



John 16:7-15  
A Very Different Christmas  
The Spirit's Gift

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Video Clip from The Matrix. If you're reading online, you can view the clip here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zE7PKRjrid4>.

What is real? What is reality? How can we have our eyes opened to reality? Why is this important? These are all questions that the 1999 movie, The Matrix revolved around. It's like a philosophy class wrapped around an action movie. And today's message will attempt to answer these kinds of questions. If you question the importance of seeing, living in, and understanding "reality" then you must have time travelled to today from at *least* 30 or 40 years ago, if not more. **But especially in the last number of years, the question of "what is reality?" has become more and more of a serious issue that people are intentionally thinking about.**

For instance, this last week I saw this headline: "Split-screen America: Alternate realities on display as House votes to impeach Trump." The phrase, "Alternate realities" is *not* a phrase that would have been uttered all *that* long ago. We've invented "virtual reality" – whatever exactly that's supposed to mean; and we have "reality television shows" – but you have to wonder: are they really all that "real"?

Then there's the recent phenomenon called "deep fakes." It's a technology that allows photographs to be faked to the point that you cannot tell the difference between a real and a fake one without inspecting it really closely – and even then it's very, very difficult to tell the difference. There was an article in the Seattle Times about this a couple weeks ago or so. For instance, I have four pairs of photos to show you. Each pair has one real person, and one that is a "deep fake" – it is computer-generated. Which of these pictures do you think is real, and which is fake:



*Answers: 1. Left is fake, right is real In 2, 3, and 4, all of them have the real photo on the left, and fake one on the right.*

This technology is starting to apply to videos as well, so that you can make it look like someone said something or did something that they didn't actually say or do. There's such a concern about this that the University of Washington and Washington State University have started a joint venture to study this phenomenon of deep fakes, and especially how it impacts our politics. Or, did I just make that up? 😊 What's real? What's fake? Can you imagine Huskies and Cougars collaborating? It's probably fake. Actually, it is real: Huskies and Cougars are working together.<sup>1</sup> It's proof that God exists! 😊

In fact, I have a **photo** here that is supposedly of me and the University of Washington President, Anna-Marie Cauce. What do you think? Is that an authentic photo taken with both of us actually there, or is it fake? Is that the kind of company I keep – Presidents of major Universities? Real or Fake?



*Answer: That photo is real.* And, we're even in an Advent series of messages (**Sermon Series Slide Here**) where we're being asked to both suspend reality *and* see reality for what it is all at the same time. This idea comes from a short little book that's giving the framework of this series, and it's called, "A

Very Different Christmas: What Are You Hoping For This Year?” And so in this series we’re imagining an alternate reality where we are in the heavenly living room with God the Father, Son, and Spirit on Christmas Day, exchanging gifts as we sit around the Trinity’s Christmas Tree. (Heaven is real...God is real...but I don’t know that there’s a living room with a Christmas tree in it...and none of us are actually there yet if there is.) So there’s some imaginary, non-reality stuff going on here as we picture the environment in which we find ourselves.

**But the gifts that are exchanged are very real.** God the Father’s gift is to us, and it’s a baby, Jesus, who gives us clarity about who God really is and what He’s like. Jesus’ gift is to the Father and is the gift of righteousness – a life lived perfectly in tune with His heavenly Father’s will. Our gift is to the Father as well, and it piggybacks on Jesus’ gift, and it’s the gift of faith – believing in Jesus and his gift of righteousness and that God sees us as righteous when we believe...and actually living out that belief which is then faith. It’s a gift that blesses God, but also benefits us.

Today we look at the gift that the Spirit gives. And the Spirit’s gift is to us, much as the Father’s gift is to us as well. And the Spirit’s gift is the gift of... reality. **Or, perhaps more properly put: The Spirit’s gift is the gift of seeing reality.** In the movie clip we just saw from the Matrix, Morpheus offered two pills to Nero. The blue pill keeps him seeing things the way he always has the red one gives him a view of reality, of the truth. He says, “Like everyone else you were born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind...All I’m offering is the truth, nothing more.” It’s an opportunity to see things as they actually are...to see beyond the surface to the deeper truths and realities of life.

Similarly, the Spirit offers the gift of reality – to see what lies beneath the surface – and without swallowing some pill being handed to you by a stranger in dark sunglasses. We see this gift on display in the birth narrative of Jesus through the angelic visitations both in dreams and in person to different people, as the angels guide them into the plans of God. This is one thing that the Holy Spirit does as well: it leads us and guides us, and they all work together in doing this.

So Mary's pregnancy is a shock to her and to Joseph. Their initial reaction, like it might be for any of us, is one of concern, shock, dismay, disappointment, uncertainty, and more. He thinks he should leave her – in their culture, to break off an engagement was akin to divorce so that's the word that's used. She's confused about how and why this is happening. **But the Spirit, through the angelic visits, opens their eyes up to see what is really happening, to see reality, to see the bigger picture and understand what God is doing in them and *through* them as well.**

We see this same gift of seeing reality later on as well with the wise men who are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. You may recall that Herod told the wise men to return to him once they found where this King of the Jews was born, so he could go and pay homage as well. But the wise men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod because Herod has more sinister and selfish reasons for wanting to know where Jesus and his earthly parents are. The Spirit helps them see the truth, below the surface.

Just a bit later, Mary and Joseph are warned in a dream to flee to Egypt because of Herod's jealousy that a king had been born; and then the Spirit tells them when it's time to return back to Nazareth. So in all these things we see the Spirit opening the eyes of these people to see reality – to see the deeper purpose and meaning of what God is doing in and through them, as well as what others are doing, and therefore to see what they should do. **And once they see the reality of what God is doing, they have a transformation of their hearts and follow the leading of the Spirit and live into God's plans.**

Later in Jesus' life he gives a great explanation of what the Spirit does, which is our Scripture passage for today. He's told the disciples that he will be leaving them, but coming in his place is the Advocate, the Spirit of truth. Both "Advocate" and "Spirit of truth" are names for what we simply call the Holy Spirit. And Jesus is saying that the Spirit will help them see reality... see the truth... about three things in particular that he names here: sin, righteousness, and judgment. So: **The Spirit helps us to see the reality of our sin, our lack of righteousness, and the judgment that we face because**

**of our sin and lack of righteousness.** In fact, Jesus says that the Spirit will prove the world to be wrong about these things. The world thinks sin and righteousness are both no big deals, and that judgments shouldn't be made. That's different than what Scripture tells us: Sin is a problem, righteousness matters, and we will be judged (Satan already is according to what Jesus says here). So the world's sense of reality is misguided, and the Spirit will open our eyes up to the reality of these things. By the way, in light of the message from a couple weeks ago, note that Jesus says, "[The Spirit will judge]... about righteousness, because I am going to the Father where you can see me no longer." Remember, we said a couple weeks ago that the gift Jesus gives is what? Righteousness. Here he says so himself. It's why he's going to His Heavenly Father.

So the Spirit helps us see the truth of the matter...to see below the surface. That doesn't mean reality is easy. Mary and Joseph, for example, went through a really challenging period – He thought to break off the engagement so there was relational challenge; there was the move to Egypt, then back to Nazareth, there were undoubtedly questions from their friends and family about the pregnancy, and so forth. Lot's of difficulty! But understanding the reality of the situation gave them the courage to follow God's plan and do what they needed to do...to live by faith (which we talked about last week).

The Spirit's still does that...still gives this gift. **Seeing the reality of our lives – our motives, our thoughts, our actions, our interactions with others, our own feelings and mental and emotional health – being real about those things is important.** We need the Spirit to help us see reality and acknowledge it and live into it. A depressed person needs to face reality. An alcoholic needs to face reality. A student who's failing in school needs to face reality. A person who's miserable in their job needs to face reality. A husband and wife who are not communicating well need to face reality. If your reality is described by any of those things, or something else that needs to be acknowledged: God's Spirit is moving even right here and right now to open your eyes up to reality. **The Holy Spirit still moves in people's lives to see reality: who we are and who God is. That's the gift the Spirit brings.** And then you can take the steps needed to live in reality, to deal with it. And to help you take those steps, depending on what the reality is you need to

acknowledge: it may mean seeing a counselor, or sharing with an accountability partner or a Bible Study, or your spouse...you may need help to live into a new and better reality. You certainly don't need to take a red pill like Nero did in the Matrix to see reality. God's Spirit helps us see the prison we live in, the prison that our sin keeps us in...and to see the reality of God with us and what God has done for us in Jesus. The Spirit opens our eyes up to those realities, and invites us to live into what is real; to live into the new and transformative future to which God is calling you, me, our families, our church, our denomination, and beyond. And ultimately, that is freeing. There is freedom in seeing reality and living into it.

**(Sermon Series Slide Here)** So what's the reality that the Spirit is showing you? Let the birth narrative of Jesus, and the responses of the people in it (especially Mary and Joseph, but others too), inspire you to live in reality. Let's live with the Spirit's leading, and receive the gift of reality. There are no promises it will be easy...but ignorance is not bliss. Pretending everything is ok when it's not, is not living in reality. Ignoring that God is with us is not living in reality. Living in reality is how he designed us to live both now and into eternity. So let's receive the Spirit's gift this Christmas, so we might see and live into reality. Let's pray...Amen.

i <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/maybe-we-can-get-this-right-for-the-rest-of-the-country-how-uw-and-wsu-plan-to-fight-the-digital-deepfakes/>