

The World Knew Him Not, John 1:1-14

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Introduction

Happy New Year, and welcome to 2017. For some the New Year comes as a relief, for others it comes with grave questions. As I said last night, 2016 was a good year for me and my family. Its historic events and their impact on the future cannot be known yet. What is always most important is that Christians be faithful. When the future is uncertain, Christians can be guided by three beliefs: First, is the belief that optimism and hope are not the same. By this I mean, there is no Biblical warrant for a worldly optimism that says that human beings are capable of solving our problems, or even want to solve our problems, or even know how to identify our problems. Thus, as John tells us, when Christ entered the world as the solution to our problems, the world neither knew him nor received him.

Second, despair does not come from God's Spirit. Despair is just disappointed optimism; it sees all the failure of human nature but does not know where else to seek for salvation and meaning. Despair does not trust that God has a plan to work all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose. Hope that is put in God has the power to convert our souls, renew our minds and change our world. That is the power of believing, as John puts it, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Third, God in Christ shows us that hope is centered on the cross but its goal is eternal life. First Corinthians 15 tells us that if Christians hope for things in this life only, we are the most pathetic people in the world. God in Christ has saved us from perishing by shedding his blood, and has sealed his Spirit in us for salvation into glory. That is our hope in God's grace and truth.

Let us pray: Lord God, Ancient of Days, Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End, bring us into your life, into your light, into the hope that comes from believing in Jesus' name. Amen.

1. In the World

Today's text verses 9 through 11 tells us that the true light came into the world, and though he was the Creator of all things, the Word made Flesh to guide all people in the light of God's will and wisdom and glory, the world did not recognize him and did not receive him. Hope comes in the next verse, but we are not to skip ahead and talk about that, without knowing the truth about our problems. Hope divorced from truth is just wishful thinking, a mere optimism that things are okay and getting better. Human problems are too deep to allow for wishful thinking. Were I to give examples, any list of deep human problems back when Jesus was born, and problems today, I risk being one-sided in terms of our culture's political divide. So, as many of you know, I have made a habit of pointing out social and individual problems along cherished points of the agendas on both sides of that divide, so that all alike are offended. But this morning, I won't bother. Most of you discern, from one perspective or another, and hopefully when you examine your own soul as well, that our world is lost in darkness and in need of the light of God.

A world in darkness does not recognize the light of God, and rejects it. Jesus Christ is not received and is not recognized. The world systems from the time of King Herod to the present have tried to crush him; sometimes in obvious ways, through outright tyranny and violence; sometimes in more subtle ways, through the propaganda that human beings are good on the inside, we just need to be taught to make good choices and all will be well. The most subtle and persistent method of crushing Christ is by strangulation. Matthew 13 tells us that riches are a deception and that the cares of the world grow in us like weeds and thorns to choke the living presence of Christ within us. That describes western society right now. In a second parable in

that same chapter, Jesus makes it clear that those weeds and thorns are sown by the devil, and the angels long to uproot the bad plants, but they are held back until the time of the harvest, the judgment, when they will know how to separate the good from the bad.

At this moment, right now in history, angels still can't tell the difference between what is good and what is bad in our churches, in our nations, in our politics and societies. We must suffer the growth of the weeds and the thorns, and be warned, that the more attached we get to our worldly comforts and pleasures, the more we choke on them. The examples and stories to bring this lesson home to your own lives, I will leave up to you and your consciences today. But this is how the Bible paints the human condition in our world, and it is not a pretty picture.

2. Believing in His Name

Yet says verse 12, here comes hope: to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

One of the things we complain about in our society is the sense of entitlement. The complaint cuts both ways across the political divide: People who are poor have gotten too dependent on public assistance and services, so we say, while people who are rich and powerful have pulled the strings for bail-outs and immunities from prosecution, and so on, so we say. In our culture people don't know how to self-motivate and play the hand they are dealt. I make that complaint too. The Book of Proverbs is a great place to learn that God has put us here to get stuff done, and that neither laziness nor cheating are part of the human calling.

Here, though, the Bible entitles us to the greatest privilege of all, the status of being joint heirs with Jesus Christ. No matter what our opinion is of inherited privilege, all of us understand that there is a parental instinct to provide for our own children, to do everything we can so that their lives will be prosperous, or productive, or secure, as the case may be. Warren Buffet, often

the richest man in America with a personal net-worth in many billions of dollars, has said that he will leave enough to his offspring to get them comfortably started, but that they must make their own way as he did. Some of them have been rumored to complain about that, but whether or not Buffet himself is a believer in Jesus, what he is choosing to do fits Biblical values. It is best for the souls of his own offspring that they make their way in life, and not just live idly off of his legacy.

Another example comes from a Christmas letter from a close friend. He and his wife have their two sons by adoption. Five years ago the older was confirmed on the autism continuum, and as he approaches puberty more of those challenges are surfacing. This has not decreased their love for a child they made their own, and they will do their best by him all their lives.

When we accept God's offer of our adoption, God is taking us to himself despite all our problems, and they are problems: Sin is sin, and we are broken and set on the course to perish apart from Christ. On the one hand we are not brought into this inheritance in order to be coddled like the spoiled children of the filthy rich; on the other hand we are not adopted into God's family on some conditions that might change based on caprice, as though we will somehow surprise God with the depth of our own brokenness and sin. This adoption brings us into the path that Jesus trod, a path that does not avoid suffering and death, but that leads through it, sustained by our hope that nothing we suffer can negate or cancel the glory we are promised in eternal life.

3. Grace and Truth

This one in whom we believe, writes John in verse 14, is "full of grace and truth." This grace and truth is sealed in us when we believe in the name of Jesus, it orients us to our hope in eternal life, it sustains us when the world makes us suffer for having received Jesus, and it promotes within us the witness to the plan of God that was made by the apostles themselves.

One simple way to describe a problem facing us today is that Christians are divided between those who want everything to be about grace at the expense of truth, and those who want everything to be about truth at the expense of grace. Then there are those who think they can compromise between the two but they end up creating a church culture where neither grace nor truth matter all that much. Hence, Christians show the world a very confusing and unattractive picture of Christian faith.

It is the glory of God to present to the world the complete picture of grace and truth as a single focus in Jesus Christ. Put another way, those who care more about grace than truth do not care about the things God cares about, and those who care more about truth than grace do not care about the things God cares about. When godly grace is the foundation for the Christian life, it becomes very clear to the witness that the human optimism of “I’m okay, you’re okay” is not grace at all, it is a dangerous lie. Grace understands that the mercy of God is visited upon a species of life, humankind, that does not deserve it and never can. Grace understands that sinners need to be saved. In other words, grace that is godly, is grace that is truth. There is no other kind.

Grace and truth work together in the person in the life-boat with a bull-horn trying to get the attention of the passengers on a sinking cruise liner.

“Hey! Jump clear. Your ship is sinking. We’ve got life preservers. We’ll pull you out.”

Well, look at those funny little people in those little boats. They shouldn’t say those rude things. I feel insulted. I am offended. As though I would be FOOLISH enough to buy tickets on a boat that was going to sink. Well I never. Besides, this ship is a lot bigger than that little boat, the buffet is incredible, even if it happens to be under water right now. The captain has assured us everything is under control. So who do all those little boats with all those little bull horns think they are, anyway?

We think we are God's Church, the family of God, declaring the offer of rescue and salvation. That is who we think we are. If you think the Church should be about something else, some other gospel or message than that sinners need to repent and be saved and enter into their adoption by God, then I invite you to talk to me about your point and really soon too, because you are going to keep hearing this, all year long.

You see, 2017 marks 500 years since the Reformation recovered the true nature of grace and truth and the gospel of Jesus Christ as found in the scriptures. And this year, all year long, we are going to be studying and preaching the great reformation themes of grace and truth, of belief in Jesus' name, and of the Word made flesh to dwell among us. This is not a message intended to make you feel like you're drowning, it is intended to call you out of the abyss and aboard the life-boat. Come to the light, 'tis shining for thee.

Conclusion

I am looking forward to 2017, not because I am an optimist, but because my hope is in God. The church is being sifted, and that is a painful process. The nature of how the Church functions in its public witness in our society may be changing. Meanwhile, if we recall ourselves to be witnesses to grace and truth, believing in Christ's name, hoping in our inheritance as joint heirs in the Family of God, then whatever happens, God will see us through. In a world of darkness the life of God is our light, and shall be our light. Amen.