“Tell it Slant”

The Rev. Dr. Pete James
December 8, 2014
Daniel 7:13-14
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Today’s sermon title may seem cryptic. “Tell it Slant” is taken from an Emily Dickinson poem of 150 years ago. Her poem begins, “Tell all the truth and tell it slant.”

You may be thinking telling the truth slant sounds deceptive. That’s not Dickinson’s intent. There are two ways of telling the truth: directly and indirectly. The direct approach is best, although there are times when people can’t handle the truth.


Sometimes the truth told all at once as bold as brass is too much for us. That’s why it must be told gradually or on the slant. As Dickinson writes in the closing line of her brief poem, “The truth must dazzle gradually or every man blind.”

Jesus has no problem being direct in his ministry. “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. You must be born again. Take up your cross and follow me.” Yet people can’t handle the truth all at once so he tells it on the slant or indirectly over time.

Take the matter of Jesus as Messiah. As soon as Jesus speaks about his Messianic mission, people imagine him to be a
king riding on a war horse rather than a carpenter on a cross. Jesus has to devise ways to circumvent their carefully constructed defenses. That’s why he tells stories called parables and utilizes neglected Biblical imagery to engage their imaginations.

Such is the case with Jesus’ preferred self-designation—Son of Man. Jesus eschews the politically loaded phrase Son of God for the lesser known term Son of Man. Eighty two times in the gospels Jesus refers to himself this way.

In the Old Testament son of man can refer to anyone. It can denote any member of the human race. Every person is a son of man in the generic sense.

In the book of Daniel, Son of Man takes on added significance. Daniel has a dream in which he sees “one like the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven. He approaches the Ancient of Days and is led into his presence” (7.13). This phrase “Ancient of Days” is Daniel’s way of referencing God as the eternal, timeless one. He gives to this Son of Man “authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and people of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (7.14).

This Son of Man is no mere mortal. He’s an exalted figure; a figure of Messianic proportion. His dominion will be everlasting and his kingdom will never end. Could it be why Jesus employs this metaphor to describe his mission?

Let me take you to Jesus’ trial before Caiaphas who is the high priest and ruler of Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews. Caiaphas interrogates Jesus but he isn’t cooperating. Finally an exasperated Caiaphas asks, “Tell us plainly. Are you the Messiah?” “Yes,” Jesus answers, “and in the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mt. 26.64).

Caiaphas tears his robe to express his revulsion. “He has spoken blasphemy.” Caiaphas understands perfectly. Jesus is attributing deity to himself and the punishment for such blasphemy is death.
Jesus’ words are lifted straight out of Daniel’s prophecy. He is the exalted Son of Man who will one day come on the clouds of heaven. He will be given power and authority. He will sit at God’s right hand. His kingdom will last forever.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

Ah, Christmas! What an ideal time to consider what Jesus means to us. Yet there’s also something that conspires against us. This holiday we call Christmas bears only a faint resemblance to the real thing.

Here we go again! Get out the decorations. Shop ‘til you drop. Attend those obligatory office parties. There’s now only 17 shopping days left until Christmas. This shouldn’t come as any surprise to you. The ads have been running since Halloween!

The devil doesn’t have to tempt us with evil impulses. He also seduces us with inane, insignificant things. Busyness is one of the devil’s ploys. In C.S. Lewis’ book *Screwtape Letters*, senior demon Screwtape advises his apprentice Wormwood that spectacular wickedness isn’t needed if small sins will do the job. “Murder is no better than cards if can do the trick. The safest road to hell is the gradual one, the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.” If the devil can get us sidetracked on lesser things, he won’t bother with monstrous evil.

**How will you arrange your life for Christ this Christmas?** First: a word to those who may be new to this church and recent to things of faith.

I’m rereading the book of Revelation this Advent. Christmas in our tradition is as much about Jesus’ second coming as it is his first coming. The wild apocalyptic imagery of this prophetic book frightens some people. This is rather ironic given that its purpose is to encourage and fortify Christians in the face of persecution. This prophecy utilizes Daniel’s image of Jesus as the exalted Son of Man who says to
people, “Here I am. Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (3.19-20).

Jesus might have been knocking at the door of my heart early on but I thought my restlessness could be remedied by the pleasures of this world. When it dawned on me that Jesus was knocking at the door of my heart I opened my heart to receive him.

We sing at this season of the year, “Let every heart prepare him room.” If Jesus is knocking on at the door of your heart, by all means, open the door!

Our sermon series this Christmas season is called Unwrapping His Presence. Ordinarily, we think at this season of the year of unwrapping presents. God wants to give you a gift. This gift cannot be earned or bought. It’s not even for sale. God wants to give you the gift of his presence. Open the door and receive him!

Second: a word to those who have been connected to the church and the things of faith for quite some time. We talk often about establishing a spiritual growth plan. If this language is foreign to you, think of it like a business plan or exercise regimen. Maybe you’ve heard it said that a goal without a plan is just a wish. How will you intentionally order your life this Christmas in such a way as to receive what Christ has to give you?

We encourage you to think in terms of weekly and daily practices as an integral part of your spiritual growth plan. What we are doing here is a vital component of any spiritual growth plan. It is making corporate worship a weekly habit. Worship serves as a centering experience in my week. It brings me back on point with God again. Generosity is another weekly practice, symbolized in passing the plate. Some of you give on-line; others of you give your offering each Sunday in worship. These weekly practices flow out of a
practice called Sabbath-keeping. In this 24/7 world, we set aside one day in seven to rest from our work and engage in worship.

We also encourage you to incorporate daily practices into your **spiritual growth plan**. The centerpiece of a spiritual life on a daily basis is prayer and Scripture meditation. That’s why we’ve prepared a daily devotional which supplies daily Bible readings with accompanying questions. This Advent our devotional features 35 different titles like Son of Man that are attributed in Scripture to Jesus.

We urge you to center your day in prayer. Some of you who are morning people will find it enriching to begin your day in prayer. Some will prefer to devote time in the middle portion of your day to prayer. Those night owls among us will find evening prayer beneficial as you examine the day and contemplate tomorrow. Consider the John Chapman’s pithy advice a century ago, “Pray as you can, not as you can’t.”

We urge you to be creative about these daily practices. Let me offer you two suggestions for your consideration. The first has to do with forgiveness. Why not consider someone you can release from your indebtedness. We just prayed for God to forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. So, let’s apply ourselves to the debtor part. Who is a debtor who has said or done against you? You harbor bitterness against this person. This person may not even be aware of your hostility. Why not practice forgiveness as a part of your Christmas tradition this year?

My second suggestion has to do with music. I was shopping with Chris recently. Chris cuts me lots of slack in shopping; she knows I can handle about an hour or so of this sort of thing. About an hour into this experience, I announced that I was done for the night. Chris said she was just getting started, but she graciously conceded to my request. The next morning it dawned on me why I couldn’t handle the shopping. I couldn’t stand the lame, piped-in music. The secular carols are
so bad, like fingers on a chalk board. I asked Chris about it. She said she didn’t even hear the music.

Here’s my point: we’ve got the best music around when it comes to Christmas. Every serious choir and orchestra wants to do sacred Christmas music at this season of the year. The Christmas carols, Handel’s Messiah, you name it. Why not incorporate Christmas music into your plan this year? I commend our Glorious Sounds Christmas Concert next Sunday and the Messiah sing-long the following Sunday.

Some of you will say in response to this spiritual growth plan, “I’m too busy.” I say baloney! We always make time for things that are important to us. How will you arrange your life to make Christ part of your Christmas celebration this year? Maybe you need to start at the beginning and open the door to receive Christ. Maybe you need to create a plan to make Christ an integral part of your life this year.