

Sermon 13 January 2019
Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The New Year is well underway; 2019 is just beginning to take shape. One of the reasons people make resolutions in January is that during the first days of a new year we realize unformed, virgin months and weeks, hours and minutes lie ahead of us. Before the cadences of the new year become familiar, we feel a newness of possibility, a freshness of opportunity. Before old habits weigh in with deadening predictability, we actually feel we can change. For a season, however short it may be, optimism is stronger than feelings of inevitability. We know that in the coming days there will be circumstances and events beyond our control, but for now many things seem possible. We have a new pen in our hand and the sheet of paper before us is unmarked, waiting for us to begin to write our story in 2019. The title of the paper in fresh, un-faded ink reads: *How I will live my life this year.*

How will I live this year?
What choices will I make?
What light will guide my way?

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In this morning's reading from Isaiah, the prophet hears the word of God lavish hope on the people. With extraordinary

eloquence, Isaiah assures the people of God's provident care no matter what happens to them.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God . . . your Savior.

Twice in the few verses of the passage, God says, "*Do not be afraid.*" As we have said before, it is the first message of the prophets and the angels and Jesus—*Do not be afraid.* The waters of adversity will rise, the flames of disappointment and loss will burn, but God will be with us through whatever happens—we will pass through the waters, they shall not overwhelm us; and the flame will not consume us.

Someone has counted the number of times "*Do not be afraid*" is in the Bible. It is 366 times—one for every day of the year with one left over for leap year. We need to hear the words every day—*Do not be afraid*—and we need to live in the confidence of God's promise to be with us through it all.

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Every generation is tempted to live afraid, but we live in a dreadful time of incessantly articulated threat communicated through a staggering array of media. Much of what we hear is simply untrue. Conspiracy theorists, pundits and politicians

fabricate a world of threat, working to manipulate the population through fear. How can we sort out the truth from the lies? We live with the sound of a numbing tap, tap, tapping hammer of fear mongering and lies. How can we know the truth from the lies? Perhaps there is another question we need to ask first. Do we want to know the truth? Do we want to know the truth, or would we rather live with comfortable lies that do not question or challenge what we already think or challenge the way we live? Jesus tells us the truth will set us free. Do we believe that? And if we do believe the truth will set us free, are we willing to live with truth that upsets our preconceptions and personal prejudices? Do we really want to be free of all our illusions?

Some are calling our time a *post-truth generation*. One of the characteristics of a post-truth world is that people are unwilling to listen to anything they disagree with. They rebuff arguments that appeal to reason; they choose to live with opinions that feed their emotions. They only listen to news that reaffirms what they already believe. Unwilling to consider verifiable facts, many move through life viscerally driven by their emotions, especially fear.

Some of us remember reading George Orwell and Aldous Huxley and being disturbed by their visions of a future where

people are controlled by propaganda saturated with lies, fallacies, and doublespeak. Even though Orwell titled his book *1984* few of us believed we would see the development of the technology able to manipulate and disseminate lies and fallacies on such a massive scale. Recently I read an article about how platforms like Facebook select the news we see on their sites *based on our preferences*. They have an algorithm that chooses the ads and news stories that pop up on our computers, tablets and phones. In other words, our cyber media sources help us stay in the gated community of unchallenged opinions and worldviews. We are able to live in the luxurious prisons of our prejudices and illusions of reality. We believe the world is as we see it. We are sheltered from the truths that would make us free.

This causes me to repeat the questions I asked a few minutes ago.

How will we live this year?
What choices will we make?
What light will guide our way?

Are we willing to live our lives in intellectually and spiritually sheltered prisons—do we insist on spending all our time listening to people who agree with us—or do we want to live in

the light of the truth? The truth is a fire that gives light—it also burns.

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When Jesus was baptized a voice spoke from heaven. *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.* A few chapters later in his account of the Transfiguration, Luke says the voice spoke again. *This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him! Listen to him!*

Everyone needs a standard by which they measure the truth. Everyone needs to listen to a variety of voices, but each of us needs to have a voice that judges the veracity of everything we hear. It is the standard by which we measure the truth. We need to listen to the voice of Christ—speaking to us in its rich variety of ways.

How do we listen to God's Son?

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There is a cacophony of noise around us. How do we discern the voice of Christ in the midst of the noise?

John Wesley gave us a method for hearing the truth. It is called the Quadrilateral—four channels for listening for the voice of Christ and hearing the truth. The first channel is scripture. Especially in the gospels of the New Testament we hear the record of Jesus' wisdom. If we want to know the

liberating truth we listen to the words of scripture. We read them diligently and prayerfully. We read them in the light of the person of Jesus. In the light of who he is, God's word becomes a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path.

The second channel for discerning the truth is *reason*. There is nothing anti-intellectual about true faith. We have been given minds to think with and discern what is true. It is important to unleash the power of our reason and allow it to range free through the world of ideas. Explore the sciences of psychology and philosophy, geology, biology, cosmology, rhetoric and mathematics. Explore the arts of letters, music, painting and sculpture. No harbor of truth is out of bounds for the person of faith. Cultivate the gift of curiosity and do not be satisfied with pat, comfortable answers that separate you from others.

Jon Meacham's latest book is entitled *The Soul of America: The Battle For Our Better Angels*. In its conclusion, Meacham offers guidance for reclaiming our souls as Americans. He says we must *respect facts and deploy reason*. Meacham affirms that there "is such a thing as discernible reality," . . . and yet too many Americans are locked into their particular vision of the world, choosing this view or that perspective based not on its

grounding in fact but on where it's a view or perspective endorsed by the leaders one follows." (268)

To scripture and reason Wesley added tradition to the list of tools for knowing the truth. We have a rich, but mixed religious tradition to draw upon as Christians. We need to know our history to reap the benefits of that history—to respond to the shining witness of virtue and courage and faith, and to avoid the failures of religion that have so damaged others and the world. Meacham speaks to the same need to learn and the danger of blindly repeating the mistakes of the past. He says we must *resist tribalism*. “*Wisdom,*” he writes, “*generally comes from a free exchange of ideas, and there can be no free exchange of ideas if everyone on your side agrees with one another.*” “*Don't let any single cable network or Twitter feed tell you what to think.*”

The fourth leg of Wesley's quadrilateral is *experience*. The Holy Spirit always invites us into a living experience of God. We consider prayer and meditation and the study of sacred scripture as direct routes into experience of God's presence, but life is filled with portals accessing the divine. Doors and windows of understanding are ever-present for those willing to see and listen and experience. The growing hunger for spiritual guidance through meditation and mindfulness testify

to our suspicion of the omnipresence of God. In order to rediscover and reclaim the soul of America Meacham says we have to *enter the arena*.

It may be the greatest barrier or inhibitor to our willingness to listen to Jesus and follow the truth. We are afraid of the fire. Both Isaiah and Luke speak of a fire that does not consume us. It is the fire that burns away all the things that keep us from holding to the values and virtues of our faith. Doing the right thing, and continuing to grow in wisdom and understanding are costly ways to live—but they are the only way to be fully alive—the only way to have the abundant life we were created to live. The holy fire of truth refines and clarifies.

It is a fact every camper knows. Start your campfire with kindling before expecting the logs to burn. Gently at first but more vigorously as the flames catch the fuel—increase it flow of oxygen. Fire burns brightest in an oxygen rich environment. We blow on the campfire and it leaps to life.

The Holy Spirit blows through our days bringing life. Gently or tempestuously the Spirit blows truth into our lives, burning away ignorance and bigotry—fueling light and warmth and welcome.

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We have a new pen in our hand and the sheet of paper before us is unmarked, waiting for us to begin to write our story in 2019. The title of the paper in fresh, un-faded ink reads: *How I will live my life this year?* The Spirit moves, Jesus speaks, and if we listen, we will write a fine story filled with truth, and goodness, love and new life.