

Jesus: Truth-Teller

Luke 1:57-58, 67-79

A few years ago one of America's largest department stores tried marketing a doll in the form of the baby Jesus. The advertisements described it as being "washable, cuddly and unbreakable." The doll was neatly packaged in straw, satin, and plastic. To complete the package, the manufacturer added biblical texts appropriate to the baby Jesus. To the department store executives, it looked like a sure-fire winner, a real moneymaker. But they were wrong. It didn't sell. In a last-ditch effort to get rid of the dolls, one of the store managers placed a huge sign in a prominent display window. It read:

*Jesus Christ - Marked down 50%- Get him while you can!*¹

Jesus hasn't been selling well in America in recent decades. Our consumer culture seeks meaning and fulfillment in material possessions instead of in spiritual realities. In the last decade the number of Americans who claim to have "no religion" jumped from 14 million in 1990 to 29 million in 2001. Some of these identify themselves as atheists or agnostics, but the vast majority believes in God, pray and often describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious."² Jesus isn't "in" anymore. Sometimes in order to "sell Jesus," we "mark him down," watering down his message to make it palatable. Following Jesus doesn't just mean going to church; following Jesus is a way of life.

Advent is a time to remember Jesus, to catch the spirit of his presence once again. It's an opportunity to receive anew this special guest who comes to dwell among us, to pitch his tent in our neighborhoods, to reside in our hearts. This Advent season we will look at various images and roles of Jesus to help revitalize his presence in our lives and in our world.

This morning we look at Jesus' role as a truth-teller. The more traditional name for this role is prophet. A prophet is someone who communicates to others on behalf of someone else. Biblical prophets are called to receive the word of God and to interpret God's will to the people. Prophets have such a profound spiritual relationship to God that they can discern the true will of God. Therefore, they are appointed as messengers of God.

The role of the prophet is to speak 'the word of the Lord' to the contemporary situation. It is not to foretell the future as if they are fortunetellers with a divine crystal ball. Prophets critique their culture in the name of God. They are voices of an alternative consciousness

challenging the culture's dominant conscience. Prophets remind us what it means to be a people centered in God. They faithfully declare the implications of current actions on the future, with the hope of having an impact on both. For instance, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that increasing economic inequities lead to social fragmentation. Prophets are called to speak the truth as revealed by God, with the goal of changing things for the better.

Prophets are not usually very popular. "No prophet is on record as having asked for the job." Frederick Buechner says, "There is no evidence to suggest that anyone ever asked a prophet home for supper more than once....The prophets were drunk on God, and in the presence of their terrible tipsiness no one was every comfortable. With a total lack of tact they roared out against phoniness and corruption wherever they found them. They were the terror of kings and priests...."

"Like Robert Frost's, a prophet's quarrel with the world is deep-down a lover's quarrel. If they didn't love the world, they probably wouldn't bother to tell it that it's going to Hell. They'd just let it go. Their quarrel is God's quarrel."³

The gospel of Luke highlights Jesus' role as a Spirit-anointed social prophet. Luke's genealogy of Jesus includes prophets, whereas Matthew traces Jesus' ancestry through the kings of Judah. Luke records Jesus' inaugural sermon, which he bases on the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

In Jesus' case, he is both a messenger and the Message. Jesus speaks on behalf of God and Jesus embodies the message he proclaims. Jesus not only tells the truth of God, he is himself the Truth. Theologians call this the incarnation, the Word of God made flesh.

The truth that Jesus speaks in word and deed is twofold. The first message is the critique: something is not right. The way of the world is not congruent with the way of God. Something has gone wrong. In the words of Zechariah's song, too many people "sit in darkness and in the shadow of death." This may be one reason why Jesus doesn't sell well. We don't like to be critiqued for not doing things right. We don't like to hear the truth that we are too self-centered.

Biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann suggests that more profound than the prophet's judgment is his anguish and grief. Gerhard von Rad understands a prophet as one who "participates in the emotions of God."

Jesus grieves for the unjust conditions imposed upon marginal people. He is saddened by the social norms that determine who is “in” and who is cast “out,” who is valued and who is not. He welcomes the outcasts to his table. Jesus mourns the indifference of the dominant culture toward victims. He takes notice of others’ pain, whereas too many fail to see the needs of others.

Jesus tells the truth. Something is not right. The ways of the world are out of alignment with the will of God. There is reason to grieve.

The second part of Jesus’ message is that although things are not right, there is the possibility of a new future. Grief is met with hope. The poor will be fed, housed, and employed. Those unjustly held in bondage, physically or emotionally, will be released. The people excluded by society will be included in God’s reign of justice. The truth proclaimed by Jesus in word and deed is this: “A new day is dawning bringing a new future filled with possibility. Do not despair, hope in God.”

Zechariah’s song sings of “the dawn from on high that will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” He uses the image of the dawn for Jesus, the beginning of a new day, a day marked by light, hope, and possibility.

Jesus’ ministry heralds this new day, for he models the justice he proclaims. He dines with those whom the culture despises. He touches the untouchable. He gives priority to human well-being over against law and custom.

Jesus tells the truth: Something is not right, but this is not all there is. There is reason to hope, for God is still creating and has given birth to a new reign. Do not despair, hope in God.

Today, how would Jesus name the truth about our contemporary conditions? Jesus would be concerned that nearly 37 million people live in poverty in the United States, 12 million of whom are children. Jesus would lament that there are over 750 active hate groups in the United States.⁴ Would he not mourn that humans are organizing themselves for the purpose of attacking a class of people for their immutable characteristics? I can see Jesus grieving over the 5 people dying of AIDS every minute, claiming 8,000 lives a day. Jesus would share the anguish of almost 38 million people living with AIDS and HIV around the globe.⁵

Jesus would say, “Something is not right, but there is reason to hope. God is bringing a new rule to birth. Those who follow me offer signs that people are meant to be fed, that hatred is not a divine value, and that life is

precious.” The world needs people and communities like this one who disclose injustice and who embody the Truth of God’s way. The world needs communities like this one, organized not for hate, but to share the good news of Jesus’ love for all people. The world needs the body of Jesus alive today, spending its energies, time, and love in the service of others. The world needs this church, a safe place where children, youth, and adults can be grounded in the Christian faith and sort out the mixed messages given by our culture. The world needs this church, which gives generously of its time, talent, and treasure to serve those in need in our larger community and around the world. Your ministry, my friends, gives the poor, the children, the forsaken, and the broken reason to hope.

Jim Wallis, founder of the Sojourners community, was speaking at a Christian college in San Diego in 1996, the very day of the final presidential debate in that city. Jim asked the students two simple questions. First, he asked what they would ask Bill Clinton and Bob Dole if they were in the room for the debate. The favorite questions were about abortion, lowering taxes, and the president’s alleged marital affairs.

The second question he asked was different. He asked, “What would Jesus ask if he were in the debate hall tonight?” The room was quiet and you could almost feel the students thinking.

“Very slowly the first hand was raised. ‘Jesus would ask them how they were treating the poor.’ Then another hand. ‘He would probably ask them to treat each other better, too.’ Finally, a white student said, ‘Jesus would certainly have something to say about racism.’ The ‘Jesus question’ changed the outcome of the whole discussion.”⁶

Prophets raise the ‘Jesus question’ in order to reveal the truth that all is not right in the eyes of God. Prophets live Jesus’ answer in order to model the Truth of God’s will and way. Truth tellers proclaim, “Something is not right, but this is not all there is. There is no reason to hope, for God is still creating and has given birth to a new reign. Do not despair, hope in God.”

¹ *Homiletics Online*, retrieved December 3, 2003.

² Don Lattin, "Living the religious life of a none," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 5, 2003, pp. A1, A20.

³ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 73-75.

⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center website, November 24, 2004.

⁵ World AIDS Day website, November 24, 2004.

⁶ Jim Wallis, *Faith Works* (New York: Random House, 2000), p. 210.

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