

Background for Week 14

Like some of the other writers of the bible, chronicling historical events is not the primary goal in this gospel, but rather persuasion is. As mentioned in previous studies, one of the main emphases is to produce faith in Jesus, who is the center of the believing community. As a result, his identity is often brought into question and then definitively answered in the positive. This is done either by his acts or his statements, many of which are some version of “I am...” reminiscent of Yahweh’s self-reference in the Hebrew bible. And these statements always have a striking quality about them. Those who hear them are thrown for a loop. Sometimes it results in praise, in other circumstances the outcome is immense hostility, and other times it’s a mix of both.

You’ll notice that as we enter into the passion portion of John’s written account, it differs a fair amount from the Synoptics. Jesus, in this author’s eyes, not only has divine foreknowledge, but is in total control of his life, even his death. There is no, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me” or fervently pleading in the garden of Gethsemane.

We enter the gospel right after Jesus and the disciples have just had their last supper together where he has played the role of Rabbi one last time, teaching them many additional things about discipleship and his kingdom.

Text for this week: John 18:1-40

1. Read John 18:1-40 in its entirety. What jumps out at you in the text? What thoughts are inspired by it? What questions arise?
2. Next, we'll break it down by verses.
 - a) 1-14:
 - Vs. 1-3: Likely wanting to make sure Jesus is in the traditional location of his arrest, the author seems to throw in a couple of brief notes about the garden, which is Gethsemane, for informational purposes only. Kidron Valley is the land that separated Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives.
 - 4: As explained in the text, Jesus knows what will happen to him, so he prompts the tense encounter. Twice the authorities respond by asking for Jesus of Nazareth (notice both times it’s his name *and* the town he was from—possibly a strategy by the author to drive home a point about his identity?). And twice he answers in a format that once again alludes to “I am.” Why do you think they initially respond by stepping back and falling to the ground? Have you been surprised or caught off guard by revelations when looking, or perhaps even when you’re not searching, for “I am?”
 - Vs 8-9: As John explains, in demanding that the disciples be let go, the Greek verb for ‘let’ is an imperative, Jesus is fulfilling his word, his promise.

See 6:39, 10:28, & 17:12 in which Jesus verbally refers to the disciples as those whom he has been given.

- 11: How would you have reacted in that situation, if a beloved teacher or leader was being arrested?
- 12: Have you or someone you know ever been literally arrested? What was that like? What about metaphorically?

b) Vs. 15-18 and 25-27: Picture a movie where the story transitions quickly from one scene to the next.

- Vs. 15-16: Notice how Simon Peter is identified here and yet the other disciple is not. However, he does have connections. This unnamed disciple is the one who has the pull to get Peter into the courtyard. What does this say about the power of “connections?” What are your “connections” and how have you utilized them?
- Vs. 17, 25-27: Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s denial from the end of ch 13 comes true. Peter is even confronted by a relative of the man he attacked when Jesus was arrested, who was also there in person. He goes from fighting to keep Jesus from being handed over, to denying he has any association with him within possibly hours. How has your faith wavered? Have you ever been directly asked about your faith life? If so, what transpired? How have you talked about Jesus with others? How have you denied him?

c) Vs 19-24:

- 19: Though Caiaphas is the official high priest, the high priest mentioned here is Annas. As the Oxford Annotated study bible states, though Annas had been deposed by the Romans, he still had a strong influence among the religious authorities through his son-in-law and his sons who succeeded him.
- Vs. 20-23: Jesus defends himself and Have you ever been unfairly accused of something you did not do? How did you respond? Jesus is hit for what is taken as disrespect in the way he responds to Annas, an authority figure. Have you ever had a similar experience? If not, what sort of reactions have you witnessed when an authority figure is challenged? How have you responded when challenged?

d) Vs 28-40:

- Vs. 30-32: It is unclear why the Jews, the religious authorities of the time, were “not permitted to put” him to death. Was this because they had no legal power under Rome to do so, or was it because of their own laws regarding ritual cleanliness, or perhaps for some other reason? No one knows for sure, the author leaves their status of power ambiguous. Crucifixion was the Roman death punishment, whereas the Jewish method was stoning (Lev 24:16).

- 36: “My kingdom is not from this world...” Recall how Peter responded at Jesus’ arrest; it was the mark of a typical follower of an earthly king. However, Jesus orders Peter to put his sword away (another imperative form of a Greek verb). From what you’ve learned up to this point in your faith life, how is his “kingdom” different than this earthly one? Where do you witness glimpses of his kingdom breaking into this one? What is the church’s relation to both of these kingdoms? How have we, as the church, witnessed to God’s kingdom? How have we denied it?
- 37: Jesus does not claim the title of king. A role which of course, as we know, has certain privileges. However, he clearly defines his mission, his reason for being-to testify to the truth. Ultimately, as John has been demonstrating throughout, Jesus is a revealer of the reality of God. What privileges do you have? Have you ever been in a situation where you were faced with a choice to give them up or not? If not, imagine yourself in that scenario and ask: “Would I give them up for the sake of another?”
- 38: As we see in this gospel, there is a constant battle regarding the truth between Jesus and the antagonists. And here in Christ’s formal trial we come to the crux of the matter when Pilate asks, “what is truth?” How do you read Pilate’s tone or intention here? There of course has been controversy within our own government as of late as to what characterizes as the truth. When you read or listen to the news and social media, how do you determine what is fact and what is fiction? Some claim that the bible is all just fairytales, there is no truth. Others claim that the bible is the inerrant word of God. What do you say? In your own words, what is truth?
- 40: The Greek word for “bandit” here can also mean “revolutionary” or “insurrectionist.” Does this change anything as you engage the narrative, and if so, how?

For your prayers:

Dear Redeemer, as we stand trial before the Creator’s law, we know that we are guilty. Thank you for testifying to the truth of our broken and sinful condition, and actively working to pass a judgment of compassionate forgiveness. And as people across the globe face unfair trials, may our hearts and minds be arrested by your love and moved to act in your dear name. Amen.

Next week: John 19:1-42