

Wednesday Advent Service

March 19, 2025

Numbers 12:1-15

Matthew 26:57-68

In the name of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.

How is your relationship with the truth? If we answered this question honestly, we would have to say our relationship is shaky at best. Those who peddle in falsity use our own biases against us, distorting reality in such a way that we are ever more convinced of our perceived truth. Politicians, talking heads, religious charlatans, pseudo-scientific ignoramuses all claiming to be purveyors of truth; all claiming to have your interests in mind. To rally behind those with power and influence just because you agree with their message is a fool's game. The psalmist advises: "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day, their plans come to nothing."¹ We are prone to being misled by the people we agree with and trust; this has long been a fatal flaw, especially in free societies. It is the flattering tongue that works ruin.²

Our relationship to the truth is suspect in other ways. We say we love the truth, until a lie gives us a convenient way out of responsibility. We say we love the truth, until the exposure of it reveals our flaws. We say we love the truth, until reality makes us uncomfortable or runs counter to our ideology. We love the truth, so long as we don't have to think, question, or study our way into it. Thucydides, an ancient Greek historian, says that most people would happily resort to a ready-made opinion than trouble themselves with a real search for truth.³ And while outright lies can be problematic, what might be equally dangerous is how facts can be misused in the name of what is false. Truth can be misused in gossip, distortion, and destruction. Christ was on the receiving end of all the dark misuses of the truth even as He reigns as the Light and the Truth of the world.

Gossip and rumor-spreading parade as being justified, so long as the statements are true. Ruthless character assassination is made even worse when the person is guilty. This goes beyond getting what one deserves. There is a resentful glee in the prospect of tearing down others, and the claims of justice-seeking are a mask for vengeful motives. Little concern is given to the reputation, livelihood, or family of those subjected to public shame or ridicule. We have made a sport of this with celebrities, athletes, and politicians. Distance turns real people into mere caricatures to be mocked, spoofed, and embarrassed for our entertainment. We often fail to put the best construction on people's fallen reputations.

Moses was the victim of misused truth. Married to a Cushite woman, Moses faced the scorn of his own family. While what was claimed was true, the claims were not aimed at the truth. Rather, Aaron and Miriam were interested in elevating themselves and causing Moses to lose esteem with Israel. "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Hasn't he also spoken through

¹ Psalm 146:3-4

² Proverbs 26:28

³ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12.

us?”⁴ Indeed, God had spoken through Aaron and Miriam, but they took this as a sign of equality with Moses. God then made it clear that Moses’ call was unique among the people: “With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles.”⁵ To make matters worse, Aaron and Miriam used Moses’ foreign wife as justification for claiming a role on par with Moses. They hoped to use this fact and the people’s bigotry to damage Moses’ reputation.

When Jesus was on trial there were many false witnesses, all of whom provided unconvincing testimony. Those who provoked the vitriolic response were the ones who misused the truth. In Matthew, the witnesses accused Jesus saying, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’”⁶ The closest quote we have to what Jesus actually said is from John: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”⁷ I will point out more on the distortion of truth in a bit, but for now, notice how the truth of Jesus’ words is used against Him. He did say He would rebuild the temple, which does imply that it would be destroyed. The quote from John is said during the clearing of the temple which happened during Holy Week, just a short time before the night of His arrest. Even in context, the quote from Jesus is inflammatory, but far from being worthy of crucifixion. The witnesses and judges seized on the plain meaning of the statement and twisted it into a populist charge that would rile up the people. They had a self-interested motive in the partial truth. The dishonesty and self-deception of others, namely the judges of the sham trial, would bring greater harm to Jesus.

It was another misuse of truth that made the judges declare Jesus was worthy of death. “Tell me if you are the Christ, the Son of God?” Jesus responded in truth, even though He knew that it would bring on His condemnation. “Yes, it is as you say.”⁸

The distortion of truth is often justified in the service of our own purposes. Half-truths and selective omissions can cause great harm. Intentionally taking things out of context is a tool used frequently. Sometimes this is done to protect ourselves, to make others look foolish or incompetent, or to put our questionable actions in a more positive light. Being on the other side of such distortions, having your intentions and reputation dragged into accusations that are only half-true or mostly false, leaves you without the ability to fully deny accusations due to the partial truth, distorted as it may be. The partial truth serves to hedge against any defense, because in acknowledging the partial truth, any defense against what is false tends to fall on deaf ears. Distorted truth has been utilized by us, and used against us, but never for the sake of getting to the actual truth of the matter.

Shortly after the incident with Aaron and Miriam, a group of ne’er-do-wells used half-truths to provoke a popular rebellion. Where Aaron and Miriam sought to elevate themselves, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram sought a democratic overthrow of Moses’ and Aaron’s authority. Perhaps

⁴ Numbers 12:2

⁵ Numbers 12:8

⁶ Matthew 26:61

⁷ John 2:19

⁸ Matthew 26:63-64

they just didn't hear about the ordeal Miriam went through, or maybe they did know, and they felt their own cause was truly just. Twisting the truth is justified by ambitious populist politicians, and time after time, the populace falls for it. This crew said to Moses and Aaron, "You have gone too far. The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?"⁹ Now, much of this statement was true. However, Moses was not interested in having power for his own purposes. It was God who chose Moses for this purpose. Just to make the point clear, again, the ground opened and swallowed Korah's men and all their possessions.¹⁰ This still wasn't enough. Populism dies hard. The people grumbled against Moses, saying that he had killed the Lord's people. That was a distorted accusation.

When Christ stood before the religious leaders, the truth would become a distorted weapon. Jesus did not say that he would destroy God's temple as He was accused. That was a distortion. And the truth of His claim, that He would rebuild the temple in three days, that was proven. Though not in the precise way His accusers thought He meant. The final charge against Jesus came down to His own confession. He did not deny the truth, even though it might have been convenient to do so. He loved the truth, even when it was uncomfortable. The truth He loves reveals His perfection. The truth He loves reveals Him to be the Truth that sets prisoners of sin and death free. The high priest had heard enough. The distorted reality that perverted justice led to cries of blasphemy and the rending of garments. The intention they had all along culminated in the distortion that was bent on destruction.

Gossip, distortion, selective inclusion, willful omission of critical details, all come together in a destructive accusation. It was intentional harm the elite class was after. The truth of Christ was a threat to their comfort. The revolutionary fervor of many zealots, including that of some who followed Christ, was a cause for alarm. The real revolution of Christ, however, is nothing less than the revolution of the gospel. The overthrow of Rome would not stem from a Jewish revolt, but from nail pierced hands and feet, from the shed blood of an innocent crucified King. We have seen this as the Church, the Kingdom of God on earth, has spread to every nation, every tribe, and every land.

Korah's was a rebellion that didn't go so well. Korah and his ilk had led the people of Israel on a ruinous path to destruction by using distortions of truth alongside scurrilous lies. The result of that rebellion was a plague that killed over 14K people. What brought it to an end was atonement. Aaron offered incense and made atonement for the people. "He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped."¹¹

When Christ came as our High Priest, He stood in the breach, that unbridgeable gap between the One True Holy God and an unholy humanity. When the truth is misused, a veil is cast over reality. Our understanding becomes distorted, we are misled into destruction, and we move away from our center, the Truth that is found in Christ alone. He is the Light which pierces

⁹ Numbers 16:3

¹⁰ Numbers 16:32-33

¹¹ Numbers 16:48

the veil of darkness. He is the Truth which makes atonement for our lies, our convenient self-deception, and our willingness to follow those who flatter us. This is the truth of the gospel revolution; there is no other name under heaven by which men can be saved. Repenting of our own shaky relationship with the truth, we find true forgiveness, true understanding, and true life in Him. And it is this truth that sets us free.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.