



Rev Chris Taylor - 3-3-19
Why We Follow Him

What a week this has been. Our President met with the dictator of North Korea in what turned out to be a failed summit meeting. At the same time, his former counsel, Michael Cohen was testifying on Capitol Hill. And all this while we continue to await the conclusion of Robert Mueller's two-year investigation into the President's connections with Russia – an investigation that has resulted so far in criminal counts against more than 30 individuals: six of them former advisers to the President.

This is an incredible moment in the history of our country, but it isn't the first time we've seen an administration racked by scandal. Back in the early seventies we had Richard Nixon and Watergate. Fifty years before that we had the Teapot Dome Scandal of Warren Harding's administration. Go back another fifty and we are right about the time of the Whiskey Ring and Black Friday Gold Panic which were two of the scandals that plagued Ulysses Grant.

Following Abraham Lincoln's assassination his vice-president, Andrew Johnson succeeded him. Generally considered one of the worst presidents of all time, he was the first president to be impeached and only avoided losing the presidency altogether by just one vote.

But even Lincoln had scandal. His secretary of war, Simon Cameron was forced to resign amid allegations of corruption. His corruption was so bad, so pervasive, that in a conversation about it with the President, Sen. Thaddeus Stevens remarked "I don't think he would steal a red-hot stove." Cameron asked him to retract the statement, leading Stevens to reply, "I believe I told you he would not steal a red-hot stove. I will now take that back."

There is nothing new about corruption and dishonesty, then, in politics or outside of it. With the Washington Post claiming that Trump has made 8158 false or misleading claims in the first two years of his presidency, it is tempting to say that the truth has never been so under fire, but then you might recall President

Clinton defending a lie by saying, "It depends upon what the meaning of the word 'is' is ". That's an exact quote.

The truth, it turns out, has always been somewhat iffy when it comes to politics and human nature.

Which brings us, in a round-about way, to our text this morning and to what has come to be known as Jesus' transfiguration. This Sunday marks the end of Epiphany. Three days from now we celebrate Ash Wednesday and so enter into Lent. "Epiphany" means manifestation or appearance. When we talk about someone having an "epiphany" we mean they had a sudden insight; a revelation of what is true, or right or necessary. Epiphany, then, is all about the truth, and it is the truth – the truth of our existence, the truth about God and God's will – that came to us in Jesus.

The season of Epiphany is bracketed by two events in Jesus' life and ministry. Epiphany begins with his baptism, and ends with his transfiguration. The first marked the beginning of his ministry, and the second that moment when Jesus finally turned towards Jerusalem and the fate that awaited him there. Just before the transfiguration, we find Jesus telling his disciples for the first time that in Jerusalem he was going to be arrested, persecuted, and finally put to death.

In both his baptism and transfiguration we find the Father speaking: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," (Lk 3:22), and then here in our text, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" (Lk 9:35). In both, the Father is confirming Jesus' identity. In both, the Father is placing his seal of approval upon him.

With Jesus we come face to face with absolute truth. There are no greys here. There are no "alternate truths," or questions about the definition of "is". No, in Jesus we encounter the truth about God and the truth about ourselves. It is pure light we find in him; that same light that Peter, James and John saw there upon the mountaintop.

There is a tendency today to think that truth is relative; that it is all a matter of perspective. It is not. Jesus and the transfiguration remind us that there are absolutes; that there is such a thing as truth and falsehood, as right and wrong. He reminds us that the pursuit of truth is something that is good and right and noble.

But even as we hold up that absolute, we need to remember that in our brokenness none of us can claim a lock upon it. We need to remember that we are an imperfect people, and that as a result our understanding will always be imperfect this side of paradise.

This imperfection is evident even in the Gospels themselves: inspired by God yet written by human beings. Read the Gospels carefully and you will find that there are inconsistencies between them: one, for example, has Jesus cleansing the temple at the very beginning of his ministry (John 2), while the other three say it happened at the end, right after his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday (Mt. 21, Mk 11, Lk 19). With one it is the Sermon on the Mount, with another it is a much briefer Sermon on the Plain.

We don't try to smooth over the inconsistencies or deny that they are there. We recognize, rather, that these are human beings and that each experienced Jesus from their own perspective. It is like four people standing at different positions around him; each seeing him from a slightly different point of view. It is by putting all four together that we end up with a fuller, multi-dimensional image of Jesus.

So yes, when it comes to ourselves we recognize that our understanding of the truth is incomplete. In that sense, you could say it is relative. On any given question, we will find ourselves somewhere on the spectrum between absolute falsehood on one end and absolute truth on the other. We should hold our best understanding with a sense of humility, then. There is always room for growth; always room for correction. Indeed, the more we talk to others, listen to them and draw from their perspective, the more likely we are to move closer to the absolute.

But what I want you to hear this morning is that there is such a thing as truth; absolute truth. And I want you to hear that Jesus embodied that truth. That's why his face changed there on the mountaintop. That's why his clothes became dazzling white. In Jesus, the divine, the perfect, came into this world. In Jesus, the truth – the pure, undiluted truth – walked in our midst. And so the Father tells us, "This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him!" Epiphany.

You may remember the old riddle about the adventurer caught in a land where two different groups of people lived. He knew that the members of one

group always told the truth, and the members of the other always lied. He came to a fork and knew that one path led to life and the other to death. There standing at the fork was a person from one of those two groups. But which one? The riddle is trying to figure out the one question the adventurer could ask that would lead him to the right path no matter which group the person was from.

We are all that adventurer. We are all trying to find the path that leads to life. Truth matters. Lies matter precisely because they can spell the difference between success and failure, life and death.

Like all of you, I know people who have made the wrong choices, who have embraced the lies, and who ended up destroying everything they cared most about. But I can honestly say that I don't know anyone who has chosen Jesus and later regretted it. Not one. I'm not saying Jesus' way is easy. What I'm saying is that his way is the way of truth – the truth that brings us life.