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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y50  
12

Christmas Eve (Proper II) 7:30 p.m. Eucharist  
Monday 24 December 2018

Isaiah 62:6-12  
Ps. 97:1-2, 6-9, 11-

Titus 3:4-7  
Luke 2:8-20

### **Christmas Truth**

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven." Phillips Brooks, "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

What truth will be born in you this Christmas night? I remember one moment of truth so vividly. I had gone back to my hometown to play in one of my college rugby games. Afterwards with two female friends I drove out to an almond ranch in the Vaca foothills where I had worked during the summer.

We went to the highest point on the property and leaned against the hood of my green Dodge Dart. The white clouds of springtime raced across the Great Valley. The grasses looked like long flowing hair being twirled in impossibility beautiful patterns. The warmth of the sun, the smell of the earth, the vivid blue skies, the brisk wind – that was pretty much it.

No film could capture the feeling. The world seemed perfect, every moment so beautiful and fleeting. We felt a longing that comes from a place so deep in us that no words can convey it. The joy, an overwhelming sense of gratitude for just existing, seemed tangible. We felt completely alive.

Elaine Shen was there. She and I had gone to middle school, high school and college together. I did not appreciate it enough at the time but she was a true friend. She came to all my games. As editor she filled the yearbook with pictures of me. From birth Elaine had a severely bent spine and when I was out of the country during the summer before our junior year of college she died on the operating table.

I never had the chance to say goodbye, or thank you. That sense of loss is part of my memory of that transcendent day. The joy and the sadness are all mixed together in that remembrance of feeling so alive.

For me the truth of Christmas and for that matter Christianity is like this. We plainly see the horrible things that happen to ordinary people. And yet at the same time, often unnoticed by us, there lies an inexplicable longing that seems to be just on the verge of being fulfilled, a desire for the transcendent.

Every year Grace Cathedral chooses a theme. Our 2018 theme was truth. All year people would say to me, "Since it is the year of truth, I need to tell you something." "Your haircut is terrible, the sound system is too loud, your sermons are too long, and your pants don't fit correctly." I appreciated a lot of feedback this year.

At every single service we prayed to learn the truth about ourselves, the truth of other people, the truth about the world and the truth about God. The prayer worked. This year I found myself using more precise speech, exaggerating less. In order to be more truthful I simply spoke fewer words. Instead I listened more and cultivated a reverence for the facts. I tried to get beyond my ideas of God and let God be God in God's own way.

We learned the truth at lectures and programs. A hydrologist said that the greatest danger to the environment is not global climate change, population growth, pesticides, plastics, soil degradation or species extinction. He said it is misinformation. It's up to us to correct errors of fact regarding the environment.

Robert Sapolsky the primatologist and neuroscientist from Stanford said that anthropologists believe that two thirds of all conversation is gossip.<sup>1</sup> He said that racism is deeply embedded in us, that we all respond to race subconsciously in less than a tenth of a second. This year we talked about white fragility, why white people have such a hard time talking about race.<sup>2</sup> The nutrition scientist Marion Nestle taught us that industry funding of research means that we don't understand what foods are healthy.<sup>3</sup>

All year I have looked forward to this chance to talk about the truth at Christmas. I really only have two points to make. The first has to do with the nature of faith and the second is about Jesus.

1. The novelist Alan Lightman writes, "I have worked as a physicist for many years, and I have always held a purely scientific view of the world." One night he was returning by himself from his island summer home in Maine to shore. He turned off the engine and just drifted. Lying in the boat looking up at the sky full of stars, it seemed like he was falling into infinity. He felt connected to all of nature as if he were merging into something larger than himself.<sup>4</sup>

This mystical experience of what he calls "the Absolute" created an inner conflict for him. On the one hand he felt firmly convinced of the intellectual integrity of what he calls "the Relative" that is his belief that the universe is made of "material and nothing more." But on the other hand he continued to feel drawn by this experience of transcendence.

This evening I am here to tell you that there is no "purely scientific view of the world." Science will not tell you who to marry, what to devote your life to or for that matter what color pants you should wear. We are creatures from different cultures with varying tastes, who desire and dream, and love fiercely. There are so many different ways of experiencing the world. We ourselves are not so much facts but a mixture of events and interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

Doubt is not the opposite of faith but part of it. You can be, in fact you probably should be, both a scientific and a religious person. Faith is the experience of being drawn into wonder in the face of mysteries that never will be fully resolved. Following the way of Jesus is not a matter of trying to believe something that is unbelievable. It is more like receiving a gift that is constantly being offered to us. We do not experience the world as it is but only through symbols and stories.

Facts always must be respected. But we hold these facts together with stories. Lawyers have stories about due process and the rational person. Economists tell stories about competition and scarce resources. Journalists talk about objectivity and fairness. For that matter scientists tell stories about universal physical laws.

The author C.S. Lewis distinguished between what he called the imaginary and the imaginative. The imaginary is, "something that has been falsely imagined with no counterpart in reality." The imaginative on the other hand, "is something produced by the human mind to respond to something greater than itself."<sup>6</sup>

This is the world of faith. It receives and reaches out to the unknown. Gary Wills writes, "We seek one mystery, God, with another mystery, ourselves. We are mysterious to ourselves *because* God's mystery is in us."<sup>7</sup> To use words from Alan Jones, "God is a great incomprehensible presence within each of us. We are not what we think we are. We are both more and less: more, because we are deeper and lovelier than we know; less, because we often inflate ourselves by power, money, or arrogance to compensate for our feared insignificance."<sup>8</sup>

2. My second point concerns Jesus' birth. If it were not so familiar the story would sound terrifying to us. Far from home Mary and Joseph have nowhere to stay. They give birth in a makeshift shelter for animals. When out of a fit of jealous rage a tyrant on the throne begins killing all the babies in the region, they escape into Egypt. Jesus is a refugee. He is on the other side of the border wall. When the American government separated children from their parents last spring, families like his suffered.

Our world of government shutdowns, foreign manipulation, propaganda, betrayals of allies, secret payoffs, prison sentences and narcissistic authoritarian leaders is not so different from the world of Jesus. The remarkable thing about this story is that God chooses to be present in the places where human beings are most desperate.

And yet when you read the story (especially in Greek) what stands out is not the terror, insecurity and suffering but rather the superlatives, the great glory that shines around them, the good news of great joy. The shepherds praise God saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven" (Lk. 2). And Mary treasures all these words and ponders them, or a better translation might be that, she "interprets" them "in her heart."

For two thousand years humanity has been interpreting this sign. The poet Denise Levertov (1923-1997) was the daughter of an Anglican priest. She wrote a poem called "On the Mystery of the Incarnation." "It's when we face for a moment / the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know / the taint in our own selves, that awe / cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart... / to this creature vainly sure it and no other creature is god-like, God entrusts... as guest, as brother, / the Word."<sup>9</sup>

Bishop Rowan Williams writes, "We are such bad creatures at loving that we need the shock of joy... to set our love free."<sup>10</sup> The philosopher Iris Murdoch calls this, "the extremely difficult realization that something other than ourselves is real."<sup>11</sup>

At the time I thought that day out on the almond ranch was absolutely singular, that nothing like it would ever happen again. But I was so wrong. The joy and truth of Christmas is that we can never be sure where God will find us. There is no purely scientific view, only a longing that is deeper than our fears and worries. God draws us home through our desire.

On this holy night I do not know in what way joy and sadness are mixed together for you. We are not what we think we are. We are falling into the infinite, drawn into wonder, responding to something greater than ourselves. So stop worrying about believing the unbelievable and receive the gift that Jesus offers. Christ will make us stronger, braver, kinder, and gentler.

What truth do you want to become? What truth will be born in you this Christmas night?

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (NY: Penguin, 2017) 503, 85.

<sup>2</sup> That despite the overwhelming numbers of white people in power, talking about race can be so upsetting to white people that they simply cannot see the severity of this problem or do anything about it.

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<sup>3</sup> Marion Nestle, *Unsavory Truth: How Food Companies Skew the Science of What We Eat* (NY: Basic Books, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Alan Lightman, *Searching for Stars on an Island in Maine* (NY: Pantheon Books, 2018) 6-15.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Jones, *Living the Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2000) 131.

<sup>6</sup> Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis – A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2013) 263.

<sup>7</sup> A large part of religion involves an exploration into the mystery of God and the world, and the mystery we are to our selves. Alan Jones, *Living the Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2000) 134.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Jones, *Living the Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2000) 25.

<sup>9</sup> Denise Levertov, "On the Mystery of the Incarnation."

"It's when we face for a moment / the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know / the taint in our own selves, that awe / cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart: not to a flower, not to a dolphin, / to no innocent form / but to this creature vainly sure it and no other creature is god-like, God / (out of compassion for our ugly / failure to evolve) entrusts, / as guest, as brother, / the Word."

<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/on-the-mystery-of-the-incarnation/>

<sup>10</sup> Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995) 24.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Jones, *Living the Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2000) 11.