

*Note: In the following pages, readers will find two Sermon Texts.
The First Sermon Text was preached on January 14, 2018.
The Second Sermon Text was prepared, but not preached.
Reasons why one sermon was preached, and not the other,
are explained in first two paragraphs of the Preached Sermon.*

Sermon Preached on January 14, 2018

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

John 8:32, Matthew 5:13

“Are we still dreaming?”

I’m going to do something today that I haven’t done in my entire ministry. I had verses lined up to preach from and even prepared a sermon throughout the week that I thought would inspire you, but then on Wednesday afternoon I got an email from LMH and they asked me to speak in chapel on Friday. I agreed, even though I knew that I didn’t have much time, and I had service of resurrection on Saturday but my sermon was pretty far along for today. After I spoke on Friday I felt like it was important that I share it with you, but it wasn’t Romans and Job that I had already prepared, rather it was one verse from John and one verse from Matthew and had nothing to do with what can we know about God?

I really want to share with you what I shared with the students and administration on Friday, are you okay if I do that? I found out that I spoke to them more freely, and I spoke to them that which I felt more honestly than maybe I felt that I could with you. I’m not sure why. If you are okay let me share with you what I shared with them. Let me read those two Scriptures first.

READ SCRIPTURE

20 years ago I was in Pompeii Italy at a Roman Catholic Youth Festival and I was asked to speak to 10,000 youth who had gathered I was the token Protestant. Their theme was “I have a dream”, and I encouraged them to keep dreaming because that Baptist pastor whom they were honoring had a dream that was not yet realized. Today, what I am sharing with you is entitled “Are we still dreaming?” You see throughout history people have spoken in ways that have attracted our attention and caused us to pause and think. Martin Luther King Jr. 55 years ago this August told America about his dream while Malcolm X called the American Dream a nightmare. When I was asked to speak in chapel, I was asked that I not to say anything divisive. I think it is interesting that here we on the cusp of MLK Day, a weekend that we celebrate the greatest civil

rights leaders of our nation, even of the world, and we are not to say anything divisive. You shall know the truth, you are the salt of the earth and if that salt loses its flavor.

I understood why they told me that though. The times in which we are living are not normal times. Also, even though my daughters have attended LMH, I was still a guest. I know what it is like to leave my pulpit here and have a guest preacher come in and just drop a bomb and then I am left to clean up. I know what it is like. But I have always seen the school, a place my girls have attended for the past 7 years, as an incubator for action, and I hope especially for social action in a world that screams for salt and truth. I grew up and went to Atlantic City High School where we were empowered by speakers who would come and speak to the student body like Jesse Jackson and they would tell us that we could be somebody, no matter what background we came from. We needed to hear that because Atlantic City was a place where you could end up stuck there forever and never get out. We needed to hear that we could be somebody. I got to hear Jesse Jackson in my high school, you all get Bob Bronkema...

We would hear that no one could ever put a period after your name. There was always a question mark when a child is born because when they are born, no matter who they are, no matter what family they come from, no matter what background they find themselves in, each child has a question mark because we do not know what they will become. But I was encouraged on this weekend not to be divisive.

It's interesting because in 1965 my father asked his church leadership if they would bless him to go to Selma to march with Martin Luther King Jr., and they told him not to be divisive. They said no, they would not give him their blessing and he marched anyway. When he got back and preached a sermon at his church someone threw a hymnal at him during the sermon. You shall know the truth, you are the salt of the earth and if that salt loses its flavor.

You see truth that is denied does not go away just because we ignore it, it often shows up then again uninvited. Truth will repackage itself as anxiety over time. This Sunday morning that we gather together I'm guessing very few of you will remember. I'm guessing 20 years from now when I'm preaching from here on MLK weekend you will not remember today's sermon. We have many opportunities in our lives to speak about divisive issues rather than being spoken to in this context with me telling you how you should feel or think or me telling you how I feel or think about specific issues. It isn't about what side we are on when we are addressing specific issues. You see when Jesus speaks about the truth he recognized the power of truth and declared that it was able to even set you free.

Maybe truth is better handled away from a sermon, maybe in a Bible Study, or around the dinner table. But there must be room for public discourse even in settings such as this. It is in settings such as this one where you are surrounded by brothers and sisters in Christ, the church family, in the predominant religion of the land, Christianity, that might be a good place to provoke some unity of purpose. It is in this setting where we just might remember that we are somebody and that you can actually as an individual be set free by the truth and so as a result be salt that isn't stale and keep on dreaming of a kingdom that Jesus wanted. This can actually happen to you.

Let me tell you about a man named Vernon Johns. Vernon grew up in the turn of the 20th century on a farm, but he was a voracious reader. He went to high school but didn't really end up finishing. But he was bright, he was brilliant and he knew he had potential so he applied to Oberlin. He got a letter back and in it the Dean of the school said that he neither had the grades nor the credits to be able to be accepted into Oberlin. He made his way to Oberlin and asked to meet with the dean. The Dean met with him and Johns said: do you want students with credits or with brains? The dean said, but how can you show me that you have brains. Johns went over picked up a Greek New Testament and started reading and interpreting it. He was admitted.

He was hired at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in the 1940's and right away began to be outspoken and spoke the truth about racial segregation. One Sunday he posted on the church sign in the midst of the lynchings that were taking place in Alabama, that he was going to be preaching on "It is safe to murder negroes". The local judge got wind of it and on Saturday night sent deputies to his house to arrest him. That evening the judge wanted to know what he was going to preach on. And Johns said, well, if you want to hear my sermon I like to pray before I preach. So they prayed. He said, well, right after I pray we normally take up the offering. The judge let him go.

But the leadership of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama did not like how Vernon Johns was stirring things up and making the community even more divisive than it already was in that precursor to the civil rights. So they voted to keep the peace and they ended up firing Vernon Johns knowing that God was going to put in their path a pastor who would not be nearly as divisive as Vernon Johns was. They found a pastor who had just graduated from Crozer Seminary in nearby Chester, PA. Who wants to guess what the name of that safe, status quo loving, don't rock the boat type pastor was? His name was Martin Luther King Jr.

When we hear Jesus say you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free it means that someone is in slavery. The person that Jesus is speaking about is his disciples, it is you, it is me. We are slaves to that which we are told is normal and is status quo and so we seek to find the point of least resistance. We think that lack of conflict is a sign of health and stability, when all along it just might be a bit of a sign of self-righteousness. You know, self-righteousness feels good for a moment, but then just like when you pee in your pants, it feels warm for a minute but then it gets cold and smells bad, and so it is with self-righteousness.

We are called to be truth tellers and those who are not afraid to be the salt of the earth. When you are the salt of the earth the most dangerous thing that can happen is that you lose your taste, it is what makes you unique. What makes us unique? We all have goals and visions of a church. My vision of this church is that we are a place where not everyone thinks the same, and yet people are not afraid to say what they think. We don't want to be a church where everyone looks the same, but we do want to be aware of our differences and embrace them. We want to be a church that doesn't teach divisiveness as a virtue, and yet still values the words of Ecclesiastes 3 which reminds us that to all things there is a season. We wanted to be a church that is still dreaming.

Jesus had a dream, and in his dream we were his utopia, his unrealized goal. Jesus' dream of us playing a primary role in his kingdom has not been realized yet. But along this journey of our life we find dreamers throughout the generations who teach us about truth and show us what it means to be salt. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a man sent from God to bring both truth and salt, and when you do that, it gets messy. From this church, and I pray maybe out of this body that is gathered today, there will be others who are equally feeling empowered to lead a movement that is based on truth and salt.

It needs to be a movement that is not afraid to dream. I think many people have stopped dreaming because they are disenchanted by the violence the divisiveness that they see around them. I think the dreaming for some has stopped as they see more of a nightmare when they recognize that they don't have the same opportunities that their friends have who maybe come from similar backgrounds but are just different in some other way. I hope you are still dreaming. God requires us to dream in order for us to realize our potential. Always pursue the truth and never forget to be the salt of the earth. Amen.

Sermon Text Originally Written for January 14, 2018

(See Note at Beginning of First Page)

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Job 38: 1-7, Romans 11:33-36

“What can we know about God?”

It is normally the confirmation kids that ask the really good questions, and this year we don't have any confirmation kids. I miss them asking me: Why does God not just allow but command the Israelites to massacre the people they conquer? Can you love science and be a Christian, what about other religions, are there ways in which God allows people to arrive at him through different means? You try to answer those questions.

I think we all get to the point where we recognize that there are limits to what we can know about God. Today, that is the center of Paul's premise. Who are we in respect to God? We find out that we are hand made, literally hand made by God. It is in light of this revelation that allows us to be who we are.

READ SCRIPTURE

When I was working in a hospital some years back I was paged and asked to go to the 12th floor. We were never real excited about that floor. It was the floor that housed the patients who had mental illnesses and I was asked to lead devotions that day. Before I started I said to the man in charge: am I supposed to say something to let on that I know that they have some real serious issues? The man responded, well, they know that they have serious issues and problems, they know that you know that they have serious issues and problems. What is more, he added, they know that you have real serious issues and problems too.

Isn't that the truth. You don't have to look far to see serious issues all around us. People say it is just few bad apples, we hear it is systemic, people say it is a problem up the chain of command. But in reality the reason it so shocks us is that we realize in these incidents we have looked into the depths of the human heart. We realize that all of us have a great capacity to do evil even and sometimes especially when we think we are doing good. We all have some real serious issues and problems.

When we think we don't have serious issues, when we are able to disregard our sin, to overlook our actions and inactions, when we substitute our wisdom for God's wisdom, when we think we know for better or for worse, then we think we know all there is to know.

What we can know about God is not harvested from what we can discover about ourselves. How many times are you told to just be yourself. This is especially true for preachers. They are encouraged to be themselves. Up here there is no one I would rather not be than myself. We should want to be like Jesus Christ. When we think our way is God's way without questions then we're in trouble and we have even bigger issues.

Paul asks us a series of questions here in Romans. They are: Who has known the mind of the Lord? Who has been his counselor? Remember Job, who had just questioned God and God comes back and says basically, suck it up. Be a man. Did you create yourself, do you have any idea what my ultimate plan for you is. Of course, not.

The most fundamental question that we can have as people is how is it all going to end? One of my new favorite movies is Big Fish. In this movie about a small town there is a haunted house which any small town worth its salt has. In that house lives a witch. The witch has the ability to tell you by lifting her patch how you are going to die. The protagonist goes up to her, unafraid and then the camera pans to him and he smiles and says, oh, so that's how it ends.

Throughout the rest of his life he finds himself in times of struggle, and trouble, but he is given a life of utmost confidence. Whenever he is in trouble he remembers, wait, this isn't how it ends is it. And then he can face life fearlessly. If we knew how it ended, just think of how differently we would live our lives. We should be able to live fearless lives, lives of knowing when and how it ends. Lives of knowing that God cannot be defeated. What we know of the future shapes what we do in the present.

Think of what maybe you would have done differently if you knew the future. When the girls were really young I had a conference in New York and it was over Halloween. I missed them dressed up in their costumes to go to this conference, it was a time that I will never get back. I know that now that that was a mistake and I wish I had attended a few more recitals and a few less meetings. For who has known the mind of God or knows what plans God has in store?

What can we know about God, we can know the ending. Jesus said I am the alpha and the omega, I am the beginning and the end. A few years back in a large church the children's choir was singing for Easter Sunday. They were told that once they sang then their parents were going to pick them up and take them to Sunday School. They were ingrained with that and they were told not to move until their parents came. Do not move. Well, they sang and when they had finished the parents fought their way through the Easter crowd and picked up their children

one by one. The father of one little girl was stuck in the back with the flow of traffic coming and going, it being Easter he was hung up there for quite a long time.

This little girl stood there, and stood there. She knew what she was supposed to do. She stuck her chin out and defiantly stood there because she knew that she was not going to move until her daddy got there. Every single eye in the church was on her, but she was not going to move. It seemed like the next moment her daddy just appeared and when she saw him she threw her arms around him and said: I just knew you would come, I just knew you would come. We know the end of the story, we know that Jesus Christ is going to come to take his children home.

But today the eyes of the whole world are upon us as the world is being ravaged by wars and rumors of war. Today the whole world is looking to hear what we are going to say about what is happening around us, and I am afraid that we have lost our prophetic voice. We have lost the courage to go out and live our lives as fearless Christians who know how it is going to end. What can we know about God? We know how it ends.

This knowledge and this confidence that we have in Jesus has to affect the way that we live our lives and has to affect our ethics as Christians. Without a relationship with Jesus Christ you don't know how it ends so you have to make it up as you go along. Imagine what life would be like without Jesus Christ to guide you and direct you. It would be a series of one event after another with no line connecting the dots. Jesus connects the dots for us so that we can see that our lives have meaning and a purpose, but even more importantly that we know how it ends.

Paul in these passages in Romans challenges those of us who would question God in such a way as to put ourselves in God's place without a relationship with Jesus Christ and especially those who are not aware of the ending. Brothers and sisters, we can live with confidence because we know how it is going to end.

Amen.