

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: "I am ... the truth..."

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1 Kgs 3:5-12, Rom 8:26-39, Mt 13:31-33, 44-52

This sermon began as I reacted to stuff I was seeing on the internet, TV or podcasts as well as in some of my reading. I was overwhelmed by all the different philosophies that I heard being advocated. And I was depressed because it seemed that none of those philosophies included Jesus or Yahweh, the God of Israel. I was appalled, in particular, by the notion so popular today that there is no such thing as objective truth.

We all have our own truth, I was told. Because of the diversity of humanity and its cultures, no one can assert that there is only one truth.

The purpose of this sermon is to respond to that lie, at least I see it as a great lie. Yes, there is diversity of people and cultures but that does not mean that everybody has their own truth.

I believe that Jesus is the truth. That is his word, says the Gospel according to John, at John 14:6 ... "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." What do those words mean? The Way: Jesus is the path to God the Father. The Truth: Jesus speaks and shows the truth of God. The Life: Jesus gives eternal life to people.

The author of the Gospel of John uses the word "truth" twenty-one times, more than any other book in the Bible. And that truth is all about Jesus. Just a few examples:

John 1:14: 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.

John 1:17: The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

John 8:32: and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

John 15:26: "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.

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Jesus especially distinguishes his critics from the truth John 8:44: You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

God's truth is essential for humanity. Without it we have no hope of overcoming our sins. We do not know how to behave without Jesus showing us what life in God's Kingdom is like. We have hope of salvation only if God's truth is more powerful than any other force in the universe.

Human beings have been trying to put themselves in charge of the universe, life, history and everything since the very beginning. First, God told Adam not to eat fruit from the tree of knowledge. Adam and Eve ate the fruit. Why? Because they believed the serpent when he told them that they would "be like God, knowing good and evil." They wanted to elevate themselves to God's level.

That was not God's only commandment to those early human beings. In the creation story in Genesis 1, God commanded all of humankind to "... be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth ...". So of course, human beings, when they became numerous after being nearly wiped out in the great flood, tried to build a city so tall that it could reach heaven. They wanted, says Genesis 11:4, to "make a name for ourselves." And, with a city reaching all the way to heaven, they would have been, at least in their own eyes, on an equal footing with God.

Why do human beings just completely ignore God's commandments and trust only in our own devices, our own decision-making? Christian theology has a name for that, sin. And for most of the history of Christianity the explanation is that we sinned because of The Fall, that first sin by Adam and Eve that got them thrown out of the Garden of Eden.

Christians taught and believed that human beings inherit a propensity to sin, stemming from that first sin. If we inherited the sin from Adam and Eve and their offspring, then the transmission of sin must have something, people reasoned, with the act of procreation, sex. St. Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in northern Africa in the fourth century, was blamed for the notion that sin was transmitted by sexual activity.

But the accusation was false. Augustine did not see sex itself as sinful. However, he warned against the sin of lust, unbridled human passion practiced only for pleasure. God had intended sex for the institution of marriage where the pleasure was there to encourage marriage partners to procreate and grow the species. Why should we grow the species? The answer: to have more people glorify God and to care for God's Creation by spreading throughout the earth.

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Human beings have not heeded God's guardrails around sex. As a general proposition, we value sex only because it gives us pleasure. Even more broadly human beings have set aside God's commandments and have acted for our own pleasure in all kinds of ways. We want power and wealth, so we figure out ways of taking that from others, even if it means killing and theft and fraud. To justify our behavior, we figure out ways of imagining ourselves to be in charge, pushing God to the sidelines if not ignoring God and God's commandments altogether.

If anyone ever asks you what the worst sin is or asks you what the sin that is warned about most in the Bible, it is the sin of idolatry. Idolatry means putting something or someone other than God at the center of our lives. Idolatry happens whenever we act on the basis that we are or can be in charge and that God is not. It is the sin of idolatry, and we commit it because it frees us to commit other sins. We can invent all kinds of rationales to justify our behavior, but first we must put ourselves in charge.

We commit idolatry because God has set up rules about how we are supposed to live. Judaism teaches that the Old Testament has 613 of God's commandments. We have never liked all those rules and have put a great amount of energy into figuring out ways around them. The number diminishes in the New Testament for several reasons including the Christian claim that God took on flesh to write God's love on our hearts. The exact number of God's commandments matter less than our living as God would have us live in God's love, exhibiting the love of God for one another and for God's Creation.

And yet we resist even the commandment to share God's love. Throughout all human history human beings have sought to construct elaborate rationales to justify our behavior without regard to the God who has created us, ministered to us, prophesied to us, taught us, redeemed us and been present with us for comfort, guidance, strength and wisdom. We want what we want. By golly, we are going to figure out to get what we want regardless.

Instead of one God, we invented many gods: gods for the wind, the rain, the earth, the sea, for beauty, for death, for the sun, s-u-n, and the moon, for war. The list goes on and on. Funny thing about those gods ... they did not care a whit for human beings. Rather they existed for their own pleasures and their own schemes and ambitions. Human beings worshiped them and made sacrifices to them only to enlist their help on our side to help us attain our pleasures, schemes and ambitions. Those gods existed, at actual practice, only to achieve our own human designs.

Even a panoply of gods proved inadequate to the purpose. So human beings decided to drop all pretense. Many folks decided that there are no gods or even a single god. Or, if there are gods, they are irrelevant. Let us acknowledge, this group, the deists, argue that God might have had a hand in creating the world in which we live but God has no role in human history following creation.

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Let us consider some of the notions we have developed after dismissing the gods. For example, some folks decided that we should devote ourselves to the highest of human pleasures ... good food, good drink, pleasant friendships, poetry, music, the arts. That might not be such a bad idea if there were a way to keep the pursuit of such pleasures within bounds. Does the pursuit of pleasure allow us to use and manipulate and abuse others if it gives us pleasure? Does it allow us to enslave others? Are there any limits on how we are to behave or is life to be just one long drunken party? If there are limits to the exercise of our appetites, what are they? Where do they come from? Who enforces them? The southern plantation owners in our country prior to the Civil War thought they were trying to live out such noble aspirations, as they enslaved and brutalized millions.

Following the Enlightenment in Europe in the late 17th through the 18th centuries, many people decided that we should lift up scientific reason as our guide. There are many people who think that only science, based on reason, encapsulates the truth. And indeed, there are no shortage of examples of the benefits of human reason. We have a lot of evidence from scientific advances in transportation, energy development, medicine, agriculture and industry that supports our trust in science.

However, science has not been successful in giving us a system of ethics or a set of guardrails for our behavior. It was so-called science that came up with the completely unscientific notion of race. That was done to allow one group of people to enslave other groups of people. It turns out that there is no such thing as races smaller than homo sapiens, the one race that encompasses all human beings. Race is simply a social category we have used to group humans by physical traits like skin color. However, science shows that race is not a biological fact, as human genes vary smoothly across the world. I hasten to add that while the notion of race is a scientific fiction, racial discrimination and hatred is all too real and persists. It is an evil that requires our continuing work to unseat and eliminate.

Science also gave us eugenics, the notion that it is possible to improve human beings by encouraging some groups to breed and discourage others. Indeed, it was eugenics that led first to the extermination of those with mental illnesses and birth defects. That then led to the justifications for limiting the reproduction of lesser races or even extermination of certain groups, especially the Jews.

Bottom line: science in and of itself cannot give us the guidance we need to overcome our sins. And it cannot deliver our salvation.

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And then there are philosophies that have developed that rely on something other than pure reason. The Marxists insist that the material forces of production govern history, govern human affairs. We must intervene on the side of labor, human labor, in order to facilitate the movement of human history and achieve a better humanity, a more peaceful world, and a more equitable world. And yet the lessons to be drawn from the imposition of Marxist governments are that they do not change basic human nature for the better, that they have killed enormous numbers of their own citizens, perhaps one hundred million people, as well as having despoiled the environment, and that they force billions of people to live in economic, social, and spiritual misery.

Then there is the philosophy that seems current today. We can't really explain anything, they say, because we are simply creatures of social structures and institutions that determine everything about us. We can't really be objective or scientific because every conclusion we reach is predetermined by the societies into which we were born. We can only describe, knowing that our descriptions are just that. Our descriptions are based on who we are and that is based on what social system we inhabit. There is no objective truth, only the descriptions that our society leads us to. There is no mechanism in this philosophy to teach us right behavior or save us from sin.

Solomon's prayer to God echoes Jesus ... Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil ... There is good and evil, says Solomon. God is good. Jesus shows us, the truth of God, the good. And only God can give us the ability to discern the difference between what is true and what is not. Only God's truth can teach us how to live. Only God's truth can save us.

More than that, the truth of God as evidenced in Jesus, is with us for all time. So wrote Paul in his letter to the churches in Rome ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, or rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For two thousand years, human beings have been trying to develop alternatives to the truth who is Jesus for two thousand years. They have yet to succeed. They will not succeed. The truth exists, it insists, and it persists on being recognized, no matter how much we look for different theories to achieve our own desires.

Jesus said it ... I am the truth. Praise God, Jesus is the truth.

Amen.