

Wisdom and the Word
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Jan. 3, 2010
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:
Proverbs 8:1-11
John 1:14-18

It must have been a fascinating meeting – one of those ‘I-wish-I’d-been-a-fly-on-the-wall moments.’

If the producers of the movie “Invictus” portrayed it accurately, South African President Nelson Mandela invited the captain of the national rugby team to his office for tea. Both had their hands full, though in vastly different arenas. Mandela was trying to unite a country that had been divided by apartheid. His fellow black citizens welcomed its demise, but many of the whites were circumspect at best about their new president.

The rugby team captain faced a different kind of challenge. His team, the pride of at least the white residents of South Africa, was losing its matches. The world cup tournament was coming up and he needed to lift the team’s performance.

In the movie, the two discussed leadership – how to inspire others at just the right moment and how, as leaders, they found their own inspiration when all seemed bleak and hopeless. On the surface, Mandela and the rugby captain explored the parallels between two contact-sports, politics and rugby. But what they both sought from each other that day can be summed up in one word – wisdom.

Last week, we considered how both Samuel and Christ were said to grow in wisdom and stature in their youth. And if we had to pick one thing for which we might all pray in 2010, wisdom would be a good choice.

By now in this new year, we’ve all heard reviews of 2009 as well as the last decade, the first of this millennium. From 9-11 to Katrina to Virginia Tech to the worst recession in generations, America has had its challenges. But our affairs don’t stop at our borders, of course. So we are mindful also of global terrorism, the complexities of immigration, our nation’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and our responsibilities in places of human horror, such as Darfur.

If anything, it can be said that God's people have been actively involved in all of the above, seeking to do God's will and to communicate the gospel, whether in word or in deed, to alleviate suffering, to restore hope, to build understanding and to discern God's wisdom as a marker for a better path forward.

So, in that sense, on this second Sunday of Christmas, we find ourselves back at "wisdom" and we are far from alone. The Christmas season comes to an end this week, as the church worldwide observes Epiphany on January 6. Through the centuries, the church has recognized Epiphany to commemorate Jesus' baptism. With Christ's arrival, the church seeks to understand just what has happened with the birth of the Christ child, the very manifestation of God in the world in flesh and blood like yours and mine.

Two thousand years later, it's almost impossible for us to imagine the revolution in this revelation of God's very self. We must keep in mind that the church and its secular competitors had been working so hard and for so long to make sense of the paradigm as it was, the Old Covenant, God's promise to the Hebrew people and its relation to "truth."

One of the most important ideas they had worked out focused on wisdom. Early on, the Hebrews held up King Solomon for his almost flawless judgment in leading God's people. But wisdom also took on a female nature, associated with the Greek word for wisdom, sophia. Lady Wisdom, as she is known in scripture, is described as originating from God at the time of creation. Not only was she the source of fertility and new life, but also insight and intelligence, prudence and strength and good advice for living.

Long before Barnes and Noble assembled books full of inspiration and practical guidance in one easy-to-find aisle and marked them for sale, Lady Wisdom cried out, as in our first reading from Proverbs:

To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it. Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right; for my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips. Proverbs 8:4-7

For the Hebrews, wisdom in books such as Proverbs offered a manual for day-to-day living. Wisdom was earthy, applicable and sometimes brutally to the point, as when Solomon suggested to two women arguing over ownership of an infant that they cut the child in two and each take their part.

In so many ways, this was how the Hebrew people saw God and needed God. The world was harsh, survival a full-time job. So a no-nonsense theology fit their existence and their worldview.

In later years, though, Roman rule created new norms and with Roman rule came the influence of Greek thought. In the centuries before the birth of Christ, some Greeks made faith into philosophy, a matter of intellectual conjecture about the universe and where God fit in, if at all.

Along with their word for wisdom, “sophia,” the Greeks talked and wrote about the “logos,” which is Greek for the “word,” as a reflection of God. Then, after Christ, super intellectuals began to push the idea that Christ was not divine at all. No human could bring into the world God’s very being, they argued, especially one made of plain old flesh and blood.

So the author of the Gospel of John knew what he was doing when he wrote the poetic opening verses to his account of Christ, the last of the four gospels, written at a time when doubts about Jesus’ identity as the messiah were taking root.

His gospel opens with no long genealogy tying Jesus to King David, no prologue about John the Baptist, no manger scene, no shepherds and angels, no magi and guiding stars. John opens with the Word, the logos.

It’s easy to read the opening verses of John’s gospel and mistake them for an exercise in rhetoric. John’s opening lines lack the grittiness and the glory of the Bethlehem story. John embraces the language of the day, the same fuzzy-sounding language the Greek stoics and philosophers used to make Jesus into some ethereal non-being. So we may gloss over their meaning.

But the brilliance of John’s opening hymn is that he uses that very language and style of thought to drive home his point from the fist word. Jesus was THE Word, the Word of God, spoken into reality, made absolutely real. Jesus came into the world, with all its sin and brokenness, all its inclination to dodge reality by making up theory. Jesus came into that world to communicate God’s very nature.

This aspect of God was there at the creation, John says, just as the Hebrews thought of wisdom. But this definitive manifestation of God went further. It took human form, to work, eat and sleep, to teach and enjoy friendship, to know despair, just as you and I do, and to claim victory, just as you and I do.

“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 writes. “From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.”

John doesn’t stop there, of course, this is only his introduction. Throughout John’s gospel, Jesus put flesh on God’s promise – healing a lame man, feeding the five thousand, restoring sight to the blind, raising the dead and making disciples, all the way to the cross. The Word went silent for a moment, then came into the world again, to be heard by all, to give life, to light up the darkness.

In all these ways and more, John reminds us, Jesus was not an element of a theory, a spirit among other spirits or just another word among words of speculation about the universe, bound together in volumes to sit on a bookshelf. He was God in the flesh, made manifest for us, the embodiment of all that God intended – and still intends -- for us.

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On this last Sunday of Christmas, we look out on a new year and a new decade. The arrival of Epiphany encourages us to think and pray about how God is made manifest to us. But John’s gospel tells us that the life of faith is more than thinking and praying. Jesus was not a word on paper, but *the* Word in action. So for us the life of faith is thinking and praying, yes, but also doing. It is joining God in the doing of Jesus’ work as the body of Christ.

In her commentary on John’s opening verses, the wonderful preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says the arrival of Epiphany might encourage congregations to ask what words they might embody.

So how about it, church?

Just as God put flesh on grace and truth in Christ, are there ideas you believe we should put flesh on in 2010? What faith concepts can we make concrete - through outreach and in-reach, through time and talent, through study and action? In 2009, we focused hard on justice among other things. Where else should we go in 2010 as we build a vocabulary of living?

(Congregational input.)

So let it be.

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Let me close where I began.

Having seen the movie “Invictus” this week, I looked up the poem for which the movie is named. Now I don’t mean to burst anyone’s bubble. Invictus is a wonderful movie with a powerful message.

But there is some debate about whether its producers took at least one liberty. The poem that Nelson Mandela shared with the captain of the national rugby team in 1995 may not have been the work that came to be known as Invictus. Some sources say that Nelson Mandela shared a different work, a personal favorite of mine, actually, a portion of a speech by President Teddy Roosevelt given 100 years ago in 1910.

It reads:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

I don’t have a dog in the debate about which poem Mandela shared. But I wonder if the author of the Gospel of John might have liked Roosevelt’s words a bit better.

In a sense, they capture what John himself was trying to communicate about Christ – that rather than being a reflection of some lofty theory or thought, Christ was himself in the arena, a man whose face was marred by dust and sweat and blood, who, though divine, spent himself in a worthy cause, indeed, the most worthy cause of opening the door of grace for all to enter.

Amen.