

Museums of lie and truth: Speaking toward truth in our sermons¹

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Abstract

The search for truth becomes a challenging theological task in a world of lies and propaganda, being exhibited more and more openly. Inspired by two “Museums of Lies,” this paper aims to show how lies can be used to uncover a more profound truth by exposing them through a truth-seeking lens. While the homiletical task of “preaching the truth” is more complicated than it would seem at first glance, it is accompanied by the anthropological question, ‘Whether it is true’ (Karl Barth), and the theological question: ‘What is truth?’. The argument is that by observing what Martin Luther called “theologia crucis,” the task of preaching truth becomes dependent on the means and ways in which the Bible itself uncovers truth within our world of lies and by acknowledging that the discovery of truth can only be described as a process, at the beginning and end of which Jesus’ answer to Pilate may provide reassurance.

Keywords: lies; truth; museum; Martin Luther; Karl Barth; lekh-lekha; John; Pilate

1. Museums of lie or: exposing by exhibiting

There are two *museums of lie* worldwide, but I have to admit that maybe the very first sentence of this paper proves to be a lie, as I haven’t done any in-depth research. I know one of these museums, which is close to where I live. The other one is 100 years old – and it would be a lie to say that this museum has existed.

Let’s start with the existing one.² It is connected with the artist Reinhard Zabka, who founded his “Museum of the Lie” in a little village around 100 km northwest of Berlin called Gantikow – and this is why he named himself Richard von Gigantikow.

This sounds quite funny but wasn’t at all at the very beginning. It was full of humor, but of humor which meant resistance to a totalitarian regime. The “Museum of the Lie” was founded in the 1980s during the German Democratic Republic. Richard von Gigantikow created works of art protesting against the ‘normal’ bourgeois life in GDR. His art was a protest and very much disliked by the GDR regime. This is why Zabka started to saw up his art works, break them down into pieces, and rearrange them. In this way, his work seemed unpolitical at first sight, but it was not.

¹ This article is revised from the Presidential Address delivered at Societas Homiletica’s conference in Budapest on August 13, 2022.

² Cf. <https://www.luegenmuseum.de/>.

Out of these impulses, his idea was to create a museum of lies containing a collection of things that shaped life in GDR – but also other things, which are lies at first sight: e.g., the ear of Vincent van Gogh.

Nowadays, more than 30 years after the end of the GDR, Germany is far from being a totalitarian regime, but there is still much work to do. The artist sees *nationalism* as one of the biggest problems people face nowadays. Nationalism is, in his eyes, one of the big lies of our time, maybe the biggest, but one which can be cured.³

Gigantikow arranged and arranges intertextual compositions of artworks, pieces of everyday life, words, and sentences – like the following: “Lies in the service of truth wash the dust of everyday life away from the stars.” (“Die Lüge im Dienst der Wahrheit wäscht den Staub des Alltags von den Sternen.”) He is using lies to uncover something else – ultimately: to discover the truth.

But this is challenging. It is not that visitors see stories of obvious lies, but they are taken into a complex interwovenness of truth *and* lies. It is one of the big lies that everything in the museum of lie is a lie. So, people will have to find out, to reflect, to discern truth and lie – and after an hour or two or much more, they come out and might have realized how complicated things are. They will have learned that everyday communication is full of lies, and the truth is mostly hidden in and between a complex net of lies.

Since 2012, the museum is no longer in Gantikow, but in Radebeul, near Dresden. There were conflicts with the owners of the house. And now, the museum *is* not really in Radebeul but in an interim location. It has not found a final place yet but is somehow dislocated. If you want to, you might see this as a metaphor for all the places in which truth is discovered amid the lies of our lives and our societies: they are somehow dislocated, heterotopia, as Michel Foucault would have said⁴ – and maybe our preaching is just one of these dislocated unsettling places.

The other “museum of lie” was just an idea, a dream around 100 years ago. One of the most brilliant intellectuals of his time, Aby Warburg (1866–1929), dreamt of this. As his parents’ first-born son, he could have been the director of a huge private bank, but he did not want to. He wanted to be a private scholar and collect a huge library. Instead of his heritage, he just asked to receive any book he needed and wanted – the basis of the Warburg libraries.⁵

In times of World War I, he became more and more political and critical. His house in Hamburg was transformed into an observatory of the propaganda of World War I, and here is where his idea of opening a “Museum of Lie” started. He wanted to display the national propaganda of World War I and help people with this critical iconology. It is a pity that this

³ „Richard von Gigantikow, Kurator des Lüseums, erforschte als Nationaltherapeut die Abgründe deutscher Befindlichkeiten. Sein Forschungsgebiet: Nationalismus, eine regional verbreitete Hysterie, durchaus heilbar. Künstler sind für diese Heilkünste besonders prädestiniert, denn sie können mit den Gefühlen spielen, sie können auch die Wut dressieren, die die Bürger auf die Straße treibt.“

⁴ Cf. *Michel Foucault*, *Of Other Spaces*. Utopias and Heterotopias; the text can be found and accessed easily on the internet.

⁵ Cf. *Aby Warburg*, *Werke*, auf der Grundlage der Manuskripte und Handexemplare hg. und kommentiert v. Martin Tremml, Sigrid Weigel und Perdita Ladwig, stw 2242, Berlin 2018.

museum was never realized. The world would have needed it. Who knows, maybe it would have helped to prevent World War II from happening, to prevent the Vietnam War and Russia's war in Ukraine!?

In a very different way, the idea of both museums is strikingly similar: they exhibit to expose. To wake people up and lead them out of their comfort zones of cozy truth claims and propaganda.

We may have seen an iconic picture of how this looks like in spring 2022, when the Russian journalist Marina Owsjannikowa showed a poster “NO WAR” during the live broadcast of the main news on Russian television on March 14th, 2022. She dared to confront the lies of the imperialistic national state doctrine by their exposure – just for seconds before she was carried away.

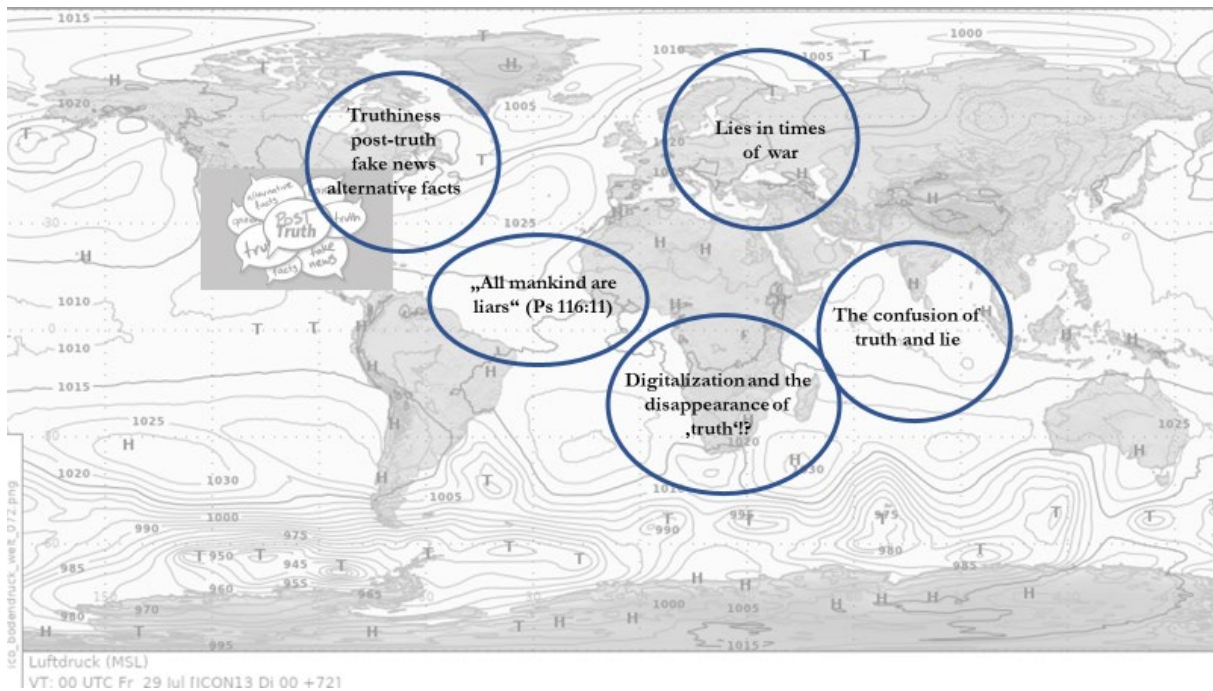
I think, our preaching could and should be analogous to these museums. In the letter to the Colossians 2:15, we read (in the old King James Version): “And having spoiled principalities and powers, he [God] made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it [in the cross].” Spoiling the principalities and powers by the cross, by the humble words of our sermons, by the crazy ideas of museums of lie!?

2. In a world of lies or: the ‘general weather situation’

German Practical Theologian Ernst Lange (1927–1974) once said that whenever you prepare a sermon, you should be aware of the concrete situation in your congregation, community, or district but also have a look at the ‘general weather situation’ (die “Großwetterlage”).⁶ What are the main trends, maybe not obvious at first sight, but important for the structure of feeling of the listeners?

Ernst Lange's term ‘general weather situation’ motivated me to present some ‘weather map’ on truth and lie in global context.

⁶ Cf. *Ernst Lange*, *Zur Theorie und Praxis der Predigtarbeit*, in: idem, *Predigen als Beruf. Aufsätze*, ed. by Rüdiger Schloz, Stuttgart/Berlin 1976, 9–51, 38.



I see two main current challenges and three underlying phenomena (and I would never dare say that my truth-and-lie-weather-map is complete or even thoroughly thought through!).

Two current challenges:

(1) The first one can be seen in North America in my map, but let me be very clear: It is surely not a US-American or North-American phenomenon, but a worldwide one, although it became most obvious for many people worldwide when the Trump team spoke about “alternative facts” in January 2017. We live in a – as some say – post-truth era, in a time of “fake news” or “alternative facts.” We are surrounded by disinformation, and this is at the same time connected with “truthiness.”

Disinformation⁷ is false information created to mislead people deliberately; it is used as a method of politics on different levels and using different media. As fake news, it is aesthetically resembling mainstream news; and disinformation may not be completely wrong, but there may be some aspects of truth or evidence in it – which makes things even more complicated.

Disinformation is connected with truthiness, a term coined in 2005 by Stephen Colbert, meaning “the belief or assertion that a particular statement is true based on intuition or perceptions of some individual or individuals, without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, [...] facts” or science.⁸ Truthiness is: you want to believe in the truth of something: Corona is just a cold, a ‘Grippesino’, a mild flu, as Bolsonaro said in

⁷ Cf. Pennycook, Gordon/Rand, David G., The psychology of fake news, in: Trends in Cognitive Sciences 25 (2021), 388–402.

⁸ Wikipedia definition.

2020; or climate change is just “mythical,” “non-existent” or an “expensive hoax,” as Donald Trump says.⁹

(2) You see my second current challenge somewhere between Russia and Ukraine: lies in times of war, but this is surely not the only war we are facing in this world. But it is very close for us in Central Europa, and it is threatening as one of the military superpowers with a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons and the power to make parts of the world starve is the aggressor. But there are more: in Syria, the Kurdish areas in Iraq, Yemen, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and many more.

The first victim of a war is truth. Putin’s propaganda leads to the approval of around 80% of the population for his ‘special military operation,’ as he calls it.¹⁰

And then there are at least three underlying phenomena – all interwoven, which complicates our ‘general weather situation’.

(1) First, there is a basic anthropological phenomenon, which is stated most clearly in Ps 116:11, “All mankind are liars,” and which is narrated in many chapters of the Bible. It starts at the very beginning: in Paradise. Or, to put it the other way round: We could still be there, walking around naked, eating the best fruit you can imagine, without all the pain and hardship of our life, if lie had not entered. “Did God actually say ...?” (Gen 3:1). And: “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I am naked ...” (Gen 3:10).

Revital Ludewig, a social psychologist, says that people, on average, lie 25 times a day – and in her view, it is a social competence to be able to do so.¹¹ She may be right and lies are part of our communication. But according to the Bible, to Gen 3, lies relate to mistrust and destroy the relationship – of Adam and Eve, and both of them with God.

In our homiletical discourse, we know very well that truthiness is an aspect of preaching as well. People hear what they like to hear, even if preachers say something else. This is at least one of the results of the analysis of the psychology of communication in the 1970s.¹²

So, it is safe to say that as long as humans live on this earth, there will be lies: “All mankind are liars.” And one aspect of the differentiation of God and man is exactly this: “God is not man, that he should lie [...]. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” (Num 23:19).

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51213003>.

¹⁰ Cf. *Friedrich Erich Dobberahn*, Religion im Dienst des Krieges. Die abscheuliche Wiederkehr der theologischen Ursünde, in: *Deutsches Pfarrernetz* 122 (2022), 399–403: Dobberahn shows examples of how religion is used as a ‘weapon’ in the current propaganda of the Orthodox Church of Russia and connects this to former rhetorics of war (especially in First World War Germany).

¹¹ Cf. *Revital Ludewig*, Zwischen Wahrheit und Lüge. Aussagepsychologie für die Rechtspraxis, Zürich/St. Gallen 2017.

¹² Cf. *Karl-Wilhelm Dahm*, Hören und Verstehen. Kommunikationspsychologische Aspekte zur gegenwärtigen Predigtnot, in: *Albrecht Beutel/Volker Drehsen/Hans Martin Müller* (Ed.), *Homiletisches Lesebuch. Texte zur heutigen Predigtlehre*, Tübingen 1986, 242–252.

(2) Secondly, digitalization, with its many positive effects, also has some dramatic side effects. The algorithmic steering of many of our social media communication delivers us with news we *want to hear* – as this is what makes sense economically. And we hear all kinds of things. Corona vaccinations are dangerous and life-threatening and were invented by Bill Gates for – well – any kind of reason. In Hungary, people may hear: George Soros seeks world domination, and the European Union tries to destroy Hungarian culture, and all over the world, people might say, that mankind is surely not responsible for climate change and so on, and so on.

And when you see how easy it is to create your multimedia reality by just photoshopping a bit, digitalization may at least accelerate the problem we are talking about.¹³

(3) And thirdly, there is the confusion between truth and lie, which we already discovered in our museum of lies in Radebeul. It takes work. If the world were clearly black and white, it would be much easier. One is reminded of how the devil argues in the story of Jesus' temptation. Satan is very well versed in the Bible (cf. Mat 4:1–11). Chuck Campbell analyzed this aspect and wrote in his book "The Word before the Powers" about the confusion of "truth and falsehood."¹⁴

Actually, it could be asked why there are so few "museums of lies" in a world full of lies. Maybe, because museums usually deal with the past, and lies are all around and abundant in our days – and will be tomorrow and in the coming days!? Or maybe, because lies hide behind something which looks like truth!? Or because the powers and principalities are at work confusing us in our situation ... If this is roughly the general weather situation, we have much work to do ...

From time to time, people articulate their suffering under the pressure of the power of lies. In 1933, German composer Hugo Distler (1908–1942), who made an end to his life in 1942 by suicide, recomposed the hymn "Wake up, wake up, o German land."¹⁵ It was originally composed by Johann Walter (1496–1570; one of the most important musicians in the age of Reformation, who worked together with Martin Luther on his "German Mass"; in 1561 – after the Schmalkaldian War and the Leipzig Interim, he saw the necessity of calling for penitence – and of trying to awake the people).

And then, in 1933, we hear these words anew: "Right and truth are overwhelmed," "lies" "dressed in garments fine," and "held in honor." And what is missing and lacking, is God's word. And here we are at the specific point of homiletical discourse. What about God's word in this general weather situation of lies? And what about us, the witnesses of God's truth?

¹³ In the months after the delivery of this address in Budapest, the question of "Artificial Intelligence" raised to a new dimension. With ChatGPT people became more and more aware of the fact that AI may gain a tremendous influence in our public discourse without being connected with 'truth' and without being controlled by a commonly accepted ethical guidance.

¹⁴ Cf. *Charles Campbell*, *The Word before the Powers. An Ethic of Preaching*, Louisville/London 2002.

¹⁵ Cf. *Wolfgang Herbst*, Hugo Distler und die Entstehung einer Legende, in: *Schütz-Jahrbuch* 31 (2009), 14–22.

<p>5. Die Wahrheit wird jetzt unterdrückt, will niemand Wahrheit hören; die Lüge wird gar fein geschmückt, man hilft ihr oft mit Schwören; dadurch wird Gottes Word veracht't, die Wahrheit höhnisch auch verlacht, die Lüge tut man ehren.</p>	<p>5. Now right and truth are overwhelmed and truth lacks willing hearers; and lies are dressed in garments fine and oft with oaths assisted; by these despised is God's true word, and truth insulted with a smirk, but lies are held in honor.</p>
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3. Homiletics in a world of lies and the promise of God's truth

3.1 Preaching *the* Truth

Facing our weather map, the simplest task of preaching might be: "Preach the truth! Say what is true! Again, and again! Expose the powers of lies by preaching the truth!"

It is quite easy to say this – especially in my Western and Central European context. I may say whatever I want to say in my safe German pulpits – and the worst thing I have to expect is that some people may leave the service or critique me immediately after the service or won't show up again in my services. But in other times and situations and all too many places around the world, it is a different thing. One of my friends in Leipzig is in close contact with priests of the Russian Orthodox Church – and of course, not all of them agree with the chauvinist-nationalistic propaganda and the harrowing misuse of religion in support of Putin's war against Ukraine, but many of them are full of fear and do not dare to speak out openly against the war and the crimes; they don't even dare to call it a "war."

You have to be brave sometimes to say the truth. There was a research project at Duke University on Oscar Romero (1917–1980), a Catholic Priest and, from 1977, Archbishop of San Salvador. During a Mass, he was executed on March 24, 1980. He writes in his diary on November 5, 1979:

„[...]it is normal for one who dedicates himself to preaching truth and justice to be at cross-purposes with the world and for his voice, even though it be silenced by death, to continue to be heard in the conscience of those who think as he does.“¹⁶

His sermons¹⁷ were quite unusual – at first sight. He regularly started with a long explication of the scriptural readings of the respective Sunday. He intended to start with God's word – whatever happened in the last days and whatever filled his heart and the hearts of his congregation. And again and again, the Biblical word showed its relevance and the challenge it offers for today. In a sermon on January 6th, 1980, Epiphany, he talked about the three kings or magicians looking for the newborn king and asked where people in El Salvador could find a king, a real savior of the country.¹⁸ And he showed that the three kings were ready for a long,

¹⁶ *Oscar Romero, A Shepherd's Diary*, translated by Irene B. Hodgson, Cincinnati (OH) 1991, 375f.

¹⁷ Cf. <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/homilies-and-writings> [accessed 04/23/2023].

¹⁸ Sermon from January 6, 1980, 1.

long way and ready to give away their wealth to the poor. Romero asked the wealthy in his country if they would be ready to follow in their footsteps.

The second part of his sermons was even more striking. It is usually almost as long as the first, the Biblical-hermeneutical part. In this part, Romero told his listeners what happened in the church and its congregations in the last few days. It was all about facts – and people often heard the opposite of what the state and propaganda media said. Those who were arrested or deported were called by name to not forget a single person. The sermons in these two parts – the truth of the Bible and the truth of the lived live – made Romero dangerous for the regime of San Salvador.

There are times when it is all about telling the truth, opposing the alternative facts and the constructed narratives of those who are in power. Being a witness means *martyria* in Greek – and sometimes preaching is exactly this: *martyria* – reminding us of the martyrs of our churches.

In our churches of the North, we face declining numbers of church members. And especially in this situation, I am threatened to deliver sermons that want to show how ‘relevant’ and important churches still are. Sermons that produce societal values instead of interrupting political and economic power structures. Again and again, I am threatened to offer people a Gospel, which is ‘cheap,’ as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said.¹⁹ And I may be ready to “call evil good and good evil,” “to put darkness for light and light for darkness,” to “put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter,” as Isaiah calls the false prophets of his age (cf. Isa 5:20)? Am I an agent of lie and a false prophet? Jeremiah has much to say against these false prophets (cf. Jer 23; cf. also: Jer 27; 29:9).

¹⁴ [...] they commit adultery and walk in lies;
they strengthen the hands of evildoers,
so that no one turns from his evil [...].

¹⁶Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. [...]’ ¹⁷They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’ [...]

²³Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away?”

Have I heard Jeremiah’s sermon? And does a conference like this also lead to the movement of homiletical penitence? Am I, as Martin Luther called it in his Heidelberg Disputation 1518, a *theologus gloriae*, a theologian of glory, who calls – as Luther says – bad good and good bad. In contrast, a *theologus crucis*, a theologian of the cross, says what has to be said: “dicit, id quod res est”?²⁰

¹⁹ Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The cost of discipleship* (Nachfolge), London 2001.

²⁰ Martin Luther, *Lateinisch-deutsche Studienausgabe*, Bd. 1: *Der Mensch vor Gott*, unter Mitarbeit von Michael Beyer hg. v. Wilfried Härle, Leipzig 2016, 35–69, 52.

Maybe the so-called ‘good news’ is not always ‘good’ in the sense that people might want to hear it, and it is exactly ‘good news’ because I, as a preacher and my listeners, would never want to hear it. Good news is always a destabilizing message, upsetting my equilibrium and getting me out of where I am, locating myself among the poor, the imprisoned, the naked ...

In July 2022, in Naumburg Cathedral, a new altar was shown. It was painted by Michael Triegel, one of the famous artists of the Leipzig School. In 1519 Lucas Cranach painted an altar showing the so-called *Sacra Conversazione*, Mary and the child in the middle, surrounded by saints. In 1542, the center of the altar got lost, and only the side wings remained. Triegel’s altar seems traditional at first sight. But if I look closer, I see the strange group of people Jesus is surrounded with.²¹ The person with the red cap carries the key in his hand – and is Saint Peter. Triegel painted him following the model of a homeless person and beggar in Rome. Paul is an orthodox Jew whom Triegel met in Jerusalem. And one may also discover Dietrich Bonhoeffer and see many women surrounding Jesus. This is the true place and context of preaching.

3.2 Preaching *toward* truth

Preaching truth is what we are called to do. And at the same time, this is connected with the second challenge: preaching *toward truth*. It is possible to rediscover the whole homiletical arrangement when you enter the question of truth into it.

The question *What is truth?* could lead to hours and hours of philosophical discussion. One thread of the occidental philosophical discussion is connected with exactly this question. I could start with the early Greek philosophers and end with the radical deconstruction of any truth claims in postmodern philosophy and the careful rediscovery of truth claims and confessions of truth in so-called meta-modern trends of philosophy.

In this European philosophical line of thought, there is at least a tendency to individualize and rationalize the truth. This may be, of course, one of the strengths of this discussion. It asks whether there is an adequation between my intellectual perception and the ‘thing’ or ‘things’ outside (*adaequatio intellectus et rei*).²² But there is another dimension of truth, which is not disconnected from the individualistic-epistemological-cognitive-propositional definition and practice of truth but points toward another dimension: an embodied-relational-experiential-expressive understanding of truth.²³

The clash between two different ways of dealing with truth can best be illustrated with the well-known scene of Jesus standing before Pilate and Pilate asks: “What is truth?” (John 18):

²¹ Michael Triegel’s Naumburg altar can be found easily in the Internet.

²² This perspective on truth can be differentiated in several aspects: (1) It can be seen in an objective way: the congruence between facts and words/sentences; (2) in a more subjective way: the existential feeling of something (or my own life) being true; and in a more intersubjective way: as a congruence of worldviews.

²³ George Lindbeck differentiates between a cognitive-propositional theory of truth and an experiential-expressive theory of truth (cf. *George Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine. Religion and Theology in a postliberal age*, London 1984, 49). Cf. also *Wilfried Härle, Christlicher Glaube zwischen Skepsis und Gewissheit*, in: *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Weltanschauungsfragen* 77 (2014), 325–333; *Jürgen van Oorschot, Art. Wahrheit/Wahrhaftigkeit I. Altes Testament*, in: *TRE* 35 (2003), 337–340.

“³⁷Then Pilate said to him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.’ ³⁸Pilate said to him, ‘What is truth?’”

... and never receives an answer. He can't receive an answer because the one who said "I am the truth" (John 14:6) is standing before him; the truth is a person, and the truth is the relationship with Jesus, the embodied, incarnated word of God.

In John's gospel, again and again, people meet the living truth – and are puzzled. Misunderstanding after misunderstanding! And it is clear from the very beginning:

“He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:10–13).

John's concept of truth is deeply rooted in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish thought. The Hebrew word we usually translate with *truth* is *emet* / אמת – and is hard to translate: it is something like persistence/stability; reliability; honesty; or faithfulness. All of these words lead to a relationship – with other people and with God. *Emet* is connected with God him:herself – and with the people around; it is connected with justice and reconciliation, embodied, political, personal, and practical (cf. Micha 6:8).

In conversations with Jewish friends, I sometimes hear the critical remark: You, Christians, are sometimes so eager to intellectually find 'the truth'. We Jews try to walk in a true way with our God. Yes, they are right. Truth is connected with – what I would call – a *lekh-lekha-perspective*. The whole story of Israel starts with these two words: God's word to Abram: *lekh-lekha*, in the English translation, it is just one word: "Go!" (Gen 12:1: "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'"). Truth means: being on the way with Him:Her, with our God, in this world. We live truly, we preach truth, but we do not only deliver propositions of truth. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel once said (mAv 1:18): "On three things the world stands: on judgment, on truth, and peace, as it is said (Zach 8:16): Judge truth and the justice of peace in your gates."

One of the great Jewish thinkers and philosophers in the 20th century, for me one of the most important, is Franz Rosenzweig, who once criticized Christian theology in general, especially the new theological movement of Dialectical Theology in the 1920s. He wrote (in my own English translation):

"The theology which is rightest is the most dangerous. We nowadays have, after a long drought, a theology, especially a Protestant one, which leaves nothing to be desired in its correctness. We know that God is the 'totally other'. [...] What follows is that we as people who are right, stand in a circle like children. One says something correct, and his neighbor corrects him with the message that there is a correcter correctness and that his correctness

was wrong – and so they go around in a circle until the first one starts again. And this is what they call: theology.”

And in the original German version:

„Die richtigste Theologie ist die gefährlichste. Wir haben heute, nach langer Dürre, eine Theologie, meist protestantisch, die an Richtigkeit nichts zu wünschen übrig läßt. Wir haben es also nun heraus, daß Gott der Ganz-Andre ist [...]. Die Folge dieser ungeheuren Richtigkeit ist, daß wir Richtigen heute allesamt wie die Kinder im Kreis stehen, einer sagt eine Richtigkeit, sein Nachbar fährt ihm mit der noch richtigeren, daß seine Richtigkeit eben als Richtigkeit falsch war, über den Mund, und so geht es rundum, bis wieder der erste dran ist. Das Ganze heißt Theologie.“²⁴

Well, if this is what we call “theology,” we haven’t realized the embodied dimension of longing for truth, the relationship in which this truth is embedded, the ethical challenge, and the eschatological openness of this truth.

Almost exactly 100 years ago, one of the theologians who are criticized in Rosenzweig’s words, Karl Barth, delivered the first and – in my view – one of his most important lectures on preaching: “The need and promise of Christian preaching” (Schulpforta, July 25, 1922). In this lecture, he describes his theological way: Once, he ‘had’ his theology, but then – considering what we do when we preach – he felt a deep problem: “Often enough these two magnitudes, life, and the Bible, have risen before me (and still rise!) like Scylla and Charybdis: if *these* are the whence and whither of Christian preaching, who shall, who can, be a minister and preach?”²⁵

Karl Barth was sure that we don’t *have* anything to give our listeners in the sense of giving answers or interpretations. There is some expectancy, Barth says.²⁶ But it is not for entertainment, instruction, or even edification. It is a fundamental open question. People sing in Church that “God is present,” and they want to know: “*Is it true?*”²⁷

“Is it true, this sense [...] of a heaven above the earth – not only *above* the earth, that is to say, but above the *earth*? Is it true, this talk of a loving and good God, who is more than one of the friendly idols whose rise is so easy to account for, and whose dominion is so brief! What the people want to find out [...] is, *Is it true?*”²⁸

And there is no easy answer, according to Barth. But an ongoing eschatological longing ...

²⁴ Franz Rosenzweig, *Sprachdenken*, Bd. 1: Jehuda Halevi. Fünfundneunzig Hymnen und Gedichte, *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften 4,1*, ed. by Rafael N. Rosenzweig, Haag/Boston/Lancaster 1983, 68–71, 70.

²⁵ Karl Barth, *The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching*, in: idem, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. Karl Barth’s own introduction to his faith and message, translated by Douglas Horton, London o. J., 97–135, 100.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 104.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

What would a *lekh lekha*-preaching mean, concretely, practically? Sam Wells wrote: “Preaching isn’t telling people what you’ve long known. It’s inviting people into the mystery of what you’re in the process of discovering.”²⁹ One of the basic concepts of the so-called New Homiletic is, in my view, still important: It is not about sharing a propositional truth, but about discovering truth in creative listening. Preaching is about discovering a God called ‘truth’ again and again amid our lives and situations – and amid all the political circumstances we are surrounded with.

I still believe in a hermeneutical rhetoric – and not a rhetoric of persuasion (which is becoming increasingly popular, at least in my German context³⁰). The preacher should be someone who preaches truly, in a true way. I think he or she should show his or her doubts and open questions, his or her vulnerability, his or her lament – and, on the other hand: joy and hope and faith.

Thomas Hirsch-Hüffell talked about the role of the preacher as the role of someone who ‘believes publicly’ – and I like this term. Somehow, humility and boldness go hand in hand if you try to do so. Let me at least quote one of the big philosophers who dealt with the question of truth: Immanuel Kant said, I can never know if what I say, is true, but I can know and should know if what I say was meant truthfully.³¹

And the listeners? They are the ones who accompany us preachers, on our way toward truth, share our search, share our longing, share our lament.

I am very glad that in Cranach’s famous Wittenberg painting showing Martin Luther preaching, one detail is not missing: the Bible. I asked myself whether the Bible could be called our “museum of truth.” The Bible might be the space we walk in again and again with our congregations. It is a fantastic museum – with interactive presentations. It only works if we enter and join in and start to play, to take up roles, to ask questions. It is worthwhile to discover it repeatedly and to exhibit the words, pictures, and stories of the Bible.

And then we stand there, as Pilate did, facing the living truth. We may ask the stupid question, “What is truth?” but hopefully we know that it is all about following him because he is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

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²⁹ Sam Wells, *Speaking the truth. Preaching in a diverse culture*, Norwich 2018, 4.

³⁰ Cf. e.g. Wilhelm Gräb, *Predigtlehre. Über religiöse Rede*, Göttingen 2013.

³¹ Immanuel Kant, quoted in Karl Jaspers, *Chiffren der Transzendenz*, ed. by Hans Saner, München 1970, 35.