

Malcolm Clemens Young  
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y1  
1 Epiphany (Year B) 11 a.m. Baptism, 3 p.m. Evensong, 6 p.m. Eucharist  
Sunday 7 January 2018

Genesis 1:1-7  
Psalm 29  
Acts 19:1-7  
Mark 1:4-11

### **The Truth about God**

*"The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders" (Ps. 29).*

What is the truth about God?<sup>1</sup> Our 2018 Cathedral theme is truth and this seems like a good place to begin. Eleven years ago our family found ourselves behind a square iron fence at a fairground with perhaps a hundred thousand people outside. The electricity generated by all those souls felt tangible. I remember the beautiful young dancers, old men in bright robes carrying holy objects and prayers chanted so loudly over loudspeakers that you could almost think of nothing else.

We were celebrating Timkat, the Feast of the Epiphany, in Addis Ababa as the special guests of the Abuna, a kind of pope for forty million Ethiopians. I will never forget the feeling I had when the people threw thousands of plastic bottles over the fence to be filled with blessed holy water.

In Greek, the word epiphany means to shine upon or to reveal. We associate this season with three images. First, it reminds us of the light present from the beginning of our world which is Christ. Second, we remember the magi, the three wise men, visitors to the baby Jesus, who some regard as representatives of, "the exotic, the secular, and the scientific world."<sup>2</sup> The other guiding story for this time tells about the baptism of Jesus when the heavens were torn apart and God's spirit came to rest on him.

My old teacher Peter Gomes used to say that Epiphany, "is the season in which the identity of Jesus, his real identity, is made clear and clearer to all who will look and see." He told us that what begins as a very private message to Mary and Joseph comes to be shared with, "an ever-expanding audience of witnesses." He compares it to the ripples formed when you drop a pebble into a smooth pond (until the entire surface is witness to the initial movement of that one stone).<sup>3</sup>

That Ethiopian day in the midst of the largest crowd I had ever seen we lost our five-year-old daughter. So much was happening, I took a photograph, and in a heart stopping instant she was gone. Then we noticed all the television cameras moving to a place where there was a commotion. There was our daughter sitting on the Abuna's lap as he presided from his throne over the largest religious ritual I will ever see.

My wife picked her up and the two of them were on every television station and the front page of every newspaper. Wherever we went in Ethiopia after that people

recognized them and gave them special gifts. This event led to an amazing sense of connection to others.

We long to be known, and during that time we were. It was as if the special admiration that we have for our own children, the way they seem so beautiful to us, was suddenly shared by a whole country of people. For those weeks it felt like all of humanity was our family.

All of us know about the opposite experience too, when instead of a person we become “traffic” to others, that is an inconveniently placed object for them. We also know what it feels like to be isolated and lonely. This week I read an article sent to me by a friend called “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”<sup>4</sup>

The argument may be familiar to you already. It holds that the smartphones, which didn’t even exist when we went to Ethiopia, have disrupted a whole generation’s experience of childhood. They are guinea pigs measuring the effects of colossal social changes. According to the author today’s young people are far less likely to use drugs and alcohol, to have sex or even to go out with their friends. They spend about the same amount of time doing homework as earlier generations.

The difference is that young people today spend a massive amount of time on smartphones and social media. This leads to loneliness, a feeling of being left out, depression and suicide. The author writes that girls’ depressive symptoms have increased by fifty percent. Three times as many 12 to 14 year old girls kill themselves today than did in 2007. She also writes that those who attend religious services have a much lower risk for depression.<sup>5</sup>

This is a time when we really need God to be revealed to our children, and to us. Yet sometimes it seems as if even devout Christians are strangely uninterested in coming to know God. Many people seem satisfied to say simply that “God is love” without caring much about the details, without learning what the Bible and tradition teaches about God’s nature.<sup>6</sup>

This puzzles me. Imagine if we were having a conversation and I told you that I love my wife. What if you asked where she grew up and I said, “I don’t know.” You might say, “Well what kind of music does she listen to?” or “what does she look like?” “is she shy or gregarious?” If I told you that I didn’t know, you’d probably think there was something seriously wrong with our relationship. One of the most upsetting realizations we can have about someone we love is that they do not really know us.<sup>7</sup>

Loving someone means trying to learn about that person. We find out about God through prayer and worship, in studying scripture and the tradition, by talking to each

other and by trying to follow God's teaching in how we live (by the way this includes everything from how we drive to how we talk about other people).

In baptism we promise to learn more about God and to help our children to do the same. In baptism we renew a relationship that God first began at creation. In baptism we say, "I belong no longer to myself, to my parents, my work, to the Internet or the world; I belong to God."<sup>8</sup>

Some of you may know that I am on a quest to understand God through the eyes of the theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968). Last year I read 2,000 pages of *Church Dogmatics* his 9,000 page systematic theology. He asserts that we can know something about God because God cares enough about us to show himself in the Bible, in preaching and the person of Jesus himself.<sup>9</sup> For Barth, this God of the scriptures is above all the Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And the Epiphany story of Jesus' baptism shows us each aspect of who God is.

Trinity means that we experience God as three persons who have one being or essence. In an analogous way you might experience me as a husband on a double date, as a parent coaching rugby, or as a priest here at Grace Cathedral. You will see a different aspect of me in each of those settings but the being behind all of those experiences, that is me, is the same.

1. God is the Creator of the universe, the Father we address in the Lord's Prayer, the one who says "This is my son, the Beloved" (Mk. 1). John the Baptist preaches a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The Greek word for sin is hamartia and means to miss the mark. The Greek word for repentance is metanoia and it means to change our consciousness and transform our life.

Barth points out that there is within us a kind of enmity toward God. We are kind of like frenemies (friend-enemies) with God.<sup>10</sup> This isn't just about us as individuals. We learn how to be with God in large part from our culture, which in Western Europe and North America has begun to bend further away from God.

In a recent article the actor Russell Brand who plays the rock star in the old movie *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* writes about what he is learning in overcoming his addiction to drugs. In a 12-step program Brand recognized his powerlessness over drugs and turned his life over to God, the only one who could save him. It made him realize that all of us live by an unconscious myth that in his words, "we can make ourselves feel better with external stuff, be it behavior or chemicals."<sup>11</sup>

2. God is also the Redeemer, the person Jesus Christ, the man John baptized in the Jordan River. This means that God is not just a kind of physical force creating and holding together the world. God is not less than a person. In Jesus, God knows about

human life from the inside. Jesus expresses the reality that we can experience intimacy with God. We can talk to God and even hear back from Him.

With our lives we may often miss the mark but Jesus shows that we do not have to be lost in our misplaced efforts to find security and love by putting ourselves above others.

3. Finally God is the Sanctifier, the Holy Spirit. At Jesus' baptism when the heavens are torn apart the Spirit descends on him like a dove. The barrier between heaven and us has been removed. The spirit rests on us now too. This Spirit makes it possible for you to trust God. It is the part of God that is present in you. Barth says, it is not a magical transformation but, "a teacher of the truth within ourselves."<sup>12</sup> This Holy Spirit abides with us, so that we will never be disconnected from God.

Over time this Spirit changes us so that gratitude is no longer just the way we think or even behave. Gratitude becomes our very essence.<sup>13</sup> For Barth, in the end this is all about joy.<sup>14</sup> God's joy leads to the creation of the world. In this same joy God invites us into the Divine life and through the Spirit gives us the ability to say "yes" to God with our whole being. It was this joy that I sensed on that day as the Ethiopians threw their water bottles over the fence.

Brothers and sisters welcome to the Year of Truth at Grace Cathedral. We all long to know and to be known. Like those exotic, secular and scientific Magi let us follow the star of wisdom and come to know the One we love. In the face of all that threatens this generation let the light of Epiphany, the person of Jesus become ever clearer to us. As the ripples of the waters at Jesus' baptism reach the shores of our time let us find our own way to say, "I belong to God." Imagine the truth about God we are about to discover.

---

<sup>1</sup> Our Cathedral's 2018 theme is truth. I hope that we will learn new truth about our own lives, and our relation to others. We will explore the truth in journalism, ethics, politics, the economy, sociology, the natural and biological sciences and technology. This week our federal government opened up the process to begin selling offshore oil drilling leases. In our time we need to especially open our eyes to the truth about nature and our planet. Associated Press, "Alaska May Open Up Again for Oil Leasing, but Risks Linger," *The New York Times*, 5 January 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002) 31.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-6.

<sup>4</sup> Jean M. Twenge, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" *The Atlantic*, September 2017. David Smith sent the article. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>

<sup>5</sup> "Eighth-graders who are heavy users of social media increase their risk of depression by 27 percent, while those who play sports, go to religious services, or even do homework more than the average teen cut their risk significantly." *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> This reminds me of the sense of misplaced attention in the billboards that say that we spend more time reading billboards than planning for our retirement.

<sup>7</sup> Ethan Renoe, "The Tragedy of Dumbing Down Christianity," *Relevant*, 22 December 2017.

<https://relevantmagazine.com/article/the-tragedy-of-dumbing-down-christianity/>

---

<sup>8</sup> Paraphrase of Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002) 33.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1 The Doctrine of the Word of God* tr. G.W. Bromiley (NY: T&T Clarke, 1936), 88-120.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 444ff.

<sup>11</sup> Jesse Carey, "The Second Coming of Russell Brand," *Relevant*, 8 October 2017.

<https://relevantmagazine.com/feature/the-second-coming-of-russell-brand/>

<sup>12</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1 The Doctrine of the Word of God* tr. G.T. Thomposon, Harold Knight (NY: T&T Clarke, 1956) 371

<sup>13</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.1 The Doctrine of God* tr. Parker, Johnston, Knight, Haire (NY: T&T Clarke, 1957) 669.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 647.