

Faithful

Titus 1:1-9

The church and the world don't see time the same way. The world starts celebrating Christmas as soon as Thanksgiving is over, the church says Christmas only begins Christmas day and lasts for twelve days, after the world has moved on. The church encourages us to spend time in worship not looking at a clock. The world wants us to check our watches and phones so we can move on to the next thing. Time doesn't always work the same way.

We see that here today. Since the Sunday after Epiphany is when we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, and that used to be the Sunday before classes started for the spring semester at Iowa State, things used to line up neatly. The new life of baptism and the start of the semester thematically went together well. We began a new semester remembering that we have been marked by God, called by name, made children of God and adopted into God's family. A new start, a new beginning, lined up together.

Now post-pandemic, Iowa State has a longer winter term between the fall and spring semesters. In order to fit that in, the winter break goes a week longer. Now, instead of starting the week before MLK Jr day, it starts the week of MLK Jr day, which means it started on a Tuesday. And this year, the dangerous cold gave a virtual start to the semester, for an even stranger beginning.

But now, we're two weeks past remembering the baptism of Jesus. We're past MLK Jr day, and the presidential inauguration. And instead of just moving onto the usual lessons, today we remember Titus, one of Paul's coworkers. What does that have to do with the beginning of the semester? More than you might think at first glance.

For me, it brings back fond memories. The chapel at my alma mater, Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis, is called the Chapel of Saint Timothy and Saint Titus. Timothy and Titus, you see, were pastors in the early Church and coworkers of the apostle Paul, and so were good people for us to reflect on as we went through our studies. In fact, the stained-glass window that used to be behind the altar in the chapel had beautifully detailed images of two men robed in white. One is depicted as a smooth-faced young man holding a shepherd's crook (the symbol of the pastoral office) and a palm branch (the symbol of Christian martyrs). The other is portrayed as an older man with gray beard and bald head. Both of them were pastors, and together they represent the student body of Concordia Seminary, both "first" and "second" career students. Timothy was the young one, and Titus was the old one.

We really don't know all that much about Titus. Despite being one of Paul's friends and coworkers, he's not mentioned in the book of Acts during Paul's missionary journeys described there. We know that he's a Greek believer, and that sometimes created tension when he was in more Jewish areas, especially with the strict Jewish Christians when he accompanied Paul to Jerusalem. We know that he accompanied Paul on his final journey to Corinth, because Paul's second letter to Corinth speaks of him going. We know that at some later stage, while Paul was in prison, Titus was sent to Dalmatia. It seems that Titus was Paul's go-to man, his problem solver, his fixer. When there had some chronic church problem, Titus was the one who was sent to clean up the mess. In Corinth, in Ephesus, in Crete. Titus put things in order and appointed church leaders to keep things that way.

The role we know Titus held the most, and the subject of the letter that bears his name, is his time on the island of Crete. He certainly had his hands full organizing the new churches there. The people on the island of Crete were not the easiest to work with, and Titus became somewhat discouraged. Crete was an island known for its lies and its liars. Later in the letter, Paul reminds Titus, "One of Crete's own prophets has said it: 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, idle bellies'. There was a Greek verb "to Cretanize," which means "to lie and cheat. Truthiness and disputes over fact checking would not have been unknown there. Despite their reputation, though, the Cretans were still loved by God. They still needed to be told about the good news of Jesus, about the truth of God's forgiveness for them. And that's why Titus was there.

God, who cannot lie and will not lie, is bringing truth to Crete through Paul and Titus. And this truth is not meant to sit on a shelf to be admired. It is not simply a weapon to win arguments. Truth is not static and it certainly is not stagnant. It does more than set the record straight. Truth bursts on the scene and changes everything. Truth leads to godliness.

God doesn't lie. He can be trusted absolutely. The Gospel Paul preached, the Gospel Titus preached, is founded on the rock-solid basis of the reliability, the trustworthiness, the faithfulness of the one true God. This was extraordinary news to the average first-century person, who was used to there being many gods, none of whom could be relied upon. Crete was especially connected with Zeus, the head of the Greek gods who was known for his unfaithfulness to his wife, Hera, and for changing his mind.

Part of the 'good news' of the early Christian gospel was that the One True God, the God of Israel, was now making himself known in and

to all the world as the utterly reliable God, the one you could trust. This, in fact, is the force of the opening verse Paul writes to Titus. Paul introduces himself as a slave of this God, and an apostle – an emissary, an accredited herald – of Jesus as the true king. The status he has in relation to God and Jesus comes directly from 'the faith of God's chosen people' and 'the knowledge of the truth that goes with godliness'. Paul claims that in Jesus as Messiah the age-old faith of Israel has now been vindicated, that the gospel message is rooted in God's faithfulness to his promises and shaped by the ancient Israelite beliefs.

One reason Paul had left Titus on the island of Crete was that he might organize the local churches and "set in order" the things that were lacking. That phrase is a medical term; it was applied to the setting of a crooked limb. The Greek word *tupos* ("pattern") gives us our English word *type*. The word originally meant "an impression made by a die." Titus was to live so that his life would be like a "spiritual die" that would impress itself on others. This involved good works, sound doctrine, a seriousness of attitude, and sound speech that no one—not even the enemy—could condemn.

That's why the elders and overseers Titus appoints can't be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. Just as Jesus is a pattern for Paul and Titus to imitate, so are the church leaders they appoint to be patterns, impress their lives on those under their care.

The overarching pattern for Titus, then, is faithfulness. To him, Paul wrote, "Be faithful! It's always too soon to quit!" Paul used the Greek word *pistos* ("faithful") at least seventeen times in the three letters we call the Pastoral Epistles, the two letters to Timothy and the one to Titus. Be faithful to the Word, be

faithful to your task, be faithful to the people to whom you minister. God is faithful!

Being faithful sets a pattern. That's what Titus does. Titus has what it takes to be a steward of the plan. Take his cues from God's design, unmoved by fads and fashion and felt needs. And that's what he's called to do as he appoints leaders who will be faithful and true, to God and to the people under their care.

And that points us to why Titus is a good person to reflect on as a new semester begins. Being faithful in attending classes and completing homework assignments is a good way to start the semester well. (Even if one of my college advisors told us to get behind early so we had more time to catch up.) Being truthful in a world full of lies and deepfakes and partisan fact checking makes you stand out and builds trust. Spending too much time partying isn't going to help you pass your classes. Being self-controlled and disciplined will.

Like Titus on Crete, we live in a world where it's hard to tell the truth. People will say things like "I've made up my mind. Don't confuse me with the facts." But that makes the message Titus shares even more important. In a world that is so often faithless, be faithful. In a world full of lies, be truthful. Keep doing what God gives you to do. Stay faithful. God is faithful to you.

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