

How many of you have ever been on a Snipe Hunt? The way we would ‘hunt snipe’ in Louisiana was to invite a newly arrived immigrant from the city or up north, out to a bean field to catch the delicious, but elusive snipe!

The best place to find them was some bean field way out in the country, and the only way to catch these snipe, we would tell the unsuspecting “victim”/hunter, would be for us to chase the snipe from one end of the field and they would run toward the flashlight that was in the croker sack he or she would be holding, and when the snipe are all in, just close up the bag.

So off we’d go to the other end of the field and we’d start ‘hooping and hollerin’ all the way back to town to the A&W drive-in, and enjoy hamburgers and root beer for a couple of hours!

All the while, there they were in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of night, left holding the bag!

That’s how some people see the Christian faith – just one big snipe hunt – promises a lot, but you’re left holding the bag.

Or to put it modern terminology – you’re holding a bag of fake news.

Just in case you are not familiar with the term “fake news,” it is the deliberate attempt to publish disinformation with the hope people will believe the fake news is truth, pass it on as truth, react to it as truth, and take actions based on the belief it is truth.

A more sophisticated snipe hunt, if you will.

Maybe you’ve been the victim of some religious snipe hunt – feeling like you’re all alone, middle of the night in the middle of nowhere, left holding the bag of fake news.

When life has tumbled in on you, when faith is stretched thin, when you have to wonder why you believed it in the first place.

It happens to the best of us. Maybe you’ve read about the letters of Mother Theresa. She wrote about her doubts, her feelings of emptiness and distance from Jesus Christ.

She had received the promise of Christ, had experienced the deep joy and peace of the reality of Jesus in her life, and that is why the emptiness was so difficult for her to fathom.

For the Thessalonians, they, too, felt a distance, an emptiness. They had given themselves to Jesus Christ.

They had been promised Jesus would return. The fact was, he had not returned. Had they accepted Paul’s message of fake news? Were they holding an empty bag of religious snipe?

Paul’s word to them, to us, is that this gospel of Jesus Christ is not a snipe hunt: “Our coming to you was not in vain,” is the way he puts it.

We never told you God’s truths to flatter you or to get something for ourselves. We gave you, he says, not an empty bag to hold on to.

We gave you the gospel of God, the good news who is Jesus Christ, and we gave you ourselves.

This is the truth of what John would write some 35 years later, “The word became flesh and dwelt among us...”

That is the gospel given us – to this church that began some 200 years ago, to each of you, maybe in this place, maybe in another place, but it’s the same gospel, the word made flesh.

But we seem to face the same reality that John wrote about when he said that the word 'was in the world, yet the world did not know him, that Jesus came to his own, that is, humanity, and his own people did not accept him.'

Was that the case some two thousand years ago, as it is now, that so many people simply do not care about "objective facts" as much as they care about feelings when it comes to forming their beliefs, their faith, their way of life?

Or is it a modern phenomenon, this cultural condition of 'post-truth' in which people are more interested in what their favorite radio, podcast, or television political or religious or economic or whatever talk show host says than in actual truth, or facts, what the evidence really shows.

And you know it's a cultural condition when it makes the comic strips in the daily paper! Maybe you saw the recent "Non Sequitur" cartoon that pointed to the Oxford Dictionary of the English Language recognition of "post-truth" as a real English word.

It means "an adjective defined as relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."

As a theologian, I am especially concerned about American Christians' seeming lack of interest in truth.

My best example is self-help guru Ashleigh Brilliant's book title, "I Have Abandoned My Search for Truth and Am Now Looking for a Good Fantasy."

He may have meant this tongue-in-cheek, but I think the book title well describes the attitude of many Americans, including religious ones, and including among them Christians.

Just consider all of America's "new" or "alternative" religions, "invented religions" if you will.

These are what Roger Olson, a professor of Christian theology and ethics, says are religious movements and organizations not based on a reform of some older tradition but apparently simply invented by a founder considered a prophet or guru or whatever.

You know them, those "religions" birthed by science fiction or prospecting for prosperity by deceiving people into thinking some new spiritual technique is the key to happiness, wealth, power.

But don't for a minute think this is limited to so-called "cults and new age religions."

There are many Christians who have been infected by this cultural condition that disregards truth in favor of personal feelings or traditions or 'well, that's my opinion!'

Increasingly, doctrine and ethics are treated as opinion at best. If a doctrine, for example, doesn't feel right, then it is at best unimportant. If an ethical stance calls for change of mind or lifestyle, it must be wrong.

When "Truth" disappears or is simply brushed away and ignored, then all we're left with is holding an empty bag all by ourselves in the middle of nowhere.

For Christians living in this post-truth culture, we need to hear again John's commitment to truth, "*that the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*"

Dag Hammarskjöld, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, said it wonderfully in his daily prayer:

*O God, Give us
A pure heart
That we may see Thee,
A humble heart
That we may hear Thee,
A heart of love
That we may serve Thee,
A heart of faith
That we may live Thee.*

Nothing vain, nothing for greed, nothing but the gospel,— John lived with this truth: the good news of Jesus of Nazareth, a real man in a real world.

Jesus is not the product of our theology. Jesus is not a development of our doctrines. Jesus is not some word we pretend to chase into a snipe hunt bag.

Jesus is a real man in a real world – the mystery of the son of God come to earth. When he was hungry, he ate; when he was thirsty, he drank; he slept when he was tired, and he would sweat as he walked those hot, dusty roads.

He laughed at good stories, and he told good stories himself. He had friends whom he loved and who loved him.

Jesus is a real man who is the son of God who lived in our real world, and Paul gave that gospel of God to the Thessalonian church and now we have that gospel

We live Jesus Christ as we give ourselves in his name to others – beyond the walls of worship, away from creedal God-talk into actual deeds of God-walk – where our faith lives and grows in a real world with real people where opinions differ, feelings matter, traditions reside, and things just do not always go as planned.

We live the truth of Jesus Christ.

Let me ask you to try something. If you will begin every day saying over and over within yourself:

*I am committed to God,
And I have faith in God;
I am a child of God;
God is with me.
I am God's partner;
Working with God and for God,
And God is working through me.*

Let me say it again:

*I am committed to God,
And I have faith in God;
I am a child of God;
God is with me.
I am God's partner;
Working with God and for God,
And God is working through me.*

It will change the way you work, the way you act, the way you speak, how you relate to others.

The gospel will be true in your life, and no one will be left holding the bag. They and you will be holding on to each other, living the word made flesh.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.