

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

January 31, 2021 – EPIPHANY 4B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Truth—When we Need it Most*”

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 (God gives Moses the criteria for a true prophet)  
Psalm 111 (Praise to God for His works, and His faithfulness, justice, and redemption)  
1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (We are not to let our freedom on Christ become a stumbling block to others)  
St. Mark 1:21-28 (Jesus casts out an evil spirit, opening the spiritual eyes of those in the temple)

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Jesus began His ministry in the village of Capernaum, about 40 miles north of His hometown of Nazareth, on the western shore of Lake Galilee. In today’s Gospel lesson, He visits the synagogue there to teach on the Scriptures ... and ends up casting out an evil spirit from a visitor. Talk about a different kind of Sabbath! But for the worshippers, that encounter with Jesus’ teaching and His divine power left them awestruck. In contrast to their usual rabbis, He speaks and acts with a higher authority that seems undeniable. They realize they have run right smack into the Truth.

And because of who Jesus is and what He does, they understand, perhaps for the first time in their lives, that *Truth* is a Person.<sup>1</sup> Up until now, their rabbis have been passing on to them the venerable opinions of past masters. As such, they are accustomed to hearing what one dead teacher or another wrote about this or that issue, and they have been taught to respect and internalize these commentaries. But that particular Sabbath, when Jesus appeared in their synagogue, they discovered that Truth is not a “what”—an inheritance left over from the past, something they must keep stored away.

They experience the Truth as a “who”—a living, breathing, Person, whose face they recognize and whose actions they cannot control. This means something in *them* will have to die. That something is their erroneous belief that they can *control* the truth. For if the truth is not a “what,” there’s reason to expect that neither you, nor I, nor any of us can somehow master it, or bend it to our purposes.

Sort of like the man who was charged with murder and bribed a friend on the jury to hold out for a verdict of manslaughter. The jury took a long time deliberating, but finally brought a verdict of manslaughter. Upon visiting the man in prison the following week, the juror was thanked: “You must have had a tough time getting them to vote for manslaughter.” “Tough is right,” his friend replied. “Because the other eleven wanted to acquit you!”<sup>2</sup>

When Truth is a person—that is, Jesus Christ—it cannot be our slave. Our desire for control over it must die, as we commit ourselves to a far different existence, one characterized by interaction and interdependence with God, not by our own declaration and dogmatism. When Truth is a person who also *bears witness* to that Truth, we realize we cannot treat the Person of Christ—or *any* person—as a thing. We begin to understand that no one is disposable, and that we cannot view others only in terms of our plans and ambitions. In our lifetime, we have seen the abuse of far too many people around the globe.

Sometimes this degradation of the human person is brought about by a totalitarian state. In others, it is the work of terrorists who show no pity. Even in our own country, it occurs through economic, social, and cultural systems that marginalize or reject the least among us.

Jesus said: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6)—not “a way, a truth, and a life.” His identity as God’s Truth is seen in who He is and how He lived His life. Long ago, Jesus taught, exorcised, and healed, in the Capernaum synagogue. Now He reigns in glory where He continues that ministry—often, through us. And we nurture the glorious hope that we shall see Jesus again, either when we go to Him at the end of our lives, or He returns to us.

Even so, we also trust that Christ is with us, here and now. And, this same Jesus appears in a host of other places, too. Around the world, wherever people hunger for the one true God and actively begin seeking His Truth, whether they be Muslims, Hindus, ISIS terrorists, or pagans, they encounter Jesus Christ, and their lives are changed forever. Historically, and even today, we’ve seen scientists and statesmen, playwrights and philosophers, athletes, actors, and atheists, all discover the Truth as they come to know Jesus Christ.

For those of us who already have a relationship with Jesus, we believe Christ is present in the Eucharist, and that He is present wherever there is truth, goodness, mercy, justice, compassion, healing, deliverance from evil—and any kind of miracle.

If we are to spiritually form and educate the coming generation, we must help them understand that Truth is a Person, a “who” rather than a “what,” and that Truth cannot be manipulated or managed, controlled or contained. As far back as the 5<sup>th</sup> century, St. Augustine wrote: “When regard for truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things will remain doubtful.”<sup>3</sup>

That’s because, while Truth is a Person—Jesus Christ—it is also communal, because it is not a private matter we can keep to ourselves. We cannot hold a private truth the way we have a private toothbrush. Although each of us has a unique perspective on life which reflects our character and experience, by itself our personal perspective alone is not valid. It needs to be informed by the objective Truth found in God’s written Word, the Bible, and in God’s incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus encounters the people of Capernaum in their synagogue. This is a public place where worship, study, and discussion regularly occur, a place where people have formed a community in which they are accountable to one another. And it is within this network of relationships, with all its complexities and entanglements, that they encounter the Truth in Jesus. They experience Him in fellowship with one another. And after they’ve been shocked out of their wits by His exorcising the possessed person, they seek each other’s help to make sense of what has happened. They do not keep silent, but start to talk among themselves. They wonder about it together. They are a community of learners.

As individuals, we first have to encounter God’s Truth in Christ for ourselves. But we cannot grow in that Truth without a community of fellow believers. This is one reason why church is so vital to our spiritual wellbeing, and so important to our continued development as disciples of Jesus. For those of you who’ve taken part in Bible study at St. John’s Church, you know how meaningful it has been to share our personal experiences of the Truth of God’s written Word, as well as His Word made flesh.

Having this taken away from us by the pandemic is another great tragedy among the multiple losses we have experienced over the past year. And until we can resume gathering in-person for worship, study, and discussion, it is crucial that we do these things with our families or friends—or even by ourselves—at home. We need to keep watching and participating in services online; to continue reading our Bibles and reflecting on passages with family, friends, or neighbors, and to maintain our prayer lives. For communion with, and conversation with, God—that is, *prayer*—is one of the best ways we can stay connected to the Truth.

The great 20<sup>th</sup>-century British novelist, George Orwell, wrote: “During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.”<sup>4</sup> These days, we are surrounded by, and inundated with half-truths and outright lies, manufactured data, and shadowy explanations. As a result, we can become frightened and confused.

We are in dire need of God’s Truth, as revealed in His written Word, the Bible, and His incarnate Word, Jesus. As the people of Capernaum concluded: He speaks with authority! And because Christ does, we need to pay more attention to Him, and less to the mass media and local gossip.

Even the demon whom Jesus cast out recognized that He is “the Holy One of God.” Hopefully, we understand this, too. But the difference between the evil spirits that know Jesus, and us, is that they don’t *commit their lives* to Him. If we are to be different from them, we must follow Christ’s teachings and ways, seeking to emulate Him in our own lives. And, in this age of disinformation, social engineering, conspiracy theories, and perception management, we must be willing to hold courageously to the Truth of Scripture, and God’s Truth as shown to us in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

The great peace and social justice activist, Mahatma Gandhi, once wrote: “When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it—*always*.”<sup>5</sup> Amen!

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Charles Hoffacker, 29 January 2006, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-6/) <<https://episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-6/>>

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. [HotSermons.com](https://hotsermons.com/sermon-illustrations/sermon-illustrations-truth.html), n.d. <<https://hotsermons.com/sermon-illustrations/sermon-illustrations-truth.html>> 13 January 2021.

<sup>3</sup> “Truth,” [SermonIllustrations.com](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/t/truth.htm), n.d. <<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/t/truth.htm>> 13 January 2021.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> “Quotations on Truth,” [emphasis added.] [GoodReads.com](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/truth), n.d. <<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/truth>> 13 January 2021.