Is the Bible True?
John 18:33-38
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You've probably heard this story before. "God said to Noah, 'I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him."

Great story, isn't it? We grew up hearing about Noah's Ark and the animals that came two by two. Now, let me tell you another version of this story for another source, and let's see what you think of this one: "Then the LORD said to Noah, 'Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth.'"

Hmm. OK, we know the first story about the two pairs of animals. That one is in the Bible, right there in Genesis 6. So where does the second story come from, the one with the sevel pairs of each animal? Believe it or not, the second story comes from…Genesis 7, just a few verses after the first one. If I was Noah, I'd appreciate some clarification, because if it's seven pairs, we're gonna need a bigger boat.

There are actually two different Noah's Ark stories in the Bible that are woven together, and they don't agree. So, here's my question for you: Which one is true? Two pair or seven pair? This is just one of many examples where the Bible doesn't quite fit together as neatly as we might expect. And it raises an important question about what we mean when we say the Bible is true. There's an interesting moment in John's Gospel when Pilate asks Jesus a question: "What is truth?" It's a question people have been asking for centuries. And it's a question we're asking today when we open our Bibles and wonder, "Is this true?"

Before we can answer that question, we have to make sure we're answering the RIGHT question. A four-year-old boy came to his mother one day and said, "Mommy, where did I come from?" The mom was completely caught off-guard, so she began hemming and hawing, trying to figure out how to appropriately answer. She mumbled something about when a man and woman really love each other, they hold hands until a stork comes to give the woman an epidural and brings a baby in a basket. The boy looked puzzled for a second, then said, "That's weird, because Jimmy said he comes from Indiana."

The key to finding answers is asking the right questions, and "Is the Bible true?" may not the right question. It's a fair question, for sure, but it needs to be followed up, not with an answer, but with another question: What kind of truth are we talking about? Webster's defines "true" as "in according with fact or reality." If we define truth exclusively as something that corresponds to verifiable facts, then we're going to run into some problems with the Bible.

For example, in Genesis 1, when God created the world, the writer tells us, "And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' So, God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky." As we know today, that answer is not in accordance with fact or reality.

Back when Genesis was written, they didn't have NASA and space shuttles. They didn't even have a VHS copy of E.T." Their understanding of the universe was based largely on looking up and saying, "Well, that's interesting." So, they could only write what they knew. They looked up and saw this blue expanse, which was the same color as the water around them, so they assumed there was a dome holding back those waters. And they called the dome "Sky." That was true for them, so that's what they wrote. We know now there is no dome holding back the waters. From a scientific standpoint, that's just not true.

But is that the only kind of truth? When I walk outside in the morning and see light appear in the eastern sky, I say, "The sun is rising." Now, an astronomer would be quick to point out that the sun doesn't rise or set; it stays still while the earth moves. But my experience tells me that the sun rises, and that's a lot more poetic than saying, "I saw the most beautiful rotation of earth that made the sun become visible this morning." The sunrise is true for me, even if it's not true in other ways. Could there be more than one kind of truth?

A quick history lesson may help us answer that. Beginning in the 1500s, people like Galileo and Copernicus began asking questions about the natural world that challenged traditional religious understandings, and that started a seismic cultural shift. Instead of relying primarily on religion to explain the natural world, people increasingly turned to reason and science. Truth became something that could be tested, measured, and proven. The scientific method developed, and saying "Because the Bible says so" was no longer a debate-ender. This was the beginning of the Enlightenment.

But people knew there were other truths that were beyond proof. Does love exist? Of course! Can you measure it using the scientific method? Not a chance. During this time, a division occurred called the fact-value split. Facts tell us what something is or how it works. Values tell us what something means and why it's important. Both matter, but not everything meaningful can be measured or proven. I love this congregation, and I believe you love me. There are tangible ways to demonstrate that, like the fact that my key still works. But the love we share goes far beyond anything we can measure.

So, here's the problem when it comes to the Bible. The belief that the Bible contains no factual errors and doesn't contradict itself doesn't come from the Bible itself. The modern concepts of biblical inerrancy and infallibility developed much later, creating a sinister dichotomy that we still struggle with today. We're given two choices: either believe the Bible is factually perfect and explain away the stuff that doesn't make sense, like domes in the sky, or question the Bible's accuracy and wonder why we even read it at all. That choice sets up the destructive assumption that if you question the Bible, then you are questioning your own faith and even questioning God.

That was never an issue for the early readers of the Bible. They didn't care about the verifiable truth of the Bible, because for them, it was true in more profound ways. For example, archaeology has shown no evidence of a group the size of the Israelites leaving Egypt, traveling 40 years in the desert, and settling in Canaan. No candy wrappers, no discarded maps, no sandal prints. Archaeology and the Bible don't line up. But the biblical writers weren't trying to produce modern historical documentation. They were telling the story of God and God's people as a way of explaining their current situation. They didn't care that the facts didn't line up. The purpose of the Bible is not to explain science or accurately recount historical events. And as soon we try to use it to do those things, we're severely distorting the Bible's purpose. Trying to contort the Bible to be factually true isn't submitting to God, it's making God submit to us.

So, is the Bible factually true? Not entirely. We know now the world isn't flat, that evil doesn't live in the ocean, and there's not a dome above us. But is the Bible true in other ways? Absolutely, because for Christians there's a difference between fact and truth. Here's the best way I can think of to highlight the difference. To say "Jesus died" is a fact, as best as we know. To say "Jesus died for our sins" is a truth, one that goes much, much deeper than any fact.

There were certain truths the biblical writers were trying to convey, and they wrote in order to convey those truths, truths like God is love and Jesus is the Messiah and we are God's children. Are those facts? I don't know. I can't prove them to you. But are they truths? Absolutely. It's OK to believe that not everything in the Bible is factually true. It's OK to have doubts about the historical validity of some of the stories. That doesn't mean you're a bad Christian or an irresponsible person. It means you're human and you're using your God-given brain to try and make sense of this thing called faith.

Facts aside, I do believe that there is truth in every passage of scripture. Sometimes that truth rests right on the surface, like when writer of Genesis tells us we were made in God's image. That's truth, plain and simple. But there are other truths that run much deeper, and we have to dig below the surface to get to them. Paul says, "Slaves obey your masters." Jesus says, "Sell all you have and give it to the poor." God says, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings that I created." You don't tend to find those verses on decorative pillows at Hobby Lobby. To get to the truths in those passages requires us to wrestle with them, and in the end, you still may end up not understanding. No one has yet to figure out all the answers, so you're probably not going to, either. That's OK. Faith is not a problem to be solved; it's a mystery to be lived.

We've been told we have two choices: believe everything in the Bible and toss out all we've learned through science, astronomy, archaeology, and medicine; or don't believe everything in the Bible and go to Hell. I believe there's a better way. I choose to believe the biblical writers wrote what they knew at the time. I choose to believe God gave us brains to learn and discover more about our world, sometimes in ways that contradict or even disprove the Bible. And I choose to believe the Bible is true in ways that go so much deeper than what we can prove.

Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" It's a question we still ask today. And maybe the answer isn't found in having every question resolved or every detail explained. Maybe the question is whether, through all these stories, these different voices, and even these disagreements, we can still hear the voice of God calling us into a deeper relationship with God. Maybe truth is ultimately found in the person standing before Pilate, the one who came to show us what God's love looks like. Because God wants nothing more than to love us, and that's the truth.