

God's Word

#5 of Sermon Series

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Isaiah 55:10-13, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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The last part of this sermon series is about the word of God. This week I'll explore how we experience God's word in very broad but also personal terms beyond the words of scripture, and next week we'll look at the Bible as the word of God.

That the word of God is more than the words of the Bible seems pretty obvious. The readings from Isaiah and Matthew's Gospel both talk about God's word, but neither one is talking about Holy Scripture. Each is talking about the impact of God in the world and using God's word as a metaphor for that impact. It is as if God's word is the same as God's power. Listen to Isaiah: "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." God's word is active; God's word makes things happen. The whole Biblical understanding of God's word is so much more potent than the way we usually think about words. In the Biblical understanding, it is God's word that creates: "Let there be light!" The whole creation comes into being through God's word. In a sense, God's word is God. And so Jesus, as God in human flesh, came also to be understood as God's word: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" – so begins the majestic prologue to John's Gospel – Jesus as the divine Word or Logos of God.

God's word in creation, God's word in human flesh: How do we experience God's word today? Sometimes we think of God's word in terms of prophetic speech – stirring words in the public arena that inspire and galvanize people to action, to change, just as the ancient prophets did, those brave souls who spoke truth to power, who saw themselves as channels for God's word. Of course, now, as then, we must be on guard against false prophets, but nonetheless, we tune our ears to our politicians, preachers and other leaders to hear something beyond slogan and cant. We look for words that lead to action and change in the direction of life worth living and a world worth saving.

God's word can indeed come from today's prophets, as long as they, and we, remember that no one person has a special claim to speaking for God. Our prophets can speak truth, but never the whole truth. It is very, very hard in this electoral season of endless coverage of the most trivial slips and cynical attacks to listen for God's word in the political sphere. What does our nation need to hear, and where is truth being told that will lead to actual solutions of some of our problems? We should be listening for this.

Often it is in literature, especially poetry, that we experience the word of God. How many of you have a very favorite passage or poem, maybe worn and folded and stored in your wallet, or cherished as something you want read at a family wedding or funeral? Here is a poem that felt like the word of God to me, even God's blessing. My friend in Maine read it to me the summer after I separated from Tom, and having ended a long and difficult marriage herself, she choked up as she read. The poem is "The Journey" by Mary Oliver.

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice –
though the whole house began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do –
determined to save
the only life you could save.

But experiences when we feel we meet the word of God go far beyond actual words. For many, it is the whole wider world of the arts that serves as a channel for God's word – great music, dance, painting and sculpture. There is the beautiful understated sculpture in the Bishop's Garden at the cathedral called "The Prodigal". The father embracing his son expresses so well God's utter acceptance and love of even the most wayward of us. I came across the saying somewhere that "art is worthless unless it plants a measure of splendor in a person's heart". What a radical standard by which to gauge art! But such art, art which plants splendor, changes hearts, shapes lives, makes things happen – like the word of God.

We also hear God's word in our own words – words we speak and words spoken to us. Our own words have enormous power. By our own words, we can make things happen; we can cause powerful feelings, we can express ideas. Our words can devastate or lift us up. Most often, this is when words give voice to deep truths, when words are straight from the heart. Sometimes things we thought inexpressible come out in words, or things we have buried so deeply – until we say them – and then they become God's truth for us.

Back in 1996, when I so much wanted to stay at St. Mark's and become Rector, most of my advisory committee were hugely sympathetic and encouraging, taking my side against the system. But finally one man who'd been silent all evening spoke out, quietly and forcefully. He said it would be better for me and for St. Mark's to leave. He said that only by leaving might I possibly be called back, but if not, I'd have taken the first, hardest step away towards a new call. That night, driving home down Route 295 under a full moon, I was amazed to hear my own voice saying out loud, "Now I get to have a life!" as a wave of gratitude washed over me. I could stop staying stuck in a narrow vision of what my life was or ought to be. It was a wild feeling of freedom – out of nowhere, or from God, and I do think of times like that as times when God speaks to us. The man's words rang so true, and based on them I changed course. Something happened that night. God's word does not return to God empty, but accomplishes that which God purposes.

All these and more are ways of experiencing what we might consider God's word, even though none of them are scriptures. I often wonder why, then, we almost never include readings other than scripture in our Sunday worship. We do at weddings – often poetry is read along with the Bible. Sometimes we do at funerals. Once in Advent here, we added a poem to the Bible readings each Sunday. Carolyn Peirce suggested it and came up with wonderful poems to open up the meaning of the season along with the scriptures. I hope this happens again. I wish worship communities would experiment with more possibilities for the liturgy of the word and not act as though if it's not in the Bible, God isn't speaking! As we'll see next week, there's plenty in the Bible that is very hard to accept as God's word.

For me, God's word is spoken when it comes from our human hearts when they are most open, serious and true. I think we know the holiness of it when we hear it – in our own voice or in someone else's. Because God does not actually speak, God's word must come to us in other ways, through other voices. It is the very silence of God that urges our own human response – our own speaking of the word, our own listening for the word.

Our own listening is where Jesus goes with his Parable of the Sower that we heard in the Gospel. We hear of all the possible problems when the seed is sown – the greedy birds, the rocky soil, the burning sun, the briar patch, and finally the fertile soil yielding a rich harvest. It's very easy to try to fit ourselves, or, even more fun, to fit others into the various categories of hearers of God's word – and we preachers have been there and done that a million times.

Instead of all that, isn't it more helpful to simply recognize that we hear God's voice in so many different ways, and so many things can get in the way. To listen for God is an attentive, reverent way of living. It involves waiting and discerning and checking with others. God's word, however we hear it, is life-giving; God's word prompts us to loving actions; God's word calls us away from what is violent, selfish or cruel. God's word became flesh in Jesus and lived among us, full of grace and truth. That word, in all its splendid power and mystery still lives among us, still full of grace and truth. And, as Jesus urged his hearers, I urge us all "Let anyone with ears, listen." Amen.