How do you know the truth?

It’s been over two months since we at Hope last gathered to worship.

Two months without normal school, normal work, normal shopping… two months without funerals, baptisms, birthday parties, hugs, playgrounds, communion, choir practice, family gatherings, and just going out for coffee. We’ve traded all that for Zoom everything.

It’s been two months. And counting.

To overstate the obvious: It’s not easy to stay-at-home indefinitely. Even as our pre-pandemic life is starting to fade in memory, we’re still not clear on what comes next, or when it will come, or what will be left behind when we get there. We’re living in limbo. It’s disorienting and disconcerting and one of the ways we deal with that discomfort is to gather information. We are desperate for understanding, desperate for every little shred of clarity.

Now, clarity is hard to come by in the middle of a pandemic. But information is everywhere.

And almost all of it, it seems, is up for debate. Caught in a polarized landscape where every narrative elicits a counter-narrative from the other side and not even numbers are neutral anymore.

How do you sort through it all? How do you know the truth?

There’s a whole branch of philosophy dedicated to that question. Epistemology: the study of how we know what we know, if things are even knowable at all, and what’s the difference between just having a confident opinion about something and knowing that thing to be true.

In part, it’s a question of reliability or trust. Can I trust my senses? Can I trust my own rational thoughts? A la Descartes: “I think therefore I am.” Then again, if my own logical thinking is the most reliable source of information, what about matters where I’m in over my head? (Epidemiology, for example…)

Can I trust what others tell me is true? What if it comes from the government? Or scientists? Or the media? Which sources of information are more trustworthy than
others? What are the indicators of reliability – Confidence? Cautiousness? Consensus? Or daring to go against the grain?

And, given that we’re all biased to some extent, how do we account for those biases in ourselves and in others? What if my facts are different from your facts? Are there any objective facts anymore at all?

How do you know the truth?

Epistemology is not just for the philosophers anymore. These are questions that many of us are wrestling with on a daily basis. We’re in the midst of what’s been called an “epistemological crisis.” We’ve lost the skills to collectively discern the truth from the noise.

And there is so much noise.

Do I believe that there is good information out there? Yes.

Do I believe there’s misinformation, and even deliberate disinformation, out there? Probably, yes.

Do I believe we have a responsibility to be good stewards of what we take in and seek out the truth? Absolutely.

I think we’d all agree about that.

But I have serious doubts about our ability to agree on what’s actually happening in the world right now, which makes it difficult to discern what needs to happen next – in our communities, in our institutions, in our nation.

How do you know the truth?

Our text this week picks up where last week’s left off.

It’s still Passover. Jesus is in the upper room, readying himself for the cross and readying his friends for his death and departure. The air is thick with unease and unanswered questions. “If Jesus leaves… if Jesus dies… then what?”

Like us, they’re anxious and confused.
Like us, they’re desperate to know what comes next.

And it is here, with trouble all around, that Jesus promises the Holy Spirit. “Another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth.”

“The Spirit of truth.”

I don’t know if I’ve ever noticed that phrase, that name for the Spirit, before.
Something about it gets caught in my throat – kind of like when a song turns out to be just right for the moment and the beauty of it all almost hurts.

Because I am finding myself longing these days for truth.

To know that it’s still a thing. That it still exists.
That truth is still out there and knowable.

And I’m longing to be part of a people that knows the truth together.

Maybe you are too. Maybe this Spirit offers us some hope.

A little background on our text:

The word for truth hardly shows up in the other gospel accounts, but in John’s gospel, truth is a big deal.

“The word became flesh. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (Jn 1:14)

From that prologue to Pilate, John’s account of Jesus keeps circling back around to truth. Jesus talks about worshiping in truth and knowing the truth that sets you free. He even calls himself as “the way, the truth, and the life.” So by the time we get to his trial and Pilate asks “What is truth?,” we’re supposed to kind of pick up on the irony. Pilate, the truth is standing right in front of you. Don’t you see?

But truth in John is revelation. Not everyone can see. It’s not just that truth is a person, and that person is Jesus. Truth is what Jesus, through the incarnation, reveals: the presence of God with us. The mystery of a deity that is at once Father and Son.

And Spirit.

In our text, John adds the third person of the Trinity. “The Spirit of truth” who testifies to that revelation of God in Christ.

The one who opens our eyes and walks alongside us as an “advocate” (or paraclete): a counselor, helper, defender, encourager, companion.

Exactly what Jesus had been to his disciples, and exactly what they’re afraid of losing.

Only this one will be with them forever.

With them. And in them.

There’s a certain mysticism to John’s gospel. A vision of mutual abiding, remaining, dwelling—us in Jesus, Jesus in the Father, the Spirit in us. In essence, John draws us into the Trinity. Into the closeness of the Godhead, made beautifully, mysteriously accessible to us.
Like an invitation.

And all are here in John 14: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It’s almost like Jesus is passing the baton. As God has been with them in Jesus, so Jesus will be with them—and in them—through the Spirit.

This is the truth that the Spirit reveals. That God is with us. God is still with us. Even in the upper room. Even in the midst of trouble and confusion and anxiety over what comes next.

I’m not sure that’s what we’re looking for when we find ourselves longing for truth. When we’re deep in the weeds and wanting answers. When we just want to know. (Back to that epistemological crisis…)

But what if Jesus is talking to us too?

“But you know him. For he lives with you and will be in you.” (Jn 14:17)

What if knowing is more about who than what? What if the “Spirit of truth” is mostly interested in pointing us to God and inviting us to dwell with the Trinity? To make ourselves at home in the Trinity?

Maybe that makes all the difference.

Moe and I celebrate 9 years of marriage this month. (Feels like a pretty modest number when I think of the decades of marriage that some of you have known.)

Every once in a while, for no reason at all, we find ourselves wondering aloud together: “Where do you think you’d be if we’d never met?”

After all, we met on a blind date and got married within a year. Our lives merged quickly, but they had been going in very different directions. He was a hip-hop musician in Chicago, I was preparing to study Hebrew in Jerusalem. Both those dreams died and a new shared life emerged in their stead.

But what if we’d never been set up? Where would we be? Who would we be?

It’s a fun thought experiment, but always futile in the end.

Because knowing Moe – and living with him, day in and day out, for nine years – has changed me. Formed me. And vice versa. There’s no way to extract ourselves anymore.

I wonder if the Spirit’s ministry of truth is something like that. Slowly, day by day, walking alongside—as Advocate, Counselor, Companion—and shaping how we see and who we are.

The work of formation, not information.
Because, in Scripture, the evidence of knowing the truth is in how you live it. And if the truth is the revelation of God-with-us in Christ, then the evidence is in following Christ’s example. “If you love me, keep my commands.” This is why the Father sends the Spirit—to empower us to love and live like Jesus.

How do we know the truth?

One of the strengths of our Reformed tradition is its affirmation of human intellect and the inherent goodness of all areas of study. Our tradition is maybe at its best when it is thinking critically and biblically about a wide range of issues.

But I wonder if it would help to add, alongside that good rational work, a more contemplative pursuit of truth? Especially in our current context?

If the Spirit of truth is present with us, in us, as close as our breath, what would it look like to lean in to that reality? To let truth pursue us?

Our friends in the contemplative tradition have something called a breath prayer.

I’ve been drawn to these prayers during this strange season. To be honest, I don’t really know how else to pray. I have three small children and “quiet time” isn’t really a thing in our house right now.

But I am breathing. And sometimes, it helps to match those breaths with a phrase from scripture. Like, (inhale) “the Spirit of Truth” (exhale) “lives in me.”

And just let that sink in. And slow me down to remember God is with me. Father, Son, and Spirit.

And let that be true.

And let that be enough.

What if, in the coming weeks, whenever we are overwhelmed and anxious, we turned not to news or to commentary to alleviate that feeling, but to the Comforter and Counselor?

What if we limited our media consumption (perhaps even took a media Sabbath), trusting that the salient information would find its way to us, and finding contentment even amid all that we don’t know?

What if, when we need to come together to make difficult decisions, we began with an acknowledgement of the Spirit in our midst, dwelling among us, walking beside us, guiding us to truth, and helping us to stay united in love, even when we disagree?
And I wonder if it helps to remember that the same Spirit of truth that dwells in you is also dwelling in your brothers and sisters—drawing us together in love, together in patience, together even across social distance, together even as we struggle to discern what comes next.

People of God, you are led by the Spirit, at home in the Trinity, and called to live lives of love.

May you know this truth deep in your souls.

Amen.