

Yet each of these events did, in its own oblique way, "bear witness to the truth." For if "truth" is something we inhabit, a person we become and not just a proposition we put forth, then the truth itself reflects the incomplete and imperfect nature of human life. As a Roman functionary who dealt routinely in objectives and outcomes, Pilate finds this difficult to understand. The truth for Pilate is not usually imperfect and incomplete. Jesus introduces Pilate to the notion that truth may come in the questions themselves. In this case, the truth was not a proposition, but a Person, and he was standing right before Pilate's eyes: Jesus, "the Way, the Truth, the Life."

What, then, is "the truth" as it lives among us today? Think you are going to get a straight answer now? Ha! Guess again, Batman. Instead of an "answer," I offer you three familiar songs, each of which offers a glimpse into the "truth" of life as we know and experience it every day.

**Futility.** The first song is quite musically advanced, intonationally complex, and theologically rich. It is the "Itsy-Bitsy Spider." It is one of the very first songs you ever learned, complete with all its hand motions. Sing along! *The itsy-bitsy spider crawled up the waterspout. Down came the rain and washed the spider out. Out came the sun, and dried up all the rain, and the itsy-bitsy spider went up the spout again.* A cute song? Try it from the spider's perspective! The truth is the spider is getting nowhere. The truth for the spider is that life is just ODTAA ("One Darn Thing After Another")!

The ancient Greeks knew this and composed a myth to express this truth. The tale of Sisyphus ends with the hero condemned forever to roll a huge stone up a steep hill. But every time Sisyphus reaches the top, the stone rolls all the way back down to the bottom. Sisyphus begins each day by pushing that same darn rock back up that same darn hill. We've all been there, starting over again, constantly climbing "up the waterspout," even though we know that the rain is coming. Is truth the "Itsy-Bitsy Spider"?

**Suffering.** Or is truth "Rock-a-Bye-Baby"? This nursery rhyme has a long, cherished career as a soft and soothing lullaby; but have you really listened to the words? *Rock a-bye, baby, on the treetop; When the wind blows the cradle will rock. When the bow breaks, the baby will fall; and down will come baby, cradle, and all!*

How is this supposed to sooth a fussy baby? It is a song about a baby falling out of trees! I submit that the cure for what frightens our kids may simply be to not sing this song and scare them to death! But it the inescapable truth is that sometimes terrible things do

happen! Life can unexpectedly jolt us with tremendous loss, pain, betrayal, and death. The child's lullaby does not say *if* the bough breaks, the cradle will fall," it proclaims *when* the bough breaks. To be alive and living in this world is to live amid falling branches, failing relationships, fickle circumstances, and fragile hearts. Truthfully, life is difficult, and sometimes tragic.

There is an old "truism" that proposes: "There is no more pain in the world than one person can bear. But all the world's pain can be contained in one cry." The New Testament bears witness to this aspect of the truth by both opening and closing with tears. The gospels begin with a cry: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they are no more" (Matthew 2:18). And the Bible ends with a cry: "I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, 'Sovereign Lord...how long will it be before you judge and avenge...'" (Revelation 6:9, 10). Jesus himself suffered the truth of life's tragedies when, in pain and despair, he called out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). The truth is life is full of surprises, not all of them good ones.

**Praise.** But there is one more truth song, with music by Ludwig van Beethoven, and words by Princeton Professor Henry Van Dyke. The song is "Ode to Joy." *Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love; Hearts unfold like flowers before thee, opening to the sun above. Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away. Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day.*

What is truth? Joyfully we lift our praise to the God who love us unconditionally. The ultimate truth is that no matter how serious the grind, no matter how grinding the tragedy, God's love shines through. We can experience joy and gladness and peace amid an "Itsy-Bitsy Spider" world, and a "Rock-a-Bye-Baby" life. In truth, we can find reasons to give thanks for all of life's difficulties and delights. As Helen Keller famously noted: "Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it."

Later this week, we will sit around our Thanksgiving tables, re-creating a moment from our nation's past, when a small band of 102 ill-prepared settlers established a tiny outpost at Plymouth Rock. They spent a grim and grueling first year. They quickly learned the "truth" about how life would be in the "New World." Their crops failed. Their seed rotted. Their loved ones fell ill from disease and malnutrition and died.

Despite the new land, new hopes, and new horizons, life seemed itsy-bitsy. ODTAA! Although they came to the North American continent with noble ideals, with tremendous faith in God's providence, the unexpected harshness of the land, the hardness of their new life, their heartsickness for home sent half of the first colony of "Pilgrims" packing...permanently. The lullaby of religious freedom turned out to be verses just as mournful as "Rock-a-Bye-Baby," as they buried their wives, husbands, and children in the frozen ground of Massachusetts.

But for those who stuck it out, who experienced these tough truths of life, there came a time when at last they could hear strains of another ode-to-joy tune weaving its way through their souls. *O Joy, that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to thee; I trace the rainbow through the rain, and feel the promise is not in vain, that morn shall tearless be.* (V. 3 of George Matheson's "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go")

Calling together their colony and joining together with the native peoples whose generosity of spirit, knowledge of their environment, and material goods made the Anglos' survival possible, the Pilgrims genuinely and joyously celebrated the truth about their new life in this new world.

The ode-to-joy truth we all affirm when we sit down at our Thanksgiving table is this: God's love is continually in our midst, God's forgiveness is eternally available, God's peace pours out in an unending stream, God's joy can fill all the cracked and imperfect corners of our lives. Praise be to God!

Prayer: God, You heap your love upon us like a parent providing for a family's needs, embracing a child with tenderness. Forgive us when, like spoiled children, we treat Your generosity as our right, or hug it possessively to ourselves. Give us enough trust to live secure in Your love and to share it freely with others in open-handed confidence that Your grace will never run out. In the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sources:

- "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider." Public Domain.
- "Rock-a-bye Baby." Public Domain
- "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." Text: Henry Van Dyke, 1907. Music: Ludwig van Beethoven, 1824. Public Domain.
- "O Love That Wil Not Let Me Go." Text: George Matheson, 1881. Music: Albert Lister Peace, 1884. Public Domain.

## The Riddler

Christ the King Sunday, November 21, 2021

John 18:33-38

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The third Batman movie, *Batman Forever*, offered viewers a new Batman, a new Robin, a new Batgirl, and two new villains: Two-Face and the Riddler. Played with typically over-the-top whackiness, Jim Carey's Riddler came off as wonderfully twisted and crooked as his question-mark walking stick. Even if he had not been wearing a lime green jumpsuit and sporting orange hair, the Riddler would have been the movie's most colorful character because he never offered any straightforward answers. Every statement he made, every hint or challenge he gave Batman took the form of a mind-bending riddle. If you wanted to know what the Riddler was trying to get at, you had to think.

Jesus is a bit of a "Riddler" himself in today's gospel lesson. Standing before the Roman prefect Pilate, the one official who can either condemn him to death or set him free, Jesus appears oddly obstinate. Pilate hurls a direct question at Jesus. "Are you the King of the Jews?" What Pilate gets back from Jesus is only the most oblique of answers. First, Jesus asks Pilate what he has heard or knows to be true. Then Jesus offers an unsolicited description of his kingdom which is "not from this world," and so of no political concern to Pilate.

Finally, Pilate confronts Jesus with a question-accusation that demands a straightforward "yes" or "no" answer: "So you are a king?" Once again, Jesus sidesteps Pilate's question to introduce a new subject, the topic of "truth." Just imagine Pilate's frustration! Here he is trying to douse a political flashfire, and all Jesus wants to do is fan the flames by playing philosophical fiddlesticks.

The "riddle-me-this"-type responses Jesus gives Pilate give the prefect pause for reflection. As Pilate turns to leave Jesus and go back out to face the bloodthirsty crowd, he wonders aloud, "What is truth?" What is the truth about this man, Jesus? What is the truth in this strange and twisted situation? It turns out that the truth was not in the fear and frenzy fomenting outside the praetorium; or Pilate's courtroom; or the crowd's choice of Barabbas the thief over Jesus the Christ; or the crown of thorns or the purple robe the soldiers draped on Jesus; or the inscription nailed above him that read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews"; or in Jesus' death on that cross on Golgotha.