

2 Epiphany.A.17

Isaiah 49:1-7

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Each year the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* choose a “word of the year”. In 2016, that word was “*post-truth*”. The adjective is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” An example of a sentence containing the word would be: “We live in a post-truth culture.” The word “*post-truth*” originated in an effort to describe a world in which widely available facts seem unable to dent the appeal of attractive falsehoods. (The Christian Century, January 2017)

Truth-telling, it seems, is harder and harder to come by. If truth were a commodity, perhaps it would be elusive and expensive—sitting in a locked cabinet by the beluga caviar and Dom Perignon. But here’s the truth—at least as I see it. Truth has always been elusive. Turning to our Savior, Pontius Pilate poses the question “What is truth?” never quite mustering up the courage to realize that truth, with a capital T was looking him square in the face.

So, “truth” isn’t simply something for the hearing—it’s also about seeing—and ultimately, I submit to you that it is about being.

In the Old Testament lesson for this morning we hear the second Servant song in Isaiah: “Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born....He made my mouth like a sharp arrow, in his quiver... And he said to me, “You are my servant....in whom I will be glorified.”

The servant is to be the mouthpiece of God. Like a sharpened sword, the servant is to proclaim God’s truth. So, this servant is not so much a warrior as

an orator, one whose words are sharp rather than someone who wields a sword in battle. Later in the reading God speaks and says to the servant that it is too small a task to speak words of truth solely to your own people. In the end, a task of that scope is too trivial for a mighty God. The servant is to speak God's truth to the world. God says: "I offer you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." The trajectory of God's truth is not aimed toward a favored few, but toward everyone.

Perhaps you have never heard of Viola Liuzzo. However, on a weekend in which we honor the mission and ministry of one of the great "truth tellers" of our time, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., her story is important to speak as well. You might ask "What does a white, slightly dumpy, middle aged housewife and mother of five have to tell us about truth, much less, civil rights?"

All appearances to the contrary, Viola Liuzzo was a woman with a passion for justice. In 1965 she was horrified at the violence she saw inflicted upon black protesters on television. So, when she heard of a four-day, 54-mile walk from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to support voting rights, this housewife from Detroit packed her a bag. Liuzzo told her husband: "It's everybody's fight." She kissed her children goodbye and began the drive south.

Led by The Dr. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Viola Liuzzo and thousands of other marchers walked to Montgomery, where Dr. King spoke on the Capitol steps, telling the crowd that freedom was imminent: "How long? Not Long! Because no lie can live forever." King said in a now-famous speech. That night, Liuzzo, tired but exhilarated, shuttled local marchers back to their homes. A car filled with Klu Klux Klan members tried to force her off the road. Finally, they pulled alongside Liuzzo's car and shot her in the head. She died instantly.

Luizzo's death sparked a national debate. Unfortunately it was not the debate about Klansman violence and racism. The July 1965 Ladies Home Journal published a readers' poll asking if Viola was a good mother. 55 percent of the readers said "No." (Quite honestly, I'm rather shocked at the 45 percent who said "yes" during that repressive era). You might wonder why more of us haven't heard of Viola Luizzo. One of the reasons is that her reputation was savaged after her death. Years later, FBI files were released and it came to light that J. Edgar Hoover had deliberately circulated rumors that she had gone to the South with the sole intent of sleeping with black men. Post-truth is nothing new.

Truth tellers aren't necessarily lauded for the good they accomplish. Frequently they're slandered. Sadly, many times they're killed. And yet, I think we would agree that our world would be much the poorer without them.

In a world rife with dis-information, fake-news and outright slander and libel, how are we to tell the truth? Is there any to be had? I suggest to you there is. Jesus. Jesus is our truth. Go home today and turn to the fifth chapter of Matthew and begin reading—it's the Sermon on the Mount. This is no hard task—you only have to read two chapters. Think of this as plain truth-telling from your Savior. In it Jesus talks about anger and revenge. He says things such as: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you...if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" and "You have heard it said 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'" Jesus speaks of caring for the poor, the persecuted, the sick and the suffering; for refugees, prisoners and the homeless. And he teaches us to pray the Lord's Prayer. Here's the thing. And, please, don't take my word for it—listen to Jesus, let him speak to you. When you hear in the news, or on

the internet someone or some movement trying to convince you that up is down, right is left, that the sky is ocean and false is true and Jesus didn't really say exactly what he said—you can go right back to that sermon on the mount and consider—is that person or movement speaking the truth? Does what they advocate line up with what Jesus says? Or are they smiling brightly, employing sparkling words and trying to sell you a deed for a piece of land that doesn't exist? If what you hear isn't matching up with the Sermon on the Mount, it is nothing more than a bald faced lie.

Telling the truth is more than a matter of thinking hard or having access to reliable information. It's also a matter of being a certain kind of person. If we are to know truth when we hear it (and likewise, if we are to understand falsehood when faced with it), we have to be familiar enough with the Truth of Christ so as to call out a lie when we see one. If we are to be sharp swords of truth, we have to be humble, to model ourselves on our Savior, and to work hard to embody the moral virtues that match up with what we proclaim about our faith. In Jesus' day, as in our own, truth was a rare commodity. Yet I hope that we would be of one mind in believing that while the cost to obtain it may be high, for those who know it, it is precious beyond words. In Jesus' name. *Amen.*