

Sermon – “The Conviction of Things Not Seen”

Sunday, January 4, 2015

Scripture Reading – John 1:1-18

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Our scripture reading for today is John 1:1-18. In anticipation of Epiphany, the journey of the wise men from the East and the season of lights, which reminds us that the good news of Christ's birth is for all people; John introduces the Christmas story to the Greek world—using language familiar to his listeners. The “word” or “logos” was their understanding of the mind of God. Philosophers, for centuries, wrote about the “logos,” the impersonal power, which made the world and kept order in it. And so, unlike Matthew and Luke, we don't read about a census, the house of David and the trip of a virgin and her fiancée to Jerusalem. This would have little meaning to his listeners who lived in the rational world and who were unfamiliar with the Judea heritage. Instead, we read that *the word became flesh and lived among us*. In Jesus Christ, the invisible, impersonal God becomes visible and wonderfully personal. John shares the Good News and then invites his listeners to a life of faith. Hear now the word of God.

*1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ") 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made God known.*

The title of the sermon: *The Conviction of Things Not Seen*

The text: *No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made God known. John 1:18*

Let us pray. Holy God, as we reflect together on the meaning of your word made known to us in Jesus Christ and the gift of faith, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

*There once was a man who liked to climb mountains. One day he had reached the top of a very tall mountain when he accidentally slipped and began falling down the side. Before he reached the cliff, he was fortunate enough to grab hold of a limb. Totally alone, hanging on for dear life, he cried out.*

*'Can anyone up there help me?'*

*To his surprise and delight he got a response to his call.*

*'This is the Lord,' a voice replied.*

*'Lord, I'm hanging from a limb about to fall off this cliff. Can you help me?'*

*After a short silence that felt like a very long time, the Lord replied, 'Do you believe?'*

*'Yes, Lord, of course I believe.'*

*'Then let go of that limb.'*

*The man thought for a moment, and finally said*

*'Is anyone else up there?'*

Today, I'd like to talk about faith. The author of Hebrews, in chapter eleven, defines faith in this way: *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

Sometimes we forget about the element of risk and mystery involved in having faith—by doing this, sadly, we take the life out of our faith. When our religion becomes something we take for granted, when it becomes too predictable, or when it becomes something of which we are so sure; then we have lost our understanding of what it means to have faith.

John reminds us in his prologue, in his confessional statement: *No one has seen God.*

The very nature of faith consists of an element of uncertainty with a willingness to participate whole-heartedly; to believe the unlikely, the improbable without proof or guarantee.

Fred Craddock writes this about faith: *Faith hears, sees, and testifies, but faith is not arrogant or imperialistic as though its views were so obvious as to be embraced by all but the very obstinate. Faith involves a searching, a response to an offer, a hunger, a willingness to obey. Nothing about Jesus Christ is so publicly apparent as to rob faith of its risk, its choice, and its courage. Faith exists among alternatives.* (Preaching the New Common Lectionary, pg. 100)

Therefore we need not criticize or condemn those who have made choices other than faith in Christ. Likewise, let us not forget the risk and the courage of those who have chosen faith in Christ.

To some, faith appears simple or naive—a blind belief. But in actuality faith takes a higher level of thinking to the extent that it involves trust and our emotions, a willingness to make a commitment to something without guarantees. Faith calls us to go beyond the world of rational thought.

And so, again, as in so much of our religion—there is a paradox in faith. Something that appears simple is not simple at all.

Perhaps that is why from the beginning of time, theologians, philosophers and scientists have struggled with the concept of faith.

During the Middle Ages the theologian Aquinas and the Roman Catholic Church, influenced by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, traveled down a road leading away from faith, seeking to prove the existence of God through rational thought. This perspective enabled the church not only to justify her faith but also to make Christianity a mandate for western civilization.

The conflict between science and religion threatened to tear apart our own denomination during the first part of the twentieth century. William Jennings Bryan, church leader and Moderator of the General Assembly in 1923 led a divisive campaign drawing a line between those who accepted Darwin's theory of evolution and those who did not as a test of orthodoxy and true faith. From his perspective, this scientific theory was a threat not only to the biblical creation story, which he interpreted literally, but also to faith itself. Today, we affirm that it is a threat to neither.

Although faith may seem like the obstacle between religion and science, in reality, it is a common denominator. The scientist with whom I live, my husband Peter reminds me of how much "faith" is a part of scientific research. The scientist often has as much faith in his theory as the theologian has in God. Neither the scientist's theory nor the theologian's deity can be proven without a doubt. Science, not unlike religion, is a world closer to the color of gray than black and white. Often it is not until we or someone we love experiences an illness or tragedy that we become painfully aware of the inexactness of science and the mystery of religion.

Just as the book of Genesis tells the story of the beginning of the world and humanity, the gospel of John tells the story of a new beginning, a new epiphany of the God whom no one has ever seen. The author will declare at every point in his Gospel that God has done something new by making God's self-known through Jesus Christ. John nowhere attempts to prove what he declares to be "truth and grace" in our midst. This is what his community believes... this is what changed their lives:

*According to The Interpreter's Bible:*

*Never setting foot outside of Palestine, Jesus was a supreme example of one who was so provincial that he became universal. He went so deep into human life that he touched the very core of it. It was because of him, therefore, who though he was a Jew yet belonged to all, that the disciples began to see that the fences they had built had no divine sanction, that God had no favorites, that there were no superior races, that there was no chosen people in the sense of a people who had priority above and beyond others.*

To have faith in Jesus Christ, the word made flesh, our glimpse of the "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise" is to embrace our humanity in all its wonder and frailties, but it is more than this. Jesus calls us to embrace the humanity of others, to recognize all God's children as brothers and sisters in Christ, to treat them with respect and civility and to make allowances for their frailty and shortcomings, even as Christ has made allowances for ours.

As we begin another year together during this Christmas season, looking into the face of the child who we believe has made God known to us; as we contemplate our individual hopes and resolutions for what lies ahead and the hopes and resolutions of Westminster Presbyterian Church as we ordain and install new church officers; may we resolve to risk *the conviction of things not seen*, the faith God calls us to in Jesus Christ—a faith that challenges us to reach beyond ourselves and to risk doing something for someone else, even when it doesn't make sense, because that's what Christ did and that's what Christ calls us to do. Amen.