

KNOW THE TRUTH

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Sept. 3, 2017
based on Psalm 119:105; John 8:31-32, II Timothy 3:14-4:5***

Today is the beginning of a fall sermon series entitled, “Here We Stand—Sure Faith for Uncertain Times.” The series relates to the fact that this October is the 500th anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation. The leading figure of the Reformation, Martin Luther, famously said “Here I stand,” when he refused to recant his beliefs under pressure; and this series is an opportunity for us to consider what our central beliefs are as Christians, and how we can stand firm in faith in the midst of today’s pressures.

I heard a lot about Luther when I was in college, because I did my undergraduate work at a Lutheran school, Wittenberg University, which is named, of course, after the German town of Wittenberg where Luther nailed his 95 theses on the church door on October 31, 1517. My wife Mavis also went to a Lutheran school—Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. We may look like Methodists, but there is Lutheranism lurking in our past. But actually this can be said of the Methodist movement as a whole. Methodism began in England in the 1700’s under the leadership of John Wesley, but the roots of the Methodist movement go directly back to Luther and other Protestant Reformers who were at work in the 1500’s. In looking back to the Reformation, we are looking to our own story.

This sermon series will not be a history lesson. But our present day perspectives are very much rooted the past; and so as I refer during the course of this series to key ideas of the Reformation, we will see how the insights that people were making during the Reformation continue to be of central importance for us today. Thinking about the Reformation will help us to think afresh about our own core beliefs. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Where do you look for truth? This is a central issue in the present day, when fake news abounds, or genuine news is vilified as fake news when people don’t like what it says. We are bombarded with fraudulent messages. Email subjects us to a cacophony of bogus claims on a daily basis, and many of us no longer answer our land line (if we have one) and only warily answer our cell phone because many of the calls we get are from fraudulent telemarketers. And if it is difficult on a daily basis to sift the truth from all the falsehood in the news and in advertising, how can we discern what is true when it comes to the really big questions of life—questions about God and morality and meaning and purpose? How exactly do we find what is true? Here it is helpful take a brief journey through humanity’s approach to that question over the past few centuries.

In medieval days, prior to the Reformation in Europe, the simple answer was—look to church and its leadership. The Catholic Church in the Middle Ages claimed what it called the *magisterium*—the teaching authority of the church—which was concentrated in

the Pope. Whatever the Pope said was supposed to be true. But the Reformation exposed the serious flaws in the pope and the church as a whole and laid the foundation for the Enlightenment or so-called modern era, when people concluded that instead of relying on institutional authorities such as the pope we should all use our own heads and look to human Reason in order to discover truth. Science blossomed and the age of discovery, and up until recent times many people would have said that reason or science provides the ultimate source of truth. But that confidence in our human reason began to unravel after the Second World War, as people realized that science had given us tremendous weapons, but not the wisdom for how to live with one another. Science could indeed yield great truths about the physical world, but it had its limits-- it could not answer moral or spiritual questions. Moreover, philosophers pointed out that the very process of observing phenomena affects what is observed; and how we think about things is shaped by our cultural context—so that all of our deductions contain an inherent element of distortion or bias. Thus we entered the postmodern era, where no truth is considered absolute, and where people look more to feeling to discern what is true. In this age, how we feel about something is what is true for us. Truth becomes relative; but this approach too has great limits, since some things are definitely true no matter how I feel about them.

So perhaps the insight of the Reformation can help us afresh. Luther recognized that the basic dynamic of the whole Biblical story is that God communicates to us; God speaks through the prophets and the Old Testament writers and ultimately speaks with perfect clarity in Jesus Christ. So if we want to know what is true, particularly if we want to know what is true in the great spiritual and moral questions of life, we need to look to what God says—we need to look to God’s Word in the Scriptures, especially to how that Word comes to its greatest expression in Jesus. In short, God does not leave us to just try to figure out what is true on our own; God reveals truth to us, and we have the record of that revelation in the Bible. We can journey in truth as we look to how God communicates to us through the Scriptures; for as the Psalmist said, “Thy Word is lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Psalm 119:105)

Thus the first principle of the Reformation is encapsulated in the Latin phrase, *sola scriptura*—which means, the Bible alone. Luther and other Reformers perceived that we will find the central truths of life not by relying on ourselves or on other human authorities but by looking to God’s Word.

As we progress through this sermon series, you will find that each point of the Reformation is summarized in a little Latin phrase, so we’ll be learning bits of Latin every week. The principle of *sola scriptura* was a complete upending of what the Catholic church was claiming in the Middle Ages. The Catholic church used the Bible, but Catholic church claimed that the Bible is the church’s book, and the authority of the church is over the Bible. Thus the church tells you what you should think about Biblical passages, and the church can add to the Bible. This is why, up until recent decades, there were never Bibles

easily available in Catholic churches—no Bible in the pews such as we have here—because the church did not feel that average people could be trusted with the Bible on their own. The Pope was seen as the top Source of truth, and it is the Pope who interprets the Bible for everyone else.

Luther flipped that picture completely over by saying that God's Word in the Bible is the authority, and the church is under the Bible. Christians, Luther said, should look directly to the Bible for truth, and should judge the church and its leadership according to God's Word. This is why Luther translated the Bible into German and began printing copies of it for average people. Luther judged the Pope by the Bible, and the Pope did not come out so well, which led to a lively story to which I will refer as this sermon series progresses.

So the search for truth should begin with God—as we look to what God reveals to us in God's Word. But is the Bible the only source of truth that we need? In Luther's struggle with the Catholic church, in which the Catholic leadership was saying that you can look at the Bible but you also have to look at what all the popes have said, Luther found it important to insist that, no, we should look to the Bible alone, and we should judge all the statements of all the popes by what the Bible says. Thus his principle of sola scriptura was a way of holding to Biblical truth in opposition to the accumulated teachings of the Catholic church that had in many ways departed from the Bible. But today, there are some Christians who have taken that idea of sola scriptura and have twisted it into a very simplistic anti-intellectual or anti-academic principle, whereby they just take a surface reading of the Bible and consider that to be the end of the story in every search for truth. Thus, for example, some Christians insist that our planet came into existence 6000 years ago in six literal days, because that's what they get when they simply read the words of Genesis in a literal way and take them at face value. The principle here is "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it." But this is not exactly what Luther and the other reformers had in mind.

Our own Methodist tradition has a great deal to add to this discussion. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, put forward an approach that we now call the Wesleyan quadrilateral that ties together everything we have discussed this morning. Wesley argued that there are four basic sources of truth that God has provided for us, and we should use all four. The first and primary source of truth is the Bible; in agreement with Luther's insight, we start by looking to what God says to us in the Scriptures. But how do we rightly understand the Scripture? Wesley argued that we have a lot to learn from each other and from the insights of people of faith who have gone before us, which is why God has given us the church. So, he said, a second source of truth is "tradition"—or the whole history of what Christians have perceived before us. We are looking at this source of truth in this sermon series, as we draw insights from Protestant Reformers of 500 years ago. A third source of truth, Wesley said, is "experience"—that is,

your own personal experience of God. God was not only present with Biblical people or with historical luminaries like Luther; God is present with you, and speaks to you and me whenever we perceive something of God's glory in the beauty of nature, or when we sense God's presence in worship and prayer, or when we experience God's working in the midst of the challenges of life. The final source of truth, Wesley said, is "reason." God gave us our minds to use and to pursue every academic discipline. Thus the results of science are part of God's truth, because God gave us the minds to do science.

How then do we find what is true when it comes to the big questions of life? The Methodists have a method that can provide sound guidance in this age when there is so much confusion about what is really true. We start with God, looking to God's Word; and then we rightly understand what God is saying to us by using the various gifts for understanding that God has given us: we draw on the perceptions of the community of faith around us, considering the tradition of the church, we look to our own experience of God in our lives, and we use our God-given reason. This is the approach we will take throughout this sermon series.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul warned that "the time will come when, to suit their own desires, people will gather around teachers who say whatever their itching ears want to hear. They will turn away from the truth and wander off into myths." (II Tim. 4:3-4) That time has certainly arrived. You can think of a lot of examples of this today. So how do we find truth within the confusion of our age? We do so by grounding ourselves in God's Word. It is then that we come to know who we truly are, we can discover what our purpose here is, we can understand how to live life fully, and we can see what our glorious destiny is through Jesus Christ. As Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32)