

Palisades Presbyterian Church

Reign of Christ Sunday

November 26, 2006

Reflection:

Truth has not special time of its own. Its hour is now—always and indeed then most truly when it seems unsuitable to actual circumstances.

- Albert Schweitzer

The greatest friend of truth is time; her greatest enemy is prejudice; and her constant companion humility.

- Charles Colton



Readings: Revelations 1:4b – 8

 The Gospel According to John 188: 33 – 37

Hymns: #285 God, You Spin the Whirling Planets
 #324 Open My Eyes That I May See
 #260 A Mighty Fortress is Our God

The Thorns Around Truth
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I have always been fascinated by what we call “truth,” and how – for many – truth is something that is unchanging, established, universally structured, bound, and unmovable.

Yet, for me, “truth” has always been an ineffable pursuit in a world of power-dominated definitions and instructions based on someone else’s truth.

Not unlike other pursuits into areas of dissimilitude, seeking clarification through the differences of things, forays such as this cannot only get messy – but become dangerous, for the differences between practices or beliefs are what frequently define the episteme or paradigm or truth for a particular set of practitioners. Such challenges to others’ and their beliefs continue to produce all sorts of twisted and violent outcomes.

But, inherent in the pursuit for truth is the elegance and sophistication of eternal beauty. Emily Dickensen thought so, at least it would seem, in her poem: *Time and Eternity* in which Truth and Beauty find themselves side by side, buried in their respective coffins:

Time and Eternity, Part IV

I died for beauty, but was scarce
Adjusted in the tomb,
When one who died for truth was lain
In an adjoining room.

He questioned softly why I failed?
"For beauty," I replied.
"And I for truth,—the two are one;
We brethren are," he said.

And so, as kinsmen met a night,
We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names.

Truth, beauty, elegance...transparency – and yet, so much of what we live by is often obscure by mythic intoxication. That is we lose the efficacy of the myth itself and what it points to by asserting the myth as the true itself. Myth and legends are of immeasurable importance in gaining a sense of being, life, purpose, the universe. The truth though must always precede and transcend the myth, or so I hold. But what is this truth then...

When we read Revelations, for example, what is the truth? Let's start with the author. Was it written by St. John the Divine, John the Presbyter, or John the Disciple of Jesus? Was this John, John of Patmos, Patmos being the island where John was exiled and where Revelations was written – was this John the same author of the Gospel according to John? Or was he another John altogether? No one is quite sure.

What about the eschatological message, the apocalypse warnings from the author about the destruction that was coming. Was the author writing from a futurist perspective: this was to come; or from a preterist view: it had happened. Was Revelations the sequel written as prophecy to explain the Fall of the Temple, certainly for the Jews of the time – an apocalypse. Or for something that might be in our future. Again, not sure.

Were the visions enhanced, divine, or otherwise contrived? Again, theories abound. And for some, for those who have wished to maintain the mythic power and control of authority and dominance – if one strays to far from the literal – that one is immediately criticized for a lack of faith. Don't you believe God could have done such a thing? You apostate, you who have reneged on your faith!

Push back – big time.

But is the pushback about truth or dominance. Is it a constructivist view of truth that is assigned by social view to make us behave in a certain way? A correspondent truth that reflects accurately a thing as it is? A coherence type of truth – do we need this truth to make the whole system work – so do your part and don't worry about these small little questions?

Is truth consensus, sort of like a democracy?

What is true gets very difficult to decide after a while. Yet, there is truth in all things to some degree. Our reading this morning from Revelations – is a true statement about hope, regardless of the framing: don't lose hope: because no matter what the devastation - God is with– we have not been forgotten or left out. Can we get through the imagery to that truth and not feel as though we are being heretical in the process?

That's hard enough with many readings in the Bible, but Revelations: The Apocalypse of St. John the Divine, has always been a challenge. It's interesting that Revelations was not welcome by all in the New Testament when the Canon was being formed. When Eusibius put together the list of Books that later become part of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, Revelations was listed as recognized and disputed. And, when Jerome translated the bible into the Latin Vulgate around 400 CE, he refused to translate certain books, including Revelations, which was already being translated and used in many variety of ways, some of which were considered heretical, themselves, at the time.

Later, during the Protestant Reformation, Luther made a concerted effort to remove several books from the canon, specifically Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelations. The best he and his supporters could do was to move them to the end of the German Bible, which is where they remain today.

But what's up with that? Is it a fear that somehow we might miss something if one of these books are left out? Is it better to err on the side of an inclusive document with questionable sections – or a limited document with certitude? Or does it turn out that there is no way to be sure in any case following years of emendations and other critical editing or translations? So keep it in and pray that the truth will surface through the images and the text.

Even Augustine of Hippo, St. Augustine took the view that the Biblical text should not be interpreted literally - especially if it contradicts what we know from science and our God-given reason. In an important passage on his "The Literal Interpretation of Genesis" (early [5th century](#), AD), St. Augustine wrote:

It not infrequently happens that something about the earth, about the sky, about other elements of this world, about the motion and rotation or even the magnitude and distances of the stars, about definite eclipses of the sun and moon, about the passage of years and seasons, about the nature of animals, of fruits, of stones, and of other such things, may be known with the greatest certainty by reasoning or by experience, even by one who is not a Christian. It is too disgraceful and ruinous, though, and greatly to be avoided, that he [the non-Christian] should hear a Christian speaking so idiotically on these matters, and as if in accord with Christian writings, that he might say that he could scarcely keep from laughing when he saw how totally in error they are. In view of this and in keeping it in mind constantly while dealing with the book of Genesis, I have, insofar as I was able, explained in detail and set forth for consideration the meanings of obscure passages, taking care not to affirm rashly some one meaning to the prejudice of another and perhaps better explanation." (*The Literal Interpretation of Genesis 1:19–20*, Chapt. 19 [AD 408])
www.wikipedia.com

So, where does that leave us? Maybe a better question: Where am I going with this? Directly, I am speaking about me. There is a saying that every minister has one sermon that they work on all their lives. I used to think that was flip remark, but you know, I'm not so sure anymore.

If I did have one sermon of life, a sub-title might be *When You Read the Bible the Bible Reads You*. For some that borders on the Gnostic, from the Greek gnostikoi for a type of understanding or consciousness of God gained through personal experience. Yet, finding such understanding from personal experiences, does not exclude faith in God or Jesus Christ. Quite the opposite. Whether mystical, practical, or revelatory – God is active in this world in many ways – and God continues to reveal Godself in our world: and we need to listen to that, I think, reminded not to pay too much attention to those whom Augustine says "speak idiotically."

For those of you who have heard me say this before, I apologize for bringing you through it again, but in seminary – in a course called Prophetic Ministry, we had to write a series of five or six page papers – 10 of them – over a period of 10 weeks. They were on topics such as salvation, the Trinity, sacrifice, and sin. I was doing ok, more or less, until I got to the one on sin. I went to the professor and explained that I had rejected sin, not as he might think but as a concept that had to do with a punishing God. I explained that "sin" had always been used as a weapon against me as a gay man; used as leverage to try and make me change; to convince me that unless I did I was going to burn in hell; and that my life was to be counted as loss unless I rejected my sinful desires.

I explained further that in order to survive, to breathe, to live – I had to reject the entire notion of sin (and the church of my early childhood). I had to clean the slate from what others were telling me that was true and start fresh with God and me.

How the Holy Spirit gave me the gift to stand in that place and trust that I could reject the injustice of the system – and even the system itself, if necessary – and not lose God: is beyond my understanding. But I was aware that I was literally throwing off the fluff and lies and deceptions that had been created and reinforced to manage my behavior, keep me in line, and above all – keep me quiet!

Many of you know Janie Spahr, she visited here a few weeks ago on our return from Rochester. At one point in my ordination process, a well-meaning individual (more than one actually) said to me, “Why don’t you just go to the UCC, so you don’t have to struggle in a church that basically rejects you.” I told Janie about this and how I felt my gut turn and twist when I heard the words. She responded by saying that as gay people we know the lies that have been told to us over and over and that at some point we just say, “Enough!” And the idea of having to change to another denomination to be who I am, who God has created me to be – was just another lie, because it was a perpetration of the hypocrisy that we can be a Christian denomination and exclude one another for one reason or the other. I can still feel my stomach turn.

That experience and many others have translates for me into a longing for truth. Truth that is evasive to begin with, made more difficult to find by the layers of comfort and tradition that we have added over the years. The “Nice Nice,” as I call it.

Jesus scholar, former monk, and author Dominic Croissant in his book *Jesus a Revolutionary Biography* talks about the stories of Jesus’ life. Croissant makes it clear that he considers much of Luke and Matthew’s Infancy Narratives to be less than literal. Here is what he says, in part:

It is not enough, therefore, to keep saying that Jesus was not born of a virgin, not born of David’s lineage, not born in Bethlehem, that there was no stable, no shepherds, no star, no Magi, no massacre of the infants, and no flight into Egypt. All of that is quite true (meaning it did not happen based on his and others’ research), but it still begs the question of who he was and what he did that caused his followers to make such claims. That is a historical question... (p.28)

And while I have long passed the initial grief over the loss of certain elements of the Nativity as enhancements, – I have been drawn more deeply to Crosissant's latter question: Who was Jesus and what did he do that had his followers making such claims? Was the stable a metaphor for his humble beginnings; were the Magi a metaphor for the great knowledge he possessed, such that the wise men visited him at birth; was the star in the East a metaphorical symbol for the great hope that was born with Jesus' birth...all added in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, found no where in Mark or John?

I don't know, but I do know that Jesus' life and teachings, death and resurrection (whether spiritually, physically, or both) – reaches through the ages to challenge me to seek the truth, knowing full well that there are those who will stop at nothing to prevent that from occurring. Seems that not much has changed.

In our second reading this morning, did you think it strange that as we approach Advent we have Jesus appearing before Pilate in John's gospel? At first, I did too. Then, as I began to think about it, it is the perfect segue from the Reign of Christ on this Sunday to the Infancy Narratives of Luke and Matthew in the weeks ahead.

Let me read a little different version from a version of the Bible called the Message:

Reading

(Last line) You tell me, Because I am King, I was born and entered the world so that I could witness to the truth, Everyone who cares for truth, who has any feeling for truth, recognizes my voice.”

Pilate said, “Ha! What is truth, anyway?!” and returned to the crowd.

Truth that caused a crown of thorns to be placed on his head and, ultimately, his execution for disrupting the State and the times. Truth is a messy business, at times. It is no wonder we cover it up.

And the voice, recognizing his voice – we all do, I think. Jesus still speaks to us in ways I don't understand, but I am unable to dismiss. It is the same voice that produced what others wrote, whether first hand accounts or visionary works to stir the heart and soul of others to the wonder and magic that occurred on the day this man was born and in the life he was to lead, filled with God in ways I can only some day hope to know.

It's too easy to just follow the design, and it's too shallow and ineffective of a method for any kind of an effective integrated life. The truth will never be something that lies on the surface as much as it needs to be plumbed deeply.

And once known or tasted, along with beauty as kindred comes action toward those in need and without a voice.

In there is what I believe to be the charge of Christianity and the call to mission and prayer.

So, whatever we may teach or remember in the weeks ahead as we enter Advent, let us remember that Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit continues to speak and call us to the truth that we are of God and only of God. That celebration and commitment is not just a part of our lives or pageantry but a way of life that we seek to practice and demonstrate to others in all of our ways of being.

Amen.