

A VISUAL AID

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Second Sunday of Christmas, January 3, 2016

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus Speaks Offensively To Religious Authorities

Jesus said some things throughout the gospels that were pretty difficult to hear, especially if you happened to be among the religious authorities. If you were one of the scribes or the Pharisees, some of the things that he had to say weren't just difficult. They were sometimes downright offensive.

And so the reaction of some of these professionals isn't really surprising as you read the gospels. To the Pharisees, for example, Jesus says, "You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God." (Mark 12:24.) And so it's like you're saying this to somebody who is a religious professional.

Scribes, for instance, have dealt with the Hebrew scriptures pretty much for their entire adult lives. They know scripture like the back of their hands. And then to be told, "I'm sorry, but you just don't understand it, nor do you understand what it's talking about." Well, you don't take that lightly. You get upset. You've just been insulted.

You Have Heard 'X,' but Jesus Says 'Y'

In the gospel of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 through 7), Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'X,' but I say to you, 'Y.'" He says it six times in a row (Matthew 5:21-43), and every time "You have heard that it was said," that "X" is in the Torah. It's in the law. And I would like you to understand that you just don't say "Y" to those people. It makes them mad. Here's the law, and the law has said, "X," and normally

you would just put a period at that point. There is no such a thing as "But I say to you, 'Y.'" "

For Jesus to say out of his own intelligence, out of his own connection to God, "You know, that's fine, what the Torah says, but I say to you, *I am* the bread of life." *That was simply not done.* You just don't *do* that and get by with it, and Jesus didn't get by with it.

Jesus, Not Moses, Gives the Bread of Life

Probably the primary example of this is in John 6. That's a long, drawn-out chapter, so I didn't include it in the scripture reading this morning. But it's the "bread of life" chapter, and there's one section (verses 32-35) where Jesus says, "It wasn't Moses who gave you bread in the wilderness, but *I am* the bread of life, *I am* the bread of heaven." Now, if you want to make a professional Jew angry, do that.

Jesus: "It wasn't Moses."

The religious authority: "I'm sorry, are you talking about the Exodus experience? You're talking about slavery in Egypt, being brought out by Moses, the formative experience in the Wilderness, going into the Promised Land, being freed and given the Ten Commandments, the whole shebang?"

And that's like really important to him.

Jesus said, "No, no, no, it wasn't Moses. *I am* the bread of life."

Those who were not followers of Jesus got upset, and you can understand why.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:29), Jesus concludes with a sort of gibe at the religious authorities. I can't really tell if it's a compliment or an accusation; you be the judge. The text says that, "He taught them as one who had authority and not as their scribes." The Jews might be admiring him, or they might be chastising him because the scribes were the teachers.

That context is sort of like gospel-wide in its meaning, and on this first Sunday of our brand-new year, I'd like to talk about just one word.

In the Beginning Was the Word

In our church on Christmas Eve, one person was lighting the Christ candle, while another was reading a portion of the prologue of John (1:1-5). However this morning Bob read the whole prologue (verses 1-18). That passage is really without parallel. It is considered one of the deepest, most beloved, most profound passages, not only in the Bible but in world literature as a whole. The prologue of John is really in a class by itself.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The very first verse brings us squarely into the notion from the Greek of "logos," translated as "Word." "Word" is technically right but it's an anemic translation. It doesn't give the whole sense of the Greek original.

You know there are nouns that name things like the pew you're sitting on or the wall you're looking at. And there are adjectives that describe things like the wooden pew and the white wall. Together, nouns and adjectives can provide a more or less mediocre working representation of something concrete, but they cannot provide more than a poor representation of something abstract.

But "Word" is much more than that. The best example of a translation for logos that I can think of is "God spoke, and creation hap-

pened." That's more the sense of what is behind the word. Continuing, "The logos was *with* God and the logos *was* God." And the logos became the light of humanity, the light of the world. (From the Prologue of John.)

So logos equals God, and then it says, to translate it very literally, that "He dwelt among us," but literally he pitched his tent. So it's like he pitched his tent in our campground for a while and became one of us and walked among us.

Understanding Through Exegesis

And then verse 18 of John 1, the final verse of the prologue, goes like this, a classic Jewish sentiment: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known."

When a person goes to seminary, part of the core curriculum is verbal analysis called exegesis. Even though it's a technical term, a kind of jargon, it's rather important. It means to draw out. Typically you have a text, and you draw out the meaning of that text. So it means to interpret, to understand.

Lawyers do it all the time. So when a legislature passes a law, what does the law mean? How do we understand the law? Some laws are simple, like "speed limits." Others are more complex and need interpretation. We have a Constitution, and there are hordes of lawyers, highly paid people who interpret it for the country so that we understand what it is saying, the nonestablishment clause, for example. So the process of exegesis is to understand; it's to derive the meaning from the bare words.

The process is this: You start off with what? Your text. Well every single text comes in the middle of a context. So if you're looking at the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5 through 7, well what about Matthew 1 through 4? What about chapters 8 onward? I'm going to draw a circle around this piece

of text, and I'm going to describe its boundaries so as to try to understand what the text is about.

Finding the Context Before and After

The very first thing to do after drawing a circle around the text under examination is to say, "Well, what about the context? (From the Latin *contextus*, the connection of words.) What happened before and what happened after affect how you understand the subject word(s). And then you look at the authorship. Oh, this was written by Matthew. Not Luke, not John, not Mark, not anybody else. So because it's Matthew, that helps you understand a little bit more.

And then there are the five W's and H that constitute the classic editors' list of questions that ought to be answered in the beginning of a good article (who, what, where, when, why, and how). "When" was it written? "What" was the cultural milieu at that time? And where? Was this in Nazareth? Galilee? Jerusalem? Egypt? "Where" was it written? That affects what the text is about. And why? What was going on? "Why" did the author(s) write it? What issue were they addressing? "Who" are the players in the story and "how" does the translation affect the original?

You can do word studies within a text. You can look at exegesis, for example, or you can look at any number of other words because when you're dealing with text of a different language and you're dealing with a translation, the translation is undoubtedly going to be poor relative to the real thing in the original language. Because of their nature, translations as a class cannot be expected to achieve the full meaning of the original. There are good translations and bad translations, but none can be as good as the original unless the original is itself defective.

Therefore, moving back to the original language, how do we further understand the text? Do other authors talk about the same

issue? If it's the same who, what, where, when, why, and how, have other people spoken about it? Did Luke write about it also? And John? And Mark? The input of others may help you understand your text.

And then finally you have to look at meanings beyond the literal ones. It's easy but it's also a cop-out to talk about nothing except the literal meanings. Jesus said, "I am the bread" of what? Well, is it pumpernickel? You know it's foolish to try to understand something only by its literal meaning. Finally, after all this work, you get to the real meaning behind the words. But that was what it meant at a previous time. What does it mean now? Is it worth your time to read it now? Well, it sort of depends on what it meant then.

Jesus Is the Exegesis of God

So verse 18, the last verse of the prologue to John: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." The phrase "has made him known" is the only usage in the entire New Testament of the word *exegesis*. Think about that for a moment. Jesus is the *exegesis* of God.

So therefore, if you want to understand God, it would behoove you to look at Jesus. Is it exclusive? It never says that, and I actually don't believe it for a minute. I think there are multiple ways in which divinity is revealed because of all the various facets of divinity. But if you want a good perspective, look at Jesus.

So let's look at Jesus for a moment, discussing theology with the Pharisees when he was only twelve years old. And then, if you've ever sat down and read one of the gospels from beginning to end, most people don't do it. Most people read just a portion at a time, as we do on Sunday morning.

But if you've ever done that, the sense that you will get is that Jesus forgave and he

healed, and he forgave some more and he healed some more. Then when he's done with that, he starts forgiving and healing all over again. And in between he was teaching. So it's like forgiveness and healing and teaching, and forgiveness and healing and teaching, page after page after page.

He turned water into wine, he walked on water, he angrily turned over some tables. He was absolutely fearless when facing a mob that was out to stone a woman, and he stopped it. He was equally fearless when he faced a mob that was anxious to see him dead.

But the essence of the man is that Jesus forgave and he healed and he taught, over and over and over again. And the prologue of John says that Jesus is the exegesis of God, so if you want to get to the core of it, you look at Christ, and he forgave and he healed and he taught, and that's God.

I Could Stop the Sermon Right Here

Dramatic pause, sustained eye contact, stirring conclusion. It's a good place to stop, except that there is one thing missing.

In a sense it's like a beautiful keystone on the top of a stone archway, the one in the middle. And if it's not there, the arch will fall down. Right now that stone is missing.

That same Jesus of logos, light, and exegesis, that same Jesus forgave and healed and taught. That Jesus called you and me family, brothers and sisters. A favorite title that he used for himself throughout the gospels was "son of man," meaning that he is a human being.

That Jesus said, "Greater things than these will you do." That Jesus said, "Each and every one of you is a temple, the place where God lives. That Jesus said, "Each and every one of you is a partaker of the divine nature." That Jesus is the one thing missing, the beautiful keystone — the exegesis of God.

And so, to quote a movie, "That is your destiny."

And I would ask you humbly to consider such matters as we begin our New Year.

Amen.