

A sermon for the second Sunday in Lent

How does God do what he does?

The book of Isaiah was a favorite of Martin Luther because, compared to the rest of the Old Testament, it has a strong view of sin and death and proclaims that God is in control of history. Isaiah 45:1: "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus." The ancient emperor Cyrus was the tyrant of all of Persia and yet he is the Lord's anointed one. And then in Isaiah 45:7 the Lord says: "I make weal and I make woe." In spite of how things may seem, the Lord has power over good and evil and is in control of history.

We can sum it up this way: The Hebrew people did not care about doctrine. They did not wonder about omnipotence and God being all powerful and all knowing. They did not care about that. For them what mattered is that the Lord is God, and God is the Lord. That is all you need to say, and that is all that is to be said.

There is an old saying: Philosophy bakes no bread. You could say that about theology as well: Theology bakes no bread. It does not produce food on the table. It does not pay the bills. It is about thinking. And yet baking bread implies thinking and a decision about whether life is worth living.

We ask: What is it that God does? As the one who is in control, how does he do it? What does the book of Isaiah say about that: How does he do it?

He does it with the word and that comes back then to the whole matter of how we look at words in our culture, the Western world, at least in this era. We say: Well, words are just words. Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

In Shakespeare's Hamlet (Act II), the elderly Polonius asks young Hamlet: "What are you reading?" And Hamlet answers: "Words, words, words, just words." Hamlet's witty answer both discounts words as well as shows their importance.

In Romeo and Juliet (Act II) Juliet ponders: "What's in a name? /That which we call a rose/ By Any Other Name would smell as sweet." She loves Romeo but he is a Montague, a rival family whose name ought to repel her. Yet to Juliet his family name does not matter to her because she loves him.

Words are just words and yet words have power. They can make things happen. In the ancient world some words were magic. "Abracadabra" can bring something new into being. The word "abracadabra" is from phrases in Hebrew that mean: I will create as I speak!

We still have "words" today that do what they say, such as in a wedding ceremony when the minister or the judge says: "I now pronounce you husband and wife." The two become one. They are now married because this pronouncement is **the word** that does what it says.

In the first two chapters of Genesis when the people who are created in God's image are given the task of dominion, what is their task? Their task is to **name** the animals, because that is power. When God gives his name in Exodus 3:14 at the burning bush it is: "I AM WHO I AM." By giving his people his name, he gives them power.

God creates through his word. As Isaiah 55:10-11 states: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall **my word** be that goes forward though my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but shall accomplish that which I **purpose**, and **prosper** in the thing for which I set it.”

The prophet Jeremiah, who wrote in the same era, speaks similarly of the word. Jeremiah 1:11: “And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Jeremiah, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘I see a rod of almond.’ Then the Lord said to me, ‘You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.” There is a play on words here. In Hebrew the words “rod” and “watch” are similar. The Lord is watching over his word. He is accomplishing his purpose through his word; he makes it happen that way.

In the New Testament we all know John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” which echoes Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

We need to be careful here. When the ancient Hebrews talked about God’s word, they did not mean that the word was the second person of the Trinity or the incarnation. For them that would be an idol, and idol worship was something they surely did not follow, because when they fell into idolatry, they fell into trouble with the Lord.

We can help ourselves here by recalling the account in Genesis 18 in which three figures come to visit Abraham out in the desert, and according to hospitality in the Middle East, he then had to entertain them. So he prepared a banquet and these three are talking with him, obviously messengers from the Lord, and suddenly it is not they who were speaking, but it says the Lord spoke and so there is a sort of an easy flowing back and forth, the Lord is speaking and yet these messengers are speaking.

You may know the saying: The medium is a message. The word “angel” means messenger, and in the way the Bible understands angels, the messenger is the message. It is really a message, a way of God speaking to this person.

At the same time there are other things which are said to be the way of God, the way of God doing thing. Proverbs 3:19-20 says the Lord by wisdom founded the earth. So it is not only by the word that the Lord created but by wisdom. Ezekiel 37 tells the remarkable story about the dry bones which come together because the Lord gives them life. In Ezekiel 37:4 the bones themselves should hear the word of the Lord, and when they hear the word of the Lord, they have life and they have the spirit. Spirit, life, and word all flow together.

On the other hand, in Genesis 2, the second creation story, when the Lord makes Adam out of dust from the ground, it says he made him the way somebody would create a pot or a statue out of clay. The ancient Hebrews did not worry about differences in different accounts of creation. Their main point is that the Lord is active. The main way he is active is through his word. Therefore in Psalm 33:6 and 9, which echo Genesis 1, it says: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,” and then 33:9: “For he spoke and it came to be; he commanded and it stood forth.”

Another picture of this is to think about the water, the seed, and the fact that the ancient Near East the Israelites were not sea-farers, as were the Phoenicians. In fact the Hebrews thought of the sea as dangerous and demonic. Recall in Genesis 1, how it says how God separated the upper waters from the

lower waters, the sea from the dry land. The word for sea there is an echo of the ancient word for the demonic.

Thus Psalm 104:7: "At thy rebuke, they (the waters) fled; at the sound of thy thunder they took a flight." It is by the power of the word of rebuke that the sea is pushed back and under control, and the dry land appears.

This comes out in a remarkable way in the Mark 4 story of Jesus on the water with the disciples at the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is nestled between high hills in such a way that storms can descend suddenly. And that is what happens. As the disciples are crossing in the boat, all of a sudden there is a storm, and Jesus is asleep. They shake him: "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" Then the remarkable answer that comes in Mark 4 where it says Jesus "awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea: 'Peace, be still!'" The wind ceased, there was great calm, and the disciples were "filled with awe, and said to one another, 'Wo then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?'" This is then an indication of being God in a very direct way.

The Lord sends his word forth, but he does not just let it go. He also protects his word, and we must not forget that. Amos 8:11: "'Behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord God, 'when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.'" Worse than being without food or drink, is to be without the words of the Lord. Or in Isaiah 30 there are some who will not hear. They say to the prophets (30:10): "Speak to us smooth things. Prophecy illusions." Then the Lord says (30:10-13): "Thus says the Holy One of Israel, 'Because you despise this word ... therefore this iniquity shall be to you like a break in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse, whose crash comes suddenly in an instant.'" The word not only creates, but when it is lacking or despised there is a great judgment.

At the same time, the Lord is not only the Creator; he is also the Savior. Isaiah 61:1: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted." The word "good tiding" in Hebrew here, if you translate it into Greek, is exactly the word that is used in the New Testament for "gospel." The word "gospel" is an Anglo-Saxon word meaning good news, and this is exactly the gospel. The gospel comes in all the good things that God is doing and going to do to restore creation.

How does this then work out in the New Testament? In the New Testament Paul is the one who uses the word "gospel" most of all. In I Corinthians 1:17, he writes that he is "called to preach the gospel not with eloquent wisdom lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." And then 1:21: "It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." It is by preaching the cross and resurrection that God does these things.

When we wonder how does God work, we are reminded then also of what Paul says in a decisive way in Romans 10:17: "Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ." God is the one who does it through the preaching of the word of Christ.

This can be summed up for us in Luther's Small Catechism in a striking way in the Third Commandment to remember the Sabbath day to keep holy. How does Luther explain that? He does not talk about the difference between Saturday and Sunday, and that we Christians keep Sunday rather than Saturday (the Sabbath) as do the Jews, nor does he talk about not working on Sunday. As you may know, in a previous

generation it used to be that on Sundays you had better be sure that you were just sitting quietly and reverently doing whatever holy things.

No, Luther says very clearly that the Third Commandment means we should fear and love God so that we do not despise his Word and the preaching of it, but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it. So there it is. What is the Sabbath about? It is about preaching and hearing that God in Christ died for you and me.

That can be summed up in the way Lutherans then look at the word of God. The word of God is of course first of all the word Jesus Christ as it says in John 1:1 and in John 1:2, that all things were made by him and without him was nothing made that was made. He is the Creator and Savior.

Second, the word in the preaching is the living voice of the gospel. We often forget that for the first 300 years of Christianity there was no book, no Bible as we know it today. But there were many Christians, and there was preaching. In the beginning was preaching.

In the third place, of course, we have the book of how people remembered both the words of the Lord and the preaching and teaching about him. We have the Bible.

At the center as our Lutheran heritage is the word: The word meaning 1) Jesus Christ himself, 2) the preaching of Christ, and 3) the Biblical record of it, for which we thank the Lord. Amen.