

Texts: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

The Oxford English Dictionary has named its word of the year for 2016. Does anyone know what it is? Post-truth. Here is the definition of post-truth: “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” In other words, it doesn’t really matter anymore what the objective facts report – what’s most important is what I believe to be true.

Of course the internet gives a huge platform for anyone to amplify what he or she believes to be true. Conspiracy theories, sensational headlines, fake news, even the quaint old term “yellow journalism” – it’s all there at the click of your mouse, or a notification on your Facebook page, or in a Tweet. President Obama wasn’t born in America. Our government was behind the 9/11 attacks. Bill and Hillary Clinton ran a sex ring out of a pizza parlor in Washington. Who can tell what is truth and what is a lie anymore?

We live in a post-truth world, and yet those of us who gather tonight tell a 2,000 year old story that which we as Christians claim to be true. On the face of it, the story seems preposterous. The son of God born in a stable? Angels breaking out of the sky to sing to a group of shepherds?

At the very beginning of his gospel, Luke claims that he has carefully investigated everything he has heard, and that his intention is to write an orderly account of what has been handed down to him by those who were eyewitnesses to the actual events. He claims to do this so that “you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.” (1:3)

Luke grounds his story in its historical and political context. He names Octavian Augustus, Emperor of Rome, and Quirinius, governor of Syria. There's a census being taken; everyone must register – that's a way for the occupying Roman Empire to know how much tribute it can exact from the places where it rules. We appreciate these kinds of details, don't we?

Into the midst of this larger political scene come Mary and Joseph, two of the thousands of people who are forced to travel back to their hometowns for the census. Two of the thousands of people whose lives are disrupted by powers and events beyond their control. That also rings true, doesn't it? We know what it is like to have some politician or bureaucrat or committee in a far-away place make a decision that affects us.

And then Mary's due date is on her, and she gives birth to her son in a borrowed stable, out back of someone else's house, and that seems plausible, too, because there are women all over the world who are giving birth at this very moment, in hospitals, or in homes, or in refugee camps somewhere. But Luke has told us earlier, back in chapter 1, that an angel has appeared to Mary to tell her that this baby boy is holy, this baby boy is God's own son, that this baby boy is to inherit the throne of King David and that there will be no end to his kingdom. That actually seems to stretch the bounds of likelihood. How many of you have been confronted by an angel and told your child's future?

And what's more, at the same moment that Mary is wrapping Jesus in swaddling cloths and laying him in a manger, a choir of angels is dropping out of the sky to bring the news of Jesus birth to a group of shepherds – shepherds! The lowest of the low on the social scale, about where we would put undocumented day laborers. Why would news of a king be shared with those people? That just goes beyond the pale, beyond all credibility.

And yet, here we are, once again listening to Luke's orderly account of the birth of Jesus so that we might know the truth about these things. Here we have gathered once again, in our questioning and our faith and our hopes and our fears. Every year we come to the manger and hear Isaiah's soaring words: A child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. And we wonder – is it real? Is it true? Is this gift for me?

God's ways are not human ways. With God, all things are possible.

This story is true, not because its claims can be verified but because it shows us where God can be found – right here, right now, in the middle of political events and “no vacancy” signs and unplanned emergencies.

This story is true because it tells of a God who lays aside God-ness to take on human-ness. A God who lays aside power to take on weakness. A God whose love is so broad and deep that it encompasses the entire universe; a God whose love so tender and intimate that it reaches out to touch your life tonight.

This story is true because we know that we walk in darkness all too often, and that the light that shines from the manger in Bethlehem lights our way, too. This story is true because we know that there is no darkness so dark that it can blot out the light.

Those who want to play the zero-sum game of winners and losers, those who claim that they are in control of history, they don't understand the truth of this story. This story is true because we read it with eyes of faith and we hear it with ears of faith and we imagine it with minds and hearts shaped by faith. We sing with the angels in faith and we kneel

with the shepherds in faith and in faith we set the scene in our mind's eye and imagine what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph on that long-ago night.

In this post-truth world that we live in, we gather tonight to proclaim the greatest truth: that God so loved the world that He became a human being, joining with us to live among us, to redeem us, to forgive us, and at the end, to bring us with him into eternal life. It truly is the greatest story ever told.