

January 2024



From the Bishop:

I was listening to the news a few days ago when I heard that Israel had bombed Gaza using artificial intelligence called “The Gospel.” I thought at first that I had misheard. Surely an AI program designed to bomb people is not named “gospel.” But, horrifically, I had heard correctly. As Steve Inskeep from NPR’s *Morning Edition* reports on December 14, “The system is called The Gospel. And basically, it takes an enormous quantity of surveillance data, crunches it all together and makes recommendations about where the military should strike.”

Pause right here and read the above paragraph again. I mean it. Read it again.

A weapon of war is named The Gospel. Dear Beloveds of Christ, I cannot emphasize enough how bone-chilling and nauseous it makes me feel that a word designed to bring hope and love and peace and joy to this world – *Gospel* – is being used to kill.

I don’t know who first named this system “gospel.” I don’t know what marketing expert or even what acronym “gospel” might mean in the AI world. I could not find the origin. But what I do know is that this system is now being used for something horrendous. This is so contrary to the first words from the gospel of Mark, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

As you might be aware, the word gospel is translated into English as “good news.” When Martin Luther was struggling about the laws of God and feeling that he was a sinner beyond redemption, he recounts in many of his writings how his understanding of God changed as he read Paul’s letter to the Romans. He suddenly realized that it was not up to him, but up to God. God was the one who redeemed. God was the one who forgave. Luther suddenly experienced what God through Jesus does for all of us: Through Jesus Christ, God provides comfort for the terrified, forgiveness for the sinner, and faith for the doubting. Martin Luther was overwhelmed with God’s grace and was immersed in the Gospel.

Following this earth-shattering understanding of the Good News of Jesus, Luther taught, preached and wrote about this insight every chance he got. In 1521, Philip Melancthon condensed Luther’s insight to this provocative sentence: “The gospel is a promise.” To this day, Lutherans continue to bear witness to the whole church and world that the gospel is a promise, truly good news of God’s mercy and love in Christ, received by faith alone.

In these days when words are manipulated by those in power, when evil seems to be gaining ground, when neighbor turns against neighbor, may we remember and experience God’s grace. May we be enveloped in God’s love. And, in response, may we, in our words and actions, move against the forces that are contrary to all that Jesus stands for.

For we are called, my dear Beloveds, through God’s grace towards God’s promise of wholeness and true peace. *This is the Gospel.*

As the prophet Isaiah proclaims of God in chapter 42, “I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

May it be so. May it be so.

We look towards 2024 in faith, holding God’s promise of Gospel.

+ Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee
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From the VEEP

“When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.”

+ Matthew 2:10

We have a tradition in my family that we began when the children were young, about 25 years ago. Each year, we choose a different country and research their Christmas celebrations and traditions. We learn about the typical holiday fare and do our best to recreate a traditional Christmas meal. Not only has this practice been fun, it has been educational and enlightening, as well. One of the things we learned over the years is that different people celebrate different aspects of the Christmas story and they celebrate at different times. Christmas, after all, is a season not a day. Some cultures have special celebrations in the days leading up to Christmas day. St. Lucia’s day in Scandinavia and Las Posadas in Latin America are some examples. Others focus their festivities on the twelve days following Christmas and leading up to Epiphany or Three Kings Day on January 6. In countries in the southern hemisphere, Christmas occurs in summer, so their traditions look a little different than we experience in our more northern climes – picnics and barbeques rather than cocoa and cookies. This tradition has opened us to all the different ways Christians express the overwhelming joy of a God’s abundant grace incarnate.

One of our favorites was the year we learned about the traditions in Poland. I had a dear friend, now departed, who shared the traditions of her heritage with us. Celebrations begin in Poland on December 6, the Day of Saint Nicholas. The major meal is held on December 24 after a morning of fasting. The feast begins when the first star is spotted. My friend Sue shared that in her family, it was always the youngest child that was tasked with keeping their eyes peeled and, on overcast days, they used a flashlight to make sure the feast could go on. We also set an extra place at the table in case a lonely wanderer should be in need of food. The twelve-course meal that follows is a real treat. Every time I remember that year, I remember Sue and her generosity of spirit.

As we enter January, right in the middle of the Twelve Days of Christmas, what are your traditions? Is your tree already down and the ornaments put away? Are you just getting started and looking forward to the twelve drummers drumming in a few days? Do you have a Twelfth Night party planned? Are you looking forward to the season of Epiphany? However you celebrated, I pray that your Christmas season was filled with overwhelming joy and the perfect love that casts out fear. In the words of John Lennon:

So this is Christmas
And what have you done?
Another year over
And a new one just begun...

A very merry Christmas
And a happy New Year
Let's hope it's a good one
Without any fear

As an aside: We actually began this tradition because my brother-in-law wanted to make tamales, so we started our world tour with Mexico. Ironically, when he discovered what a time intensive process tamale making is, he pivoted to purchasing that particular treat. Luckily, over two decades later, my daughter brought into our family a wonderful woman of Mexican descent who has helped us all make tamales as she has merged her traditions with ours.

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