

## Knowledge

Psalm 50:1-6  
II Corinthians 4:3-6

“Even if our Gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing.” So writes the Apostle Paul to a church he helped plant some years before. If I wrote a letter to the church I helped plant some years before I might ask them if they've discovered the bent frame in the suspended ceiling over one corner of the pastor's office. A few months before leaving that church, I locked myself out of my office. I called my assistant, who lived a mile and a half away. But she reminded me she was visiting her mother in a city two hours away. Our best friends, church members with a key to the building, lived in the same neighborhood. But they were in a different city, more than two hours away, watching their grand kids. I had run out of possible helpers.

So I got a ladder out of the utility closet and set it up in the nursery, which shared a wall with my office. I climbed partway up and pushed aside a tile in the ceiling. Next I climbed all the way and stood on the very top of the ladder—planting my feet on the bright yellow warning label that tells you not to do that. The ceiling was level with my thighs. I bent over the top of the cinder block wall and reached down to pull out another tile, this one over my desk in my office. I lifted one leg and straddled the wall. Then I pulled my other leg over and **carefully** shifted around until my shoes were aimed at a section of my desk supported underneath by a cabinet. I lifted my bottom off the wall with my hands and shoved off. I stuck the landing perfectly. Unfortunately, though, one of my arms slammed hard into the ceiling's metal frame. I bent the frame so badly it almost snapped in two when I tried to bend it back into shape. I never could get it into a perfect rectangle again.

I have never told this completely true story to anybody. I am pretty sure I've never even told my wife Linda. Sorry honey, but what you don't know can't hurt me.

All that for a corny one-liner! And what does it have to do with Paul and the Corinthians? This: knowledge can be a dangerous thing. **Lack** of knowledge, despite my joke, can be a dangerous thing. I might be in trouble right now! Paul writes of a “veiled Gospel”. He means not that he intentionally hides the meaning of his teaching, but that some people do not understand it no matter how hard he tries. I suppose every teacher has felt this frustration. Every preacher, for that matter every parent, supervisor and so on has felt it. Paul attributes it to “the god of this world”. He means Satan. The Devil has blinded some who cannot accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. These unbelievers cannot see that Jesus Christ is Lord. They lack knowledge and this has eternal consequences for them.

John Calvin, the great theologian who initiated an historical process that led to the founding of the Reformed Churches—including our own Presbyterian Church—wrote the monumental Institutes of the Christian Religion. It is the most systematic of all systematic theologies. My Westminster Press edition of it runs to 1,734 pages in two volumes. Calvin's first two sections consume 528 pages, approximately one-third of the entire work. These sections cover the knowledge of God and the knowledge of God in Christ Jesus. Knowledge. How do we know God? How do we know our sources of knowledge are true and trustworthy? What do these sources tell us about God in Christ? In meticulous, painstaking prose (Calvin was trained as a lawyer—and if you want to understand Presbyterianism that little factoid tells a lot), he laid out his ideas about natural revelation and special revelation, Biblical authority, the Trinity, the omnipotence and the omniscience of God, judgment and redemption, moral law, the nature of Christ, and much, much more.

To reduce Calvin's work into an absurdly short summary, we might say that he believed we know God for three primary reasons: God has implanted in our hearts a spiritual knowledge of God's existence and glory; creation testifies to God's power and wisdom; and preeminently, God has inspired the writing of Scripture for our instruction. The Apostle Paul puts it even more succinctly: "(God) has shined the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (II Corinthians 4:6b). When we see Christ we see God. But only because God has switched the light on that enables us to see. Which begs the question, what does it mean to see Christ?

Seeing Christ means accepting the Gospel. The Gospel is that Good News that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God has become incarnate, born a human specifically that he might die. He died to pay the terrible price God's perfect justice requires for our sin. But the Good part comes with the resurrection of Jesus. When he walked out of that tomb he revealed his divine power. Seeing Christ does not require functioning eyes. It requires instead that we understand that God loves us, God forgives us, God has saved us. It requires that we believe. When we believe we **see** all these things that God does for us. We know God is for us. And we rejoice.

We mentioned that John Calvin wrote about general and special revelation. Coming in the midst of all those other heavy terms, these might sound as complicated as Einstein's general and special relativity. They are not. For Calvin, general revelation refers to anything that reveals God in a way that is accessible by all people. Not all people will see and know God thereby, but they **could** and that is the point. The most powerful experiences I have had of general revelation include the first time I saw the Northern Lights and the births of our two children. After moving to Northern Michigan we received a call in the middle of one night from

a church member to go outside. The Northern Lights were dancing. That particular night they were all shades of green. They appeared in curtain shapes, shifting and moving. I understand the physical cause of the Northern Lights. They happen when solar radiation in a particular spectrum interacts with Earth's magnetic field. But looking at the skies that night, I saw God. The Psalmist declares, "The heavens declare his righteousness," and I agree.

I thank God that by the time Linda delivered our children fathers were encouraged to attend the births. I felt reassured by the knowledge and skills of the medical professionals and the impressive technologies they employed. Even though Linda had to undergo an emergency Caesarian section the first time, I do not recall feeling scared. I felt elated, joyous, and above all instantly in love with those impossibly tiny human beings. Looking into their faces for the first time I saw God. The Psalmist declares, "...the perfection of beauty, God shines forth," and I agree. What instances of general revelation have you experienced?

John Calvin also wrote about special revelation. By this he meant, first, the Word of God as found in the Bible. Notice I did not say, the Bible, the Word of God. As Presbyterian inheritors of Calvin's teaching, we believe that God's Word is contained in the Bible but is not co-extant with the words in the book. This may seem like picking nits but in reality it is a crucial distinction. We believe that God inspired fallible human beings to write the books now collected in the Bible. We do not accept those words as literally true in every least detail. We must study them, using every tool in our intellectual kits, to gain from the Bible an accurate knowledge of God and God's purposes. For this reason before reading a Bible passage in worship I always say, "Listen now **for** the Word of God," not "Listen now **to** the Word of God."

Yet we do not understand the Bible to be just another book. It is, after all, inspired by

God. It does contain great truths and trustworthy advice for living in Christ's footsteps. It is the prime source of special revelation. In the ordination vows all elders, deacons and pastors in the Presbyterian Church take, we promise that for us the Bible is "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ." The Bible, rightly interpreted, is our first source of knowledge of God. If we determine other sources contradict what we understand the Bible to say, we must correct those other sources. Jesus himself did this for other people constantly. I do not know of anybody who has actually counted, but surely one of his most common corrections was of legalistic hypocrites. If you use Twitter you know the type. They are always happy to tell you where you are wrong while remaining blind to their own sin.

Now that we have resumed worshiping in our sanctuary, we might do well to remind ourselves of where our knowledge of the Gospel has just now taken us. I spoke to Tribune-Star reporter Mark Bennet the day I wrote this sermon; perhaps by the time I preach them he will have published what I said. He called asking for my thoughts on Lent after a full year of COVID lock down. He asked, "How do you think people might use this church season of Lent, when you're supposed to be introspective and to confess your sins more than usual, in this particular year?" I think that is a great question. After a moment's thought I told him what I am about to tell you. I am old enough to remember the protests in the 1960's, both Civil Rights and anti-war. I remember the hippies on Dunn Meadow in Bloomington. I remember Kent State, when the National Guard shot and killed those students. I remember the Kennedy and King assassinations. ***But I cannot remember a time when I have worried more about our national, social and cultural divisions.***

In private conversations I often refer to Red World and Blue World. Red World to me contains a spectrum of religious, philosophical and political groups ranging from populist

Trump people to establishment conservatives. Blue World to me contains a similar spectrum ranging from the radical progressives to the classical liberals. The divide between these two worlds does not concern me terribly. People can and should disagree when their principles and beliefs are at stake. What does worry me—and gravely—is the manner in which we treat of those with whom we disagree. Our behavior has become outrageous and dangerous.

The last twelve months have seen rioting, complete with billions in property damage and tens of murders, **coming from both sides**. But we can no longer talk to each other about this in anything like a useful way. We no longer listen to each other with anything like respect. We seem to have zero intellectual curiosity about people with whom we disagree. Instead we instantly seek to “memory hole”, “cancel”, “dox” them. We leap straight to hate. I would ask every person hearing these words who wants to follow Jesus to use Lent to look into your own soul. What do you **really** think about those people in whatever World is not your own? What do you say about them in the safety of your own club house? How might your understanding of Scripture lead you to change your attitudes and behavior?

Do not let the Gospel be veiled to your eyes. Confess your own complicity, whatever it may be. Receive the gifts of forgiveness and faith. Know Jesus as your loving Savior. Then turn and see all people as equally beloved in the eyes of God. Maybe the sight of a Trump flag makes your blood boil. I have no criticism of that. Just make sure you do not automatically judge the guy flying it. Maybe the sound of Joe Biden's voice makes your skin crawl. I have no criticism of that. Just make sure you do not automatically judge people who voted for him. Let your knowledge of the Gospel fill you with a full measure of that love which moved Jesus Christ to write his story and give every last single one of us the chance to be a part of it. Listen for the Word of God.