we may differ in how we understand this revelation, this truth. What's true for me may not be true for you.

So, each one of us has to search for that truth for ourselves. And the diversity of insight we all harvest from this search is a glorious and wonderful thing.

Whatever the explanation, in the end, we don't know why Jesus doesn't answer the question.

What we do know is that the question itself may be more relevant, more important, and more urgent than ever. Because if sure feels like we're living in a time when the truth is under assault.

Bad-faith actions by our political leaders can be explained by the use of "alternative facts." Stories we don't like, stories reported by eye-witnesses, can be dismissed as "fake news."

And that's a dangerous thing.

The episode from Star Trek I mentioned earlier is actually an homage *1984*, the landmark dystopian novel by George Orwell.

At the end of the book, the thought policeman O'Brien is torturing the protagonist Winston Smith into believing two plus two equals five.

In this case, he's not trying to extract information, he's trying to plant it. He wants to drill this principle into Smith's head: that truth is whatever the Party says it is. Because O'Brien knows that once you cross that line and bow to that principle, dissent is impossible.

You can't speak truth to power if power decides what passes for truth.

Which is why, as people of faith, as people of conscience, as people who care about the truth, it's important that we insist that there are four lights. That we can see the truth with our own eyes and we're going to make sure that this truth be made known.

Yes, this can be an exhausting task, especially now. Yes, it can leave us feeling haggard and worn out. But we must continue to bear-witness to the truth, even if we only do that in small and personal ways. Because those small ways add up to big ways, and the health of the body politic depends on this truth being told.

This also works on the individual level. Whether we tell our truth in the privacy of a counselor's office, or the safety of the pastor's office, or whether we tell it to someone we love and trust, giving voice to the truth is essential to our individual health and well-being.

It's important that we find ways to say it out loud so that we might recover from our traumas or our mistakes, and move past our fear our shame, so that we might fully become ourselves, and be ourselves. And be whole and free again.

"I'm scared."

"I voted for the other guy."

"I'm gay."

"I'm sick."

"I love you!"

"I need help."

"I made a mistake."

"I need your forgiveness."

What is truth?

You tell me.

\*My working title for this sermon -- and the title I was still using when the bulletin went to print -- was "Who Can Say?" But for reasons which will soon become obvious, this new title is much more on point.