

SERMON: “What Are You Getting for Christmas?”
“TRUTH in a World of Truthiness”

Dec. 20, 2009

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: In a world of that has all but lost its capacity to know and embrace that which is true, speak to us your Word of grace and truth, O God, and by your Spirit enable us to hold the two together; through Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 25:1-5

Gospel Lesson: John 1:14, 17-18, 14:6-11

Throughout this Advent season we have been focusing on the meaning of Christ’s birth in light of the magnificent **prologue to the Gospel of John**. There John sets before us the most profound witness in all the New Testament to what we and all the world receive in the gift of Jesus the Christ.

Over the past weeks we have said that in the coming of Jesus, the Word made flesh, we receive a world of wonder and joy, created through him and for him. And in him we receive **life** in all its fullness and the **light** that illumines every darkness, and through him we receive “**grace upon grace,**” one blessing after another. “**In the beginning was the Word... In him was life and the life was the light of all... And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.**”

This morning, on the final Sunday in Advent, we come to John’s insistence that in Jesus, the Word of God Incarnate, we see as no where else the glory of God “pitching his tent” among us. “**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth... The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.**”

“**Grace and truth.**” Both together...not one without the other—but both together--**grace and truth**. The gospel of Christmas unites the free, unmerited good favor of God and the truth of God above and beyond all our little truths and deceptive lies. “**Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.**”

Last week we said that **grace** is the most precious word in the vocabulary grace. No other word serves so well to name God’s relationship to us as the word grace! The grace of God is the **mercy that forgives our sins** and the **power that redeems us** for usefulness in Christ’s kingdom of love. At the very heart of the gospel is the good news of God’s grace to us all in Jesus Christ.

But as precious as the word **grace** is, in all too many ways it has been cheapened it in our time. We have separated the grace of God from the **truth of God**, and the consequences have been disastrous for the life of faith. It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, more than any other in recent times, who pressed the charges against what he called “**cheap grace.**” “Cheap grace,” said Bonhoeffer, “is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.... It is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”¹ Cheap grace offers the assurance of God’s forgiveness without demanding anything of us. It merely leaves us mired in our sinfulness.

In W. H. Auden’s marvelous Christmas oratorio, *For the Time Being*, Herod has a long speech in which he seeks to explain why he must seek to destroy the Child before he undoes the settled order of things. Herod says, in part, that because of his coming, “Every crook will argue, ‘I

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 47.

like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really this world is admirably arranged.” That’s “cheap grace” in a nutshell.

The Anglican theologian Tom Wright says that our attempts to have the grace of God without the truth of God, have led to God being viewed as “a benevolent old softie, ready to tolerate everything, to include everyone, to throw away all those unpleasant old moral standards and say it’s all right, do your own thing, if it feels good, it must be OK. And the results (of such cheap grace, he says) are all around us.”

Perhaps at Christmas time, more than any other season of the year, we are tempted to forget that the **grace** of God comes all wrapped up with the **truth of God**. We cannot have the goodness and mercy of God on our own terms, but only in terms of the truth of God that challenges and changes us and our world. We must never forget that Christmas is not merely a pleasant fantasy for children, of all ages. Christmas sets before us a **truth-claim**—the claim of a truth that is either the most important truth of all or sheer nonsense. The staggering claim of Christmas is this: that the Creator of the universe has freely taken upon himself our humanity to break the power of sin and death in order to redeem the whole creation. For us as Christians that is the truth by which all other claims to truths are judged.

But in our time even to speak of truth is problematic, at best. We live in what some have called the “**post-modern era**”, when truth is viewed more as a matter of opinion and power, than that which fits with Reality itself. For many there is no Reality outside the reality of ourselves and the narrow, little world in which we live. In terms of an image we used last week, many reject the idea that is anything outside the parenthesis of human life. There is no purpose behind our birth and no goal toward which the drama of history is moving, or being led. And there is no script, no great drama that is being played out on the stage of history, just disjointed little episodes of “Whatever!”

The most popular example of all this is the old *Seinfeld* show on television. In the series, a cast of basically narcissistic, urban, “thirty-something singles” float from one episode of their essentially meaningless lives to another. The characters in this “sit-com about nothing” have no roots and no community except each other. They have only a vague sense of identity, at best, and are heedless to any moral code outside what they think will work for them at the moment.

In a *Seinfeld* world, truth is seen as a matter of taste, of what we prefer, what we like, what we wish were the case. Stephen Colbert has named it best. He calls it “**truthiness**.” Truthiness is that which seems to be true, because it fits with what I want to be true, whether it is or not.

Over the past months, as the political divisions in our country have grown deeper and more virulent, I have often heard it said, “You are entitled to your own opinions, but not your own facts.” But it gets harder all the time to separate one from the other. What to me may be an “obvious fact,” to you may be more a matter of opinion, open for debate. What we see as “the facts” is largely dependent on what we want to see and believe to be true. It is important to remember that in every claim to truth, there is always an element of belief and personal commitment. That is every bit as true for a supposedly objective scientist as for a devout believer. In every realm of human inquiry, to know the truth, one must first believe that there is truth to be known, and one must be committed to its search, wherever the search may lead.

As Christians we stake our claim, not just on what we hope or wish were true. We commit ourselves to the Truth that we are convinced has encountered us in person in the birth, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is in the light of his grace and truth that we assess all

other claims of truth. His truth is more than a matter of opinion. It is more than an issue of power and control. What saves the Christian claim to truth from arrogance or oppression is the fact that the one whom we confess as “the way, the truth, and the life” is the one who gave his life on the cross for the redemption of the world. In him the Truth of God is embodied, not in an imperial power on a throne, but in a vulnerable human life on a cross. His truth is not a matter of dominance or intimidation. It is an expression of the free, unmerited grace of the God who called all things into being through the same love that meets us in person, in Jesus, Son of Mary, Son of God. His truth comes to us, not in creeds to be recited or dogmas to be enforced, but in Person. **“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.”**

But still, in a world like this, as we said, all claims to truth are suspect—especially religious claims to truth. There is a scene at the beginning of Peggy Payne’s novel *Revelation* that sets the issue of the truth of the Christian proclamation before us in an intriguing way. I have used the story a number of times in sermons, especially in ordination or installation sermons of ministers, for whom her novel ought to be required reading. One of the themes of the novel is the need for ministers to learn to let their congregations minister to them—something you have done very well for me in the past days.

Revelation is the story of the Rev. Swain Hammond, pastor of the Westside Presbyterian Church of Chapel Hill, NC. Swain Hammond is a graduate of Yale Divinity School. He is slightly liberal, highly self-controlled—sound familiar? One day while he is out grilling hamburgers in the backyard, Swain Hammond hears the voice of God. The narrator says,

“The sound comes up and over the hills. He stands frozen and feels it coming...

Like a hugely amplified PA system blocks away, switched on by mistake.

‘Know that truth is.’”

That’s all the voice of God says for now, **“Know that truth is.”** No one else hears the voice, only Swain Hammond. He is so shaken he cannot speak. All his years in the ministry he has been speaking to people about God, but suddenly, out of the blue, God speaks to him and his tightly controlled world begins to come apart.

Swain Hammond knows that his sophisticated university congregation will not be pleased to learn that God has actually spoken to him. They prefer a nice, tame god at mind’s-length. “What am I going to tell them?” he wonders. He imagines himself in the pulpit, staring out at the congregation. When he tells them what has happened, he sees them in his imagination glancing at each other across the pews in disbelief, making twirling motions with their fingers.

“They’ll think I’m crazy. They would gradually, delicately ease me out, help me make other arrangements. I’d get shipped off to some church with a sign out front that tallies up the number saved on a Sunday, the kind of church that has buses...”

“What am I going to tell them?” he wonders over and over. “What am I going to tell them?” That’s a question every minister needs to take seriously. In 1928 the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, asked famously,

“*Is it true*, this talk of a good and loving 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 and thoroughly understand is, *Is it true.*”²

² Karl Barth, *Word of God—Word of Man*, p. 108.

The question resonates with me because not long after I came here, a young man sat in my office, and for over an hour asked with a fervency I have rarely encountered that very question: “Is it true, this gospel you preach?” He did not ask “Is it true?” from the side of disbelief. He did not question the fact that the Christian faith offers profound comfort in the struggles of life. He had experienced that comfort in his own life when his father died after an accident on a friend’s farm. The young man did not question whether the Christian faith “works” on the personal, pastoral level. His was a deeper question, a more urgent, more important question, “Is the gospel more than just a useful fiction to get us through the rough places of life and give us courage in the face of death? Is it **really true?**”

Well, is it? I cannot prove to you that it is...any possible proof would itself require a strong element of belief to begin with. You would first have to buy-in to my assumptions about reality. I cannot pile up a stack of evidence that will compel you to believe it. It’s the other way around. It is what we first believe to be true that determines what evidence we will take seriously. It is our acceptance of however much of the truth of God in Jesus the Christ as we can begin to get our minds around that opens up to us dimensions of God’s truth that are wider and deeper and more wonderful than anything we could have known otherwise.

Is the gospel of Christmas true? Do we see in the life of Jesus, Son of Mary, Son of God, the perfect union of the grace that forgives us and the truth that sets us free from illusion, in order to live lives of meaning and purpose? Is it true?

The best I can do is to bear witness as simply and as directly as I can to the Truth that has grasped me, far more than I have grasped it:

--the Truth that in Jesus, son of Mary, the **“God who said let light shine out of darkness has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”**

--the truth that the unspeakably holy God whom no one can see and live, has in actual fact stepped across the gulf of sin that separates us to reconcile us in love;

--the truth that the Creator of "all things visible and invisible" has breathed our breath and tasted our tears and has signed his autograph in our history in his own blood;

--and the truth above and beyond all other truths--that the eternal **“Word** by which all things were called into being, really and truly and for all eternity, **became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.”**

What are you getting for Christmas? No less than a world of wonder and joy, created through Christ and redeemed by Christ...and the gift of **light** in every darkness and **life** in all its fullness. And all these are expressions of the **“grace upon grace”** which comes to us through the fullness of God’s love made flesh in Jesus Christ. And that is the **Truth**—the Truth that makes for the flourishing of life, in this world and the next. That’s what we all are getting for Christmas. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Allen C. McSween
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Greenville, SC