

Midweek 4
The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth
Text: Zechariah 8:14-17

Telling the truth is important in everyday life, and it's especially important in the courtroom. Falsehoods in court could send an innocent man to jail or let a guilty person go free. That's why the bailiff instructs the person in the witness stand: "Do you swear or affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

God is the father of the truth, and he hates lies. Satan is the father of lies, and he hates the truth. Lies destroy reputations, steal property, cost lives, and damn to hell. God wants us to tell the truth all the time, not just when we are under oath. He expects us to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. That is clear from this week's text from Zechariah 8:14-17.

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Just as I had determined to bring disaster on you and showed no pity when your ancestors angered me," says the LORD Almighty, "so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid. These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," declares the LORD.

During centuries of rebellious behavior, including rampant lying, the Lord had refrained from punishing Israel with the full force of his fury. But now he would resort to sterner measures, and Babylon was his pitiless instrument of discipline. After a lengthy siege, the walls of Jerusalem came crashing down, followed by the temple and the people's pride. Israel's upper classes were marched off to exile, where for 70 years they could reflect on God's truth that they had long ignored.

Once more the Lord has relented; the exiles have returned home. Zechariah announces that the Lord is determined to do good again to Israel, but he also expects to see changed behavior, out of respect for his authority and gratitude for his mercy. He demands that his chosen people practice truth in all their relationships and responsibilities, their interactions and their institutions. Five centuries after Zechariah delivered this truth, were the people listening?

I. Tell the Truth

Unlike our other Lenten texts from Zechariah, this one is not a direct prophecy of something that Jesus would do during Holy Week. But it calls to mind the appalling disregard for truth in the courtrooms of the Sanhedrin, Pontius Pilate, and Herod.

Matthew takes us from Gethsemane to the palace of the high priest for the first trial.

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. (Matthew 26:57,59-60)

Was there *anyone* in that assembly who could swear to be telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? The judges of the Sanhedrin, that 70-member supreme court of Judaism, would have sworn they were obedient to all of God's law all the time. But their actions told a different story. Let's review Zechariah's checklist:

- **Speak the truth to each other**—Given the character of the Jewish leaders, they seemed more interested in speaking whatever would bring them personal gain. If massaging the truth fit their purposes, it was justifiable.
- **Render true and sound judgment in your courts**—The Sanhedrin was interested in judgments that would sound good to their own ears and keep them in true control. The outcome of the case against Christ had been predetermined.
- **Do not plot evil against each other**—Clearly, Jesus was not included in "each other" because they had been plotting evil against him for years.

- **Do not love to swear falsely**—The supposed Messiah could not be convicted without false testimony. If the witnesses were being paid, would they have received their reward had they told the truth?

Pontius Pilate and Herod were unfamiliar with Zechariah's writings, but the proceedings in their presence were equally devoid of true testimony and true justice.

God hated the disregard for the truth during that first Holy Week, and he hates the disregard for the truth in our day. Our legal system is supposed to seek the truth, but perjury and false witnesses remain a problem. Many who end up in court are there because they have plotted evil against a neighbor or because a neighbor has plotted evil against them. Like the Holy Judge, we hate it when clearly unjust verdicts are announced. We hate being lied to, whether by leaders, lenders, lawyers, or lovers.

But we *love* the truth! We want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We *always* tell the truth to family, to friends, to teachers, to neighbors, to authorities. Until, that is, something less than the truth might work to our advantage. Then half-truths, white lies, even outright fibs become defensible, or so we think.

Would you tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, if you were asked the following?

- Do you have thoughts of lust or greed?
- Did you report *all* your income on your tax return?
- Did your mind wander off during the sermon?

Lying is so comfortable to our sinful nature that we even dare to be dishonest with our Creator:

- "I'll never commit that sin again!"
- "I can't possibly increase my offerings."
- "You have first place in my heart all the time, Lord."

Granted, our answers are often truthful. But often they are not full of truth. God hates lies and the liars who tell them. To lie is to sin, and sin condemns us to eternal punishment. Sometimes the truth hurts. That one *really* hurts.

It hurt Jesus to tell the truth. Not because he loved lying (he never told a single one) but because he knew what would happen next. He told the truth about being the Son of God, and the Sanhedrin convicted him of blasphemy, then sentenced him to death. He told Pilate the truth about his kingship, and Pilate rewarded him by posting a notice on the king's cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

The truth that Jesus told was for our benefit.

- First, because the truth is what his Father always wanted to hear. By always speaking the truth, Jesus fulfilled the law, a record of obedience he now shares with us.
- Second, because he knew that telling the truth would lead to an untruthful verdict of "guilty" for the innocent one so that the guilty world would receive an untruthful verdict of "innocent." To claim that we are without sin is a lie. The truth is that the Judge punished our guilt by punishing our Substitute and declaring us "not guilty."

II. Believe the Truth

Pilate asked the question, "What is truth?" No doubt as judge he had seen and heard many lies. He learned it was not always easy to find out the whole truth. He apparently did not realize that Jesus was telling the most important truth ever, the Word.

Let us consider the great truths we learn from Jesus.

- Truth #1: We are sinners who need a Savior.
- Truth #2: Jesus, although fully human and subject to temptation, never sinned.
- Truth #3: The perfect record of Jesus is now credited to sinners. Yes, that includes you.
- Truth #4: The horrific record of sinners was charged against Jesus. He accepted the slander, the injustice, and the lies without protest, all so that he could fulfill prophecy, be the Lamb of God, and take away the sin of the world. Yes, that includes yours.

Listen again to the first verses of our text:

This is what the LORD Almighty says: *“Just as I had determined to bring disaster on you and showed no pity when your ancestors angered me,” says the LORD Almighty, “so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid.”*

The truth is, the Lord *did* do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. He brought the people back from Babylon. He restored their temple and its rituals. And most important, he kept his promise to send the Messiah, the Savior of all.

How do we express our gratitude for this kind of grace? The Lord tells us how:

“Speak the truth to each other and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely.”

Speak the truth of forgiveness to those who have wronged you, rejoicing in the truth that God forgave you first. Speak the truth to your friend about the sin he or she is caught in; then speak the truth of the pardon purchased at the cross.

In other words: the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Pilate asked, “What is truth!” The answer was staring him in the face – Jesus is the truth, the way, and the life. Amen.