



SUNDAY SERMON

Remember the Truth

For many, this has been a hard week. Unexpected twists and turns at the federal level, people's lives and livelihood in the balance, all amid the high expectations and complicated emotional landscape of family holidays. So, I begin with a gift, a blessing, from poet Jan Richardson ("*How the Light Comes, A Blessing for Christmas Day*")

I cannot tell you
how the light comes.

What I know
is that it is more ancient
than imagining.

That it travels
across an astounding expanse
to reach us.

That it loves
searching out
what is hidden
what is lost
what is forgotten
or in peril
or in pain.

That it has a fondness
for the body
for finding its way
toward flesh
for tracing the edges
of form
for shining forth
through the eye,
the hand,
the heart.

I cannot tell you
how the light comes,
but that it does.

That it will.
That it works its way
into the deepest dark
that enfolds you,
though it may seem
long ages in coming
or arrive in a shape
you did not foresee.

DATE

Advent 4
Sunday, Dec. 23, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

Luke 1:39-49

continued

And so
may we this day
turn ourselves toward it.
May we lift our faces
to let it find us.
May we bend our bodies
to follow the arc it makes.
May we open
and open more
and open still

to the blessed light
that comes. [Amen]

Different people often remember and retell the same stories very differently, one from another. What we remember and how we retell it matters a great deal. I was reminded of this when re-visiting Monticello this fall. The official version of family life on Thomas Jefferson's plantation shifts dramatically when Sally Hemmings' story of the truth is included.

Brent Staples of *The New York Times* wrote (12.18.03), "When discussing [racial categories], I offer my own family as an example. We check "black" on the census and appear black to the naked eye, but we are also descended from white ancestors on both sides. Despite appearances, I told an audience not long ago, "I am as 'white' as anyone in this room."

"White people," wrote he, "typically don't get it. Black people get it fine. Black families have always talked openly about racial ambiguity with white ancestors and relatives." "White families, by contrast, were terrified by blackness in the family tree. Relationships that could not simply be ignored were deliberately buried." "The big lesson for historians in the Hemmings-Jefferson case was that the oral histories passed down by slaves and their descendants were more reliable than the official written record." The truth of this story, like "most stories of its kind," said Staples, "...would have died out long ago had it not been carried for nearly a century on the tongues of black South Carolinians, who recognized [their] story... as a universal story of black families across the state."

There's another story you may have heard, about two women, who were cousins, one older, the other still young. Initially, there was nothing remarkable about either one. They lived a long, long time ago in small towns. They may have been poor, or not, but they certainly were not of any particular prominence or notoriety. The story you may have heard about them is about how the older one spent a few months staying with the younger cousin when each of them were unexpectedly pregnant.

That is when the story of two unremarkable women takes a twist and they become remarkable; when first the husband of old and barren Elizabeth and then young virgin Mary each are visited by an angel of the Lord. They hear and accept the gift, the challenge, the promise, the danger, the potent force presented by the angel Gabriel, and in so doing, participate in God's unfolding gift of salvation.

The first remarkable thing to note is that we know these stories. Who told these stories? They were not written down in the chronicles of the court. They were not recorded by the senators' scribes in Rome's government, nor by the priests' scribes in the Temple. Like the story of Sally Hemmings, this one would have died out long ago had it not been carried for nearly a century on the tongues perhaps of black South Carolinians; or at least on the tongues of the people of faith who recognized it as a universal story, and as a divine story of the working of God.

continued

What does it matter who told it? It matters because we need to remember that the people who initially maintained the oral tradition of our faith passed from one generation to the next, a story that the folks in the big house did not want to hear about. The dangerous truth about these two women and their remarkable offspring was first kept alive among the “-” nobodies who lived on the edge.

Over time, the unacceptable and subversive qualities of the story that we hear have been colored by those in authority who write the histories to their liking. Over the centuries, the church and its courtiers – just like the Jeffersons – has tidied things up. We in the church have our family secrets, just like everyone else. The crime in this case is the domestication of a radically dangerous story.

What Hallmark and Wal-Mart do to Christmas is bad enough; the church ought not conspire in the domestication of the Gospel; we ought not make it all clean and palatable. Too often we behave like those people who thought it “nice” to keep full-grown Bengal tigers in their New York City apartment. We’ll sing of Virgin Mary, all meek and mild – that’s a bunch of nonsense! I am not blaming you or me; the church has been engaged in this at least since the 4th century, when Christianity became the religion of the state, and the senators claimed the story as their own.

Actually, I’m not interested in blaming at all. I am interested in tapping into, participating in, and releasing the subversive power of the events that we hear in our Gospel in this season of Advent and Christmas. We’ve got tigers in here; live ones. These are the most exciting stories, the most promising stories. Because they begin with a couple of nobodies: women, for heaven’s sakes; poor villagers. Who give birth first to a prophet, then to the son of God. And if they can do it; why can’t we?

Returning to that story now, told as only a woman can, priest and author, Suzanne Guthrie ([Praying the Hours](#)), recounts seeing “the just-pregnant Mary after she has walked a three-day journey from Galilee to the Judean hills near Jerusalem and entered the house of Elizabeth. Mary observes her cousin’s body swollen with life on her aged frame.... And while Elizabeth’s baby leaps in her womb, Mary suddenly “gets it.” There Elizabeth lies upon her mat, probably overstuffed like Sarah, with swollen feet, ankles, and breasts, uncomfortable with excess body fluids, misfired hormones, small back pain, restricted bladder.... Now it is real. Now I get it. Now I understand what that angel meant,” writes Guthrie. “Now I see the miracle of Incarnation. The Lord magnifies my soul so I can perceive this light I bear.... Two women, one carrying a child touched by the Holy Spirit who will baptize with water, another carrying the unborn Holy Spirit who will baptize with fire; two women carrying the light inside themselves in the time of darkness. The miracle is not the Incarnation of God through the working of the Holy Spirit; the miracle is the ordinary body, yours and mine, carrying this marvelous incarnate light.”

This is the potent part of the story. The church’s official version of salvation has focused attention on our human sinfulness and our need for redemption. Sin and redemption are surely true and defining elements of the salvation story, but they are only part of the story. Conveniently, they are the parts that keep us feeling weak, guilty, dependent upon the mercy of God, especially as it is bequeathed and administered by the priests of the church.

The real potency of the salvation story comes here, with creation and the incarnation. For here, the child of God is born of human flesh. You are a blessing, pregnant with seeds of God. You may give birth to the holy in this life. As 13th century mystic, Meister Eckhart, asks (Fox, Matthew, [Meditations with Meister Eckhart](#)):

“What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself?

And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace?

What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and in my culture?

This, then, is the fullness of time; When the Son of God is begotten in us."

It is not enough for us to recount the cleaned up versions. It is vital we remember the true story, the subversive one, the dangerous one. In that remembering, we host within ourselves the possibility of the story coming true once more. We open ourselves as Elizabeth and Mary did, to the possibility of the power of God being born in our world by our own word and flesh. Christ is coming anew. Let us remember and say "yes" to the truth. Amen.