

## WHEN THE TRUTH COMES

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Mark 6:1-13; II Timothy 4:1-5

You have to wonder what the people in Nazareth were thinking. Mark tells us that Jesus went to his home town and began to teach in the synagogue. We might expect that he would show up there. After all, they were his hometown crowd. Synagogue worship in the first century included the reading of scripture and then discussion about its meaning. Someone would explain his understanding of the Torah that had just been read. Another might correct what he thought was a misinterpretation or expand on something that sounded right. It often led to lively debate. Not as explosive as Jerry Springer perhaps; but more substantive than the Capital Gang.

Religion shaped the life of the community in Nazareth, and the synagogue was the center of that life.

So when Jesus came to Nazareth to teach that day it was not unusual that he should be there. Nonetheless, what he said was not well received. His own townspeople asked, "Where did this man get all this? We know this boy. Isn't this Joseph and Mary's son, the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and don't we know his sisters as well?" You had probably forgotten what a large family Jesus had, hadn't you? Four brothers and some sisters as well!

It's always a sticky proposition going back from whence you came. The folks back there know you too well.

I remember going back to my hometown of St. Joseph, Missouri to be ordained after I had graduated from Union Seminary here in New York. I wore a black pastor's robe for the first time, a collar and Geneva tabs as well. The church in which I grew up had only 100 members or so. It was a small congregation. The people were unsophisticated folks, shopkeepers and union workers, men from the grain mill and the packing house, women who stayed home to raise children.

The pastor and one elder in the congregation were the only people in the church who had college degrees. The minister always wore a black gown, with a white shirt and tie underneath. So when I came wearing a collar and tabs, some folks took it as a sign that I had gone over to the dark side, a dark side characterized by East coast sophistication and high brow taste.

One man said to me, "Well, I can see that they've gotten to you back East."

I'm not sure I still would have worn that collar and those tabs; back then it was a sign of my rebellion, my having left them behind and exceeded their simple tastes and quaint style. I did it for me and not for them. And I made my point, which was that I was rude, and determined to declare my independence from them. Fortunately, they were more gracious in the long run, than I was wise.

Jesus goes to his home town of Nazareth and teaches in the synagogue, not because he has a point to prove, but because he wants to start with his own people; begin preaching the gospel among them. But they will have none of it. They reject him as he

begins his ministry, even as the religious leaders and people of the city of Jerusalem will reject him later, not simply as teacher but mostly as messiah.

In Nazareth, as in Jerusalem, they wanted more flash and sizzle than Jesus could offer them. He was a *homeboy* and no amount of familiarity could remove their inability to see farther than the familiar face that stood before them. They could not see in him or in their midst the treasure, the blessing, the gift that he was. “Isn’t this Joseph and Mary’s boy whose brothers and sisters are among us?”

What is amazing in this story is the inability of people to recognize what God is doing in the midst of the familiar, in one whom they know, in the midst of the worship they have kept for so long. They cannot recognize nor receive the Truth that he embodies. Instead, they lean forward so far that they miss what is right in front of them. They wait with eager longing for the messiah who will come some day, certain of how he will appear, except that when the day arrives that he has come, they miss him altogether.

We shouldn’t be surprised. Jesus did warn that some of us have seen him hungry and thirsty and lonely and sick and did nothing to give him drink or food or visit him or dress his wounds when we saw him because he was there in the need of the familiar ones whom we have seen before the ones who have always been begging for food and drink and asking for help.

Part of me wants to say, “What’s wrong with all you people in Nazareth? Are you blind or just stupid?”

After all, here was Jesus standing right in front of them, teaching the scriptures, expounding their meaning. How could they miss him?

We are always looking for a good leader for adult education classes here at the church. But imagine a class taught by Jesus one day. The real skinny from on high taught by the master teacher, addressing the important issues of life; what God is like, what is the meaning of life, how do you pray, where is heaven, what are the most important commandments, is divorce okay with God, how about abortion, and what do we do about gay marriage? I imagine so many people would want to hear him teaching that you’d have to have the class on the Sheep Meadow at Central Park, like when the Dalai Lama comes to town, and everybody crowds in to hear him.

But here these folks were in Nazareth, turning their back on Jesus, angered at the brass he had to get up in the synagogue and teach the law of God. “Isn’t this Joe and Mary’s son, the carpenter’s boy? Didn’t he run up and down the aisles of the synagogue when he was little, and worry his parents that time they took him to Jerusalem for the holidays and they got separated for three days?”

They could remember all that about him. He was just too familiar, too close, so they missed him when he came, and Jesus could do no great works among them, these people of his own hometown.

Sometimes we get so fixed on looking at the horizon that we miss what is going on right in front of our eyes, the very thing for which we have been waiting and hoping.

This is an age like that. Time and again we miss the larger picture that is unfolding right in front of us because our eyes are fixed on something else.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes of a time when “people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.” In our impatience, we have substituted truthiness for truth, what sounds or feels like the truth for the real thing.

In a fascinating article in *The Christian Century*, writer Rodney Clapp discusses America’s infatuation with the book, now movie, **The DaVinci Code** and the way in which it appropriates what is true and shapes it, instead, into what “feels true,” a good example of our ability to miss the real, while we are dazzled by what looks real.

If there is anyone left who has not read the book or seen the movie, **The Da Vinci Code** is a thriller about a scholar-detective named Robert Langdon, a supposed symbologist at Harvard, a discipline and a department that does not exist at that university. Langdon is hot on the trail of a parchment (which he never finds) that proves that Jesus did not really die on a cross, but survived, married Mary Magdalene, and had children. It’s a fascinating idea, not necessarily original, since Nikos Kazantzakis, and others have written before about the possibility of Jesus’ marrying.

In a telling conclusion to his discussion of the book Rodney Clapp writes:

Dan Brown’s novel has played perfectly into a culture that stays close to the surface, to the cinematic, to the allure of truthiness. However much it consumes our attention at the moment, *The Da Vinci Code* is a sand castle on the beach, one that will soon erode and melt from view, subjected to the waves of information and stimulation that ceaselessly beat the shores of our hyper-mediated culture. The far more pressing challenge, and the one that will not soon go away, is how the church can faithfully serve its mission of witnessing to enduring truth in a world more and more susceptible to truthiness.<sup>1</sup>

And that, it seems to me is the heart of the matter of what happened in Nazareth, and what happens to us today. We settle in this culture for spin rather than the truth. We substitute what serves our view of the world rather than apply our God given ability to reason and discern the truth.

The President of Iran questions whether there is any truth at all to the Holocaust. The state legislature in Kansas requires not only that evolution be taught as a theory which might not be so bad, except that creationism must be given equal credence in textbooks as well. The Court of Appeals in New York State has ruled that gay people may not be married, and in the majority opinion said that children are better off in heterosexual parent homes with the model of a man and a woman. But in the minority opinion written by the Chief Justice Judith Kaye, speaking of the welfare of children wrote, “tens of thousands of children are currently being raised by same-sex couples in New York. Depriving these children of the benefits and protections available to the children of opposite-sex couples is antithetical to their welfare.” She might have also added that the divorce rate in this state hovers around fifty per cent, not a very stable model for children in opposite sex homes.

The truth is a shifting commodity in our world.

We were told that the truth was that we made war in Iraq to remove weapons of mass destruction, and when there were none, we were told that the truth was that we were there to root out an evil dictator, and when he was found, the truth was that we were there to make war on Al Qaeda because of 9/11, and when the body count of soldiers passed 2500, the truth was that more soldiers must stay and die because so many already have. No one seems able to say that the real truth is that we have made such a mess of it, that we owe a debt to the Iraqi people and to the world not to leave it as badly as we have made it, and we will need help to get it right. And that's the whole truth and nothing but...

We settle for something less than the truth all the time in this culture. We even settle for it in the church.

One of the reasons that the television evangelists and mega church pastors have so much traction in our society is that they have taken eternal truth and shaped it into truthiness, into spin. They reduce Christianity, to a game plan for worldly success, how to build a happy marriage, how to get a promotion at work or become wealthy, how to be more optimistic; all of which makes people feel better, but which has nothing to do with the real truth and heart of the gospel.

Preachers in Hawaiian shirts and khaki pants have it all over this black stuff we mainliners wear. And a million dollar smile on a sexy young pastor can sell a lot of books and put a lot of seats in the pew or the chair.

You visit these churches and they don't allow crosses in the sanctuary. "Too much of a downer," they say. Instead, they substitute the flags of the nations, or install a gigantic turning globe, or a waterfall, but never a cross to be found. I once did a wedding in one of these churches and the backdrop of the chancel was a glass window, ceiling to floor. It looked out on a feeding station where deer and mountain lions and rare birds and unusual wildlife came to eat. Nobody listens to the sermon the preacher has prepared in a place like that.

Some of these churches do away with the sermon altogether and opt instead for a rock band to warm up the crowd, then a short dramatic skit on a moral theme followed by a five minute talk about its meaning. There are no bibles in these churches, just a projector screen that displays the lines from scripture that the preacher wants you to see, and none of it in its context. Which is exactly the wrong way to understand the sweep and movement and meaning of the Bible.

What passes for church in America these days has to sizzle and pop, it has to be sexy and casual, high tech, media dependent, focused on PowerPoint. It can't look like Jesus or sound like scripture, or require much of those who attend, except to experience what is happening like an audience does. In one church I know, visitors are not allowed to put an offering in the offering plate, so as to get across the message that the church is not after your money. (That comes later of course.)

We have learned as North American Christians to substitute the peripheral for the eternal, and have become fascinated with the non-essential so that when the essential arrives we do not recognize it any more.

What might it be like for us to hear afresh the real truth of the gospel, and to encounter the one who embodies it, freed from all the ways we try to package God, and thereby limit the way God can come to us?

What is the real truth of the gospel? In essence it is seeing the awkward fact that we are out of synch with God, that we have fallen short of the glory of God and we can't get up on our own. We need God's help to stand again. Which is where the good news comes in. God's love for us would go to the farthest extreme, and has, to reach out to us, all the way to a cross. It is the good news that in Jesus Christ, God has come to us in human flesh and showed us the height and depth and breadth of what it is to be fully human, and fully at peace with God.

It is not truth that has sizzle. It is truth we heard before and likely passed by. It is not a sexy message with pop and bang. But it is the unvarnished truth, nonetheless, the good news of God's love for us expressed in the life death and resurrection of one who outlived and outloved us all, Jesus Christ, God's Living Truth.

In this time that is too fascinated by the facile and the flashy, in this city that is nothing if not glitz. In this culture which settles for spin rather than searches for the truth, and this world that does not realize that time is running out, there is one who comes to us still and bids us listen to the good news of God's love, who reminds us that God is nearer than the breath we breathe, closer than the blood that courses in our veins. One who has come that we might have life and have it abundantly.

Like those people of Nazareth who thought they knew Jesus but did not, we must always be ready to receive Jesus into our midst and hear him speak of God's Truth, a truth that will likely startle and surprise and upset us, and also set us free, if we will only pay attention. Especially if we pay attention.

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<sup>1</sup> The Christian Century, May 16, 2006, Vol. 123, No. 10, p. 25.