

"Hearing is Believing"

Good morning! I'm Natalie Owens-Pike, and I'm currently in my second year of seminary at Yale Divinity School, and on the ordination track in the United Church of Christ. I'm also a Raymond Fellow of the Congregational Church of New Canaan, and as I study preaching I also visit churches around Connecticut to share a word of God.

I offer my gratitude to Rev. Scott for inviting me to share this pulpit, and Rev. Mary and all these wonderful lay leaders for leading worship with me, and welcoming me. So good to be together with you, here in the sanctuary, or out joining our livestream, I'm glad to see you.

Will you pray with me?

God whose truths testify to us, even now, God who abides with us in this holy season of Lent, draw us closer to the truths that are tough for us to hear. Help us to hear YOU, even when hearing feels far from believing. Amen.

I came into the world, to testify to the truth.

The truth will set you free.

The truth will out.

This is the moment of truth.

The Truth hurts

You can't handle the truth!

I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

I came into the world, to testify to the truth.

What IS truth?

Why do we have all of these phrases? Why do they say the same thing and also seem to contradict each other?

Among these quotes I've listed we have:

- dialogue from the Gospels, the words of Jesus, alongside poetry, song lyrics, maybe an iconic movie scenes you might have recognized,
- all speaking differently about our deep need to practice listening to the truth in our midst.

And I say PRACTICE on purpose because I think we have spent this much energy around describing how to BELIEVE the truth when we HEAR it – because this is something we have a hard time getting right.

What is the truth? Pilate asks - and don't we wonder? What do we do with the truth when it's hard for us to believe?

Jesus tells us: I came into the world, to testify to the truth. And testify he does! Telling us the truth: that we need to correct the way we are living. The truth is! We MUST: Welcome the stranger. Love those we see as "other" or different from us. Share our resources so there's enough to go around. Listen to the voices cast to the margins by poverty or loneliness or physical or mental illness.

Sometimes hearing this truth DOES hurt, because it reveals to us the ways we aren't acting as though we've Heard Jesus's testimony.

Because the truth about ourselves is that we aren't always generous or inspiring or aligned with the picture of the self-sufficient, independent, hard working, chosen people we think we are.

Those might be SOME of the truth of who we are, but these traits are not the SUM of our truths. The Sum of our truths is that when we LISTEN to the voice of God, when we make room to absorb the hard truths of what it takes to live as God intends us to, we are already breaking open, moving closer to how Jesus calls us to live.

Jesus tells us "I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

What about when it's hard to hear?

I'm thrilled to be here preaching during Lent, because I love Lent; you may think that makes me a biblical nerd, but i am in seminary so that's fair. I love the ritual of contemplative practices, ritual of receiving ashes on our foreheads (TOUCH) connecting us to our universal humanity and frailty. Reminding us that we need God to get us through. I've often found Lent draws closer to God through prayer and scripture study.

At Yale Divinity school, we have chapel every day before lunchtime, and the Catholic students led the Ash Wednesday service last week. While I was in line for ashes, if you remember, I love Lent, I was feeling great, smiling under my mask, excited to receive

the comfort of this ritual, the catharsis that comes from repeating an action that connects me to God, to my past Lenten times of rich faith, to the people who have made me the Christian I am. So I hear the priest tell the man in front of me: *from dust you came, to dust you shall return*. Familiar to us, right?

So I walk up to the priest, and expecting that same phrase, I hear him say to me instead: "Turn away from sin, and believe the Gospel."

Now some of you familiar with the catholic ritual of ash wednesday may know this is the second half of the catholic phrase for this ritual, but it hit me in the gut!

"Turn away from sin" Who me? Certainly not me!

I'm not a sinner! I mean I am, of course we're all sinners, but not like THAT?

Believe the Gospel! I do! Don't I?

My mind was reeling. As I walked back to my seat, thankfully I had a mask on because my jaw was open. Why did the man in front of me get the blessing I was expecting? What did that Priest see in me?

I sat in my seat for the rest of the service grappling with this. Rolling through the emotions of it. Praying about it. Why, God, did that priest single me out? Then, deeper, Why God, do I feel singled out by this? I was just excited about Ash Wednesday, not looking for a hard truth! But the ritual and the discipline gets us to show up for the truth, to be open to hearing it.

I'm not sure that I agree with this priest's challenge, but that's not the whole point: it was hard for me to hear, BUT it made me curious! I didn't just shut down and shut it out or write it off.

This hard truth made me sit with it! Made me pray about it! Made me talk with my internship supervisor about the theology behind it! Because it Hit me in the Hearing of it!

Jesus offers us a lot of truths that are hard for us to REALLY hear. That we are sinners. That we don't believe the Gospel all the time. That loving our neighbor means believing their experience, even when it doesn't match our own. That we have enough, when to choose to share.

Jesus tells us "I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

To listen to the truth that Jesus testifies: Jesus calls that *belonging*,

But in this season of the Lent, what do we do? We don't rest in our belonging, we don't listen for what's breaking forth in new and challenging truth from God or our neighbor – we take up the forty-day mantle of doing *Hard. Spiritual. Work.*

The penance we choose, the limitations we place on ourselves, not because we think they will bring us closer to God but because we think we need to be better / in order to be WORTHY of or in order to work to EARN God's love.

But Jesus is telling us - when we hear, and we BELIEVE. We experience belonging. That the truth of my humanity, your humanity, is that we come from dust, and to dust we shall return. We are mortal, AND beloved by God. We cannot do this alone, SO WE MUST act as though we have heard the testimony of the life of Jesus.

it's not about thinking our way through it or doing enough penance. It's about listening to the testimony of Jesus's life and believing that I too can live this way with God.

Everyone who belongs to the truth LISTENS to my voice.

But that still leaves us wondering, alongside Pilate I wonder if you caught this in the passage: what IS truth? What. is. Truth.

Pilate asks, but if you notice, Jesus doesn't answer!

And Jesus doesn't answer Pilate's question in this passage...

We are STILL LISTENING FOR THE ANSWER. Two thousand years later, we are still listening, still questioning, still wrestling with: what is the truth!

Just like I was surprised by this priest telling me: "Turn away from sin, and believe the gospel" these moments of in-breaking truth are offered to us in relationship with God all the time. Because folks, The truth is we always have to have that level of humility in our relationship with God.

God ALWAYS offers us the opportunity to go deeper and be surprised. In our relationships. In our families. In our work. In our neighborhoods.

Jesus doesn't give us an easy answer. Jesus gives us an opportunity to sit with the hard questions. Sit with the hard truth. And give each other the chance to know that Hearing is Believing. The opportunity to listen for it.

So How will you listen for the voice of truth in this season? How will you live as an answer to Pilate's question? Consider – what is a story that's been hard for you to hear - about yourself, about your neighbor, about our nation?

I saw in your bulletin today that your Pastor Scott is offering weekly reflection time together on how to "Practice Spiritual Disciplines." Next week the topic is "how to listen to God?" Will you spend a Sunday morning contemplating this, with Rev. Scott or in your own prayer time?

I encourage you to listen to Jesus in this passage and to Spend some time, maybe it's walking the labyrinth in the sanctuary, maybe in prayer, asking what is a truth I have been resisting? And what is there for me to hear?

Not to blame, but to be open to the belonging that Jesus offers us as listeners to the testimony of God. engage in these practices and you too may discover something

May it be so.