



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
Rev. Scott E. Schul

Christmas Day: December 25, 2018

Sermon Title: "Beauty"
Gospel Text: John 1:1-14
Sermon Text: Hebrews 1:1-2

Nearly 500 years ago, Martin Luther offered some advice about preaching on Christmas Day¹: "Every preacher should preach... Christ and nothing else. The people are to know who Christ is, why He came, and what fruit He produces for us." And so I'll try my best to do as Brother Martin advised. But in the course of all that, I think it might be helpful to step back and examine the larger context of what it means in this particular day and age to talk about Jesus and to proclaim his Good News. After all, we're here on Christmas Day of *2018*, not Christmas Day of *1518*. Though the mission and message of Jesus are timeless, the way we communicate and transmit that mission and that message must take into account the unique challenges and opportunities of the present day.

This challenge of presenting and proclaiming Christ to a changing world goes all the way back to the beginnings of the Christian Church. We heard it in today's reading from Hebrews. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds."

You see, the early Christian church faced a sizable challenge. For hundreds and hundreds of years, God's followers had gotten their information *about* God and their direction *from* God through prophets, who relentlessly pointed to a day in the future when all of God's promises would be fulfilled in the long-awaited Messiah. And so when that Messiah finally came, in the person of Jesus Christ, it was a joyful but also jarring change to the way faith was heard, understood, and passed on.

When Hebrews was written, there was no New Testament. Sure, a few letters from Paul were being collected, and a consensus was slowly forming about which letters and Gospels were authentic, but the Church as a whole had not come to an agreement on this. What *was* authoritative though were the ancient scriptures –what we would call the Old Testament. If people had any understanding of God, *that's* where it came from.

And so quite wisely in that particular time, place, and context, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews used what he had – the Old Testament – to make his case that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact the long-promised Messiah who had come to save and forgive the people of the world. Not surprisingly, Hebrews is one of the New Testament books that makes the most use of Old Testament passages, stories, and imagery. Hebrews is a prime example of the notion that effective proclamation of Jesus must find a way to cut through the contemporary cultural static so that people can understand and engage Jesus's timeless message.

In principal at least, that sounds easy. But it isn't. The Church has always struggled to do this. For example, take Francis of Assisi. He was a valiant follower of Jesus. But do you remember how he got his start? He was praying in a church in San Damiano, Italy. That church had long been neglected and was in ruins. As Francis knelt in prayer before the church's brightly painted crucifix, he heard a voice. "Francis, go rebuild my house; as you see, it is all being destroyed." Three times that voice came to Francis, and it filled him with a mixture of ecstasy and fear.

In obedience to the voice, Francis began to do what he thought it was literally telling him to do. And so he set about repairing and rebuilding the dilapidated church. After some time though, Francis finally discerned that more than a church needed to be rebuilt. He – Francis – needed to be rebuilt spiritually. And the broader Church which had become so corrupted need to be rebuilt as well. *That* was the *real* work the voice of Jesus was directing Francis to undertake, and it is a work that never ends. Another early church father, Augustine, is credited with a phrase the Protestant reformers took up as a rallying cry: *Ecclesia semper reformanda* – Latin for "the church must always be reformed." That remains true today.

And yet in today's religious landscape, more often than not the Church is making the same fundamental mistake Francis made. We mistake the work of *following* and *proclaiming* Christ as the work of preserving our *buildings* and keeping things just the way they've always been, so that the Church often ends up looking and acting more like a *museum* than a bold and revolutionary means of proclaiming and living a counter-cultural message of love, mercy, and forgiveness. Institutional self-preservation is *not* what Jesus called his Church to do.

Now please don't misunderstand. Anyone who really knows me knows that I *love* the Church's traditions and ancient ways. There is so much richness and intellectual vibrancy in the Church's art, literature, liturgy, architecture, and treasury of scripture and tradition. But in an age of unprecedented *Biblical illiteracy* and *apathy* about faith, religion, and church involvement, we must discover how we can best and most effectively transmit the life changing message of the Son of God in the midst of a society that has so many other options.

It sounds like a daunting task, doesn't it? And yet *you* are *here*. You have other options too. But there is something timeless in the mission and message of Jesus Christ that has *resonated* with you – something that is *changing* you from the inside out. It's all contained within that Christmas preaching advice from Luther: know who Christ is, why he came, and what fruit he produces for us. I bet you all could answer that, right? First, Jesus Christ is the Son of God, fully God and fully human. Second, he came to us purely out of love, so he could do for us what we could not do for ourselves, namely, overcome sin and death. And third, the fruits he produces for us are forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life. What a hopeful message. I believe *that's* why all of you are here today.

But how do we share that Good News with an apathetic and even antagonistic world? Well, I'm influenced by a line of thought that goes way back to great medieval theologians like Bonaventure, was picked up centuries later by Luther, and then revived in the 20th century through scholars like Hans Urs von Balthasar. The idea is remarkably simple: Jesus Christ is most effectively revealed through beauty. *That's* how we begin to share the timeless message of

Jesus Christ with a world that doesn't yet know Jesus. We don't begin by beating folks over the head with terminology, long lists of rules, or thick books of doctrine. We surround them in beauty, trusting that *through* beauty, Jesus will speak to them and call them into a deeper relationship where all of those other things – the terminology, truth, and doctrine - will come in due time.

It makes sense when you think about it. Who hasn't felt close to Jesus while viewing a breathtaking sunset? Who hasn't felt the majesty of Jesus in a sublime chorale by Bach? And when you walk into this sanctuary, don't you feel something different? Doesn't it *speak* Jesus to you in a way that transcends mere words? Dostoyevsky once wrote, "Beauty will save the world." I think that's our calling – to share beauty with our neighbors through the Church's rich repository of words, music, art, architecture, liturgy, and scripture. Why? *So that Jesus can be revealed and hearts can be transformed.* After all, there isn't any time of the year when we are surrounded by more beauty than Christmas. And so throughout this Christmas season, may God surround us in beauty, and may our eyes and hearts be opened to the Jesus who waits there for us. Merry Christmas. Amen.

Citations

¹ *Luther's Works Vol. 75, Church Postil I, Concordia Publishing House, 2013, p.187*