

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Reign of Christ
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Facts, Feelings, and Faith
Colossians 1:11-20; Jeremiah 23:1-6

At the Thanksgiving Eve service,

Rev. Jeff Potter asked how many people used to watch
the TV show *Cheers*.

Well, I'm going to go a little further back today
and ask how many of you have ever watched an episode
of *Dragnet*, by Jack Webb?

You may have seen the reruns on Nick at Nite.

How many of you here ever watched an *original* episode of *Dragnet*,
before it was a rerun?

And who can quote for me the famous line attributed to Sgt. Joe Friday,
when he was interviewing (forgive the stereotype)
a distraught woman overcome by her emotions?

"Just the facts, ma'am" Just the facts.

Joe Friday just wanted to get to the truth.

He only dealt in facts, not hunches, or intuition – certainly not feelings.

Well, as famous as Friday's line has become,
when it comes to facts,

you may be interested to learn that Joe Friday
never actually uttered that line in any episode of *Dragnet*.

The line actually came from a spoof on the show
entitled *St. George and the Dragonet*.

For the full history, you can visit Snopes.com.

Other famous facts that are not really factual:

Sherlock Holmes never said, "Elementary, my dear Watson."

Washington most likely did not cut down his father's Cherry Tree.

And nowhere in the Bible does it say,

"God helps those who help themselves."

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As we have been reading the stories of the Bible
in the Bible Basics class on Sunday mornings,
I have been reminded of how often the question is asked,

“Did this really happen this way?
How do we know it really happened like this?”

The question itself is not unusual, nor is it new.
But the way we expect the question to be answered
is a sign of our modernity.
We want to know the facts. “Just the facts, ma’am.”
We don’t want them to be biased, slanted, or spun in any way.

Just give us the straight facts:
Were Adam and Eve real people?
What kind of fruit did they eat from the tree?
Did Noah really get every animal in the world on the Ark?
Did the Joshua’s army really annihilate ALL the people of Jericho?
Did a new star really appear over Bethlehem?
Did Jesus physically walk on the water?
Was there actually an earthquake when Jesus was crucified?
Was there a solar eclipse at the same time?
Was Jesus really raised from the dead, or had he just fainted?
Did he actually, physically ascend into the clouds
before the disciples very eyes?

Our culture of scientific fact, historical fact, and journalistic fact-finding
teaches us to mistrust any information that may be biased,
or have some sort of agenda behind it.
So we approach our faith with the same tendency – just the facts, please.
But given the nature of facts,
it’s just possible we may have a little too much confidence
in our ability to “get to” the facts.

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It is nearly impossible to get to a plain fact.
For one thing, all facts are interpreted facts,
at least once you talk or write about them,
or communicate them in any way.
Once a fact is communicated from one human being to another,
it becomes an interpreted fact.

Consider the fact: He said “hello.”
Well, if I am telling you this fact
my tone of voice and body language interpret the fact:
He said “hello”
He said “hello” (surprise)

He said "hello" (interest)

He said "hello" (pointing to head with impatience)

Now, if *you* go and relate that information to someone else,
the message will be twice removed from the event.

So facts are not as simple as straight line on a sheet of paper.
There are things like body language, facial expression,
and the physical setting that impact the actual event.
Facts are more like many wavy lines on a paper
that is then crumpled up and tossed about the room.
A fact is a moving target,
and examining a fact is a matter of infinite complexity.

Consider a fact you might find as part of a weather report:

"Sunrise at 6:45am"

The fact might even be displayed

with a picture of a straight line representing the horizon,
and a circle of sun halfway above the line.

It is also important to remember that the sun rises at 5:45 *in your time zone*
and actually at an infinite number of different times
within your time zone.

And it is also a fact, of course,
that the sun is not really rising, because it never really set
the night before.

As far as we can tell, the earth is turning on its axis and orbiting the sun;
the sun, with its planets, is moving around the Milky Way galaxy;
in turn, the Milky Way galaxy is moving through space
at an amazing speed.

So, is it a fact that the Sunrise on a given day is at 5:45am?

Well, yes and no.

And consider all the information left out of this fact.

With that sunrise comes a full spectrum of light,
reflected by every object it touches,
the trees of every kind, the ground of every contour,
the birds of every variety, the waters of oceans, river, lakes, storms.

And the light casts shadows,
which are constantly changing as the sun rises,
and as the objects casting the shadows move.

At sunrise the temperature may be 23 degrees
(but understanding that fact
depends on knowing whether it is Fahrenheit or Celsius,
and depends on the reliability of the thermometer).

Facts are always limited information,
limited in the telling by the perspectives
of the fact-teller,
and the fact-hearer.

Some would want to base the truth of the gospel
on the provability of certain miraculous facts
– as if our ability to prove, say, the fact of the resurrection
would make our faith more certain.

But facts, being what they are,
provide a pretty flimsy foundation
and on which to establish our faith.

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Well, if not facts, then perhaps feelings might be the ground
upon which our faith can stand.

Perhaps faith is defined more by sentiment than science,
more by intuition than intelligence,
more by mood than information

Just this week we have all celebrated a mood of gratitude.
Some have happily expressed their thankfulness.
Others have dug deep in their hearts to find a sense of gratitude,
a sentiment that is easily squashed in a culture of entitlement.
Still others have to work actively
to look at their desperate and painful circumstances
and find there something to be thankful for.

But what happens when those feelings are not there?
Does that mean faith has gone away?
Or should the person who feels depressed, or despondent,
assume that her faith isn't "working"
and therefore abandon the spiritual way?

Consider the faith of Mother Teresa.
Few would argue that Mother Teresa exhibited more faith
than any other Christian figure in the 20th century.
She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her work with the poor.
At the time of her death in 1997,
the Pope put her on the fast track for sainthood.
But after her death some of her personal correspondence

was found to reveal a woman who struggled greatly
with her feelings about God.

Mother Teresa,
who worked among the poor of Calcutta,
wrote in 1958:

"My smile is a great cloak that hides a multitude of pains."

Mother Teresa said in another letter:

"The damned of hell suffer eternal punishment
because they experiment with the loss of God.
In my own soul, I feel the terrible pain of this loss.
I feel that God does not want me,
that God is not God and that he does not really exist."

"I am told God lives in me –
and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness
is so great that nothing touches my soul."

"Where I try to raise my thoughts to heaven,
there is such convicting emptiness
that those very thoughts return like sharp knives
and hurt my very soul.

"In my soul, I can't tell you how dark it is, how painful, how terrible –
I feel like refusing God."

Are we to conclude then,
that Mother Teresa was a woman without faith?
Do these feelings mean that her faith failed her
or at least that it was deficient?
If you feel like this, is your faith really working?
Or perhaps faith is about something deeper than our feelings.
This wisdom has been acknowledged
throughout the history of Christian faith
particularly in the spiritual tradition known as
"The Dark Night of the Soul."

It is the experience of dryness, or emptiness,
or even excruciating inner pain,
which leads us to ask questions like
"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

But in the best of Christian spirituality
an experience of darkness and emptiness like this
has never been considered the absence of true faith,

but an unavoidable part of true faith.

So it would be wrong to limit faith to only those positive feelings
like thankfulness, or happiness, or assurance,
but to include feeling like emptiness, sadness, and despondency
as a natural part of true faith.

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Paul, in his letter to the Colossian church,
puts these questions of facts and feelings
in a revealing light.

He prays that the Colossian believers may be
*made strong with all the strength that comes
from Christ's glorious power,
and...prepared to endure everything with patience,
while joyfully giving thanks to the Father,*

Here we have feelings of strength, patience, joy, and thanks.
But strength and endurance imply some form of suffering
which must be endured.
Patience implies resistance and delay and a frustrated hope.

And all of this suggests that joy must be something deeper
than simple happiness.
And thanks must be something that can be expressed
even in circumstances of hardship and struggle,
circumstances in which the facts, such as they are,
do not support faith
but work against it.

So on this day when we celebrate the Sovereign Reign of Christ
over all things,
what we have is not a collection of historically verifiable facts,
nor a testimony of people who have lived purely happy lives
because of Christ,
but we have a song that is written to fire the imagination.
*He has rescued us from the power of darkness
and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son,
He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;
for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—*

all things have been created through him and for him.
This is not flat -fact -reporting.
This is deeply imaginative language,
language with a very clear and unabashed agenda.
We who speak it

do not purport to be unbiased,
but *fervently biased* –
biased in favor of faith,
slanted toward of the reign of Christ,
spin-doctored toward of hope
prejudiced in favor of God's kingdom,
predisposed toward of love
inclined to the forgiveness of sins
and beholden to the one who reconciles all things
to the Source of all life.

Faith is learning to give up our control of the facts,
to relinquish our regulation of the truth,
and learning to trust the One who alone knows the facts,
and whose love is deeper and stronger
than any of our feelings.

Faith is the gift of endurance
when every fact and every feeling screams out
the absence of God and the failure of love.

Faith is trusting in the light,
even when the darkness seems to have overcome our reality.

Faith is the irresistible call toward God
that got Mother Teresa out of bed to carry water to the poor
when she couldn't even convince herself that God existed.

Facts can crumble under close scrutiny.
Feelings will come and go and change.

Faith is a gift of God that will endure,
until all of heaven and earth are united
in the joyful knowledge of the truth:
Christ reigns over all things.

This is the unprovable fact we are compelled to believe and proclaim,
the exhilarating comfort that transcends all our feelings:

Christ is King. Let the earth rejoice!