

Faith Comes by Hearing

A sermon for the season of Epiphany

In this season of Epiphany we celebrate the coming of the light. Today we look at how the light comes to us through the Word. We begin with John 1:1-3: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." These glorious verses reflect Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

These verses also alert us to the error of thinking "the Word" is some kind of logic or reason. We could misunderstand what is being said here because the original word is "logos," from which we have the word "logic." But logic and reason are not what the Word is about.

Rather, the Word is about what happens in Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The Word of God is creative and powerful. In fact it is God who does it, and it's therefore his Lordship.

With that comes John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." What is that all about? It's about how God makes all things new and changes everything his way, and finally comes himself. But it's still his Word. And when he spoke at the beginning, he said: "Let it be." And it was. That's how the world was created. It was by the Word.

The same is true when Jesus healed people who were possessed by demons (Matt 8:16). He rebuked the demons; he cast them out with his Word. Or when there was a storm on the sea, Jesus rebuked the storm (Mark 4:39). Or when Lazarus was in the grave, Jesus said to Lazarus: "Lazarus, come out" (John 11:43). It's the Word, the power of the Word. And that's what is understood here as we talk about the Word becoming flesh, the Word of God which does what it says.

Our word "Gospel" comes from the Middle English way of saying "good word." Middle English is the form of the English language spoken in the Middle Ages. Gospel means "good word."

At the same time, what are words? As Hamlet says to Polonius: "Words, words, words." Words can be many things. What is the Word of God?

We can talk about the Word of God in three ways. First of all, the Word is God himself coming in the flesh, but still God. The second way the Word comes is through the preaching of it, the proclaiming the Word. The third way is the Word written down in a book.

It's easy to get confused about the difference between the Word preached and the Word written down. Which came first? Some say the Book, that is, the Bible came first and from

that Book we do preaching. But really the preaching came first and the Book, the Bible, came later.

Therefore we speak of the Word of God in these three sequential ways: 1) the Word become flesh; 2) the preaching of this Word; and 3) the Word written down.

We can illustrate the power and priority of the preached Word by considering what happens in a wedding ceremony. Many things happen in a wedding ceremony. There are words of greeting, words in singing, and words in vows. But where's the real power in the ceremony? You might think it's in the vows, but no. It's when the pastor says: "I now pronounce you husband and wife." Then they are legally married.

A similar situation happens in a court room. If you're on trial in a court room, you may be as guilty as charged, but if the judge declares you "not guilty," you go free. The word of the judge does it.

Also in a baptism when the little one is baptized with water and the Word, it is the name of the Trinity that does it, not anything the little one does. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

These are examples of what is called a performative utterance. The words do what they say. The same is true about preaching. Romans 10:17 states: "Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ." Faith is created because it is the preaching of Christ that produces faith.

In the Old Testament in Isaiah 55:11 we read: "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it." This is when it happens. This is the way it happens.

Paul writes in 1 Cor 1:18 and 21 in a way that is most useful for us. He writes (1:18): "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." And in 1 Cor 1:21: "it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." It's in the preaching of Christ, in the proclamation. It's in the spoken Word.

As we have said, there are records of this preaching in the early church, and their preaching became the Bible itself. That's the third meaning of the Word.

People become a little confused at this point and say: So what? Aside from the fact that this is the way it happens, and this is how God works, we know that many people don't bother to go to church and hear the Word. Does going to church matter?

If it does, should we set up rules and say: You have to be in church every Sunday!

We could set up rules about going to church, but that's not what it's about. That's to go about it backwards.

To be sure, people have all kinds of reasons for not going to church: It's boring. I don't like the preacher. Yadadayadaya.

What is the Word that is being preached? Is it just that preacher's opinion? He preaches this, but another preacher preaches something else. People say I don't have to go to church, I know all that. It's just information or opinion. I can worship God in my own way, by myself.

Some Sunday I'd like to stand at the back door as people leave and hand out envelopes to them, and in each envelope would be a \$20 bill. Wouldn't that be fun! You can imagine how they'd for sure come back the next Sunday. And perhaps even tell their friends to come.

But, of course, that doesn't begin to deal with how important coming to church is. Maybe if each envelope had \$1,000 in it?

The New Testament says the kingdom of God is like a man who found a treasure buried in a field, and he sold everything he had in order to buy that field (Matt 13:44).

Or there was the merchant, who upon finding a single pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had in order to buy it. (Matt 13:45).

Or there was the woman who lost her silver coin and swept diligently until she found it, and when she did she called together her friends and neighbors and said: Rejoice with me! (Luke 15:8-10).

Matt 12:34 (Luke 6:45) says: "What the heart is full of, the mouth overflows with."

What this says about going to church is: Fill up your heart. Hear the Word! This is how God is working. It's the most important hour of the week. It's life and salvation. This is how God is working. "What the heart is full of, the mouth overflows with."

How can we help people see the importance of going to church? Some pastors today try to make worship important by turning it into a show with lights and extravagant props. They think they need to make going to church like going to a Broadway show or a rock concert.

No, the real question about worship, the only question about worship, is simply: Is the pastor preaching "the Gospel"? The Gospel is: God in Christ died and rose for you and me. Proclaiming the Word of the cross is what it's about. It is how God is working. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Matt 18:20).

A useful way to think about going to church and hearing the Word is to talk about food. Every so often we have to eat. Hearing the Word is like that. "From his fullness have we all received grace upon grace" (John 1:16).

As our bodies need food, so we need God's Word. The comparison works to a point, but it's faulty, too, because our bodies send lots of signals that we need to eat. Our stomachs start to growl, telling us we're hungry. Or we grow faint and that prompts us to go eat. Thus eating is really not like hearing the Word because people who are starved spiritually may feel fine.

We go to church because no other message will do, and you can't preach to yourself. We need to hear that Word which claims us, forgives us, and saves us. Only the Word of the cross does that. No other word does that. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:20).

This is the way it works. It works by the hearing of the Word. It's not a matter of knowledge or opinion. Salvation comes by the Word. It's the way God works among us in preaching, in the Lord's Supper, in Baptism, and in confession and absolution.

We rejoice because in the folly of what we preach through the Word of the cross and resurrection, he gives us salvation. He gives us life and makes us his forever. Amen.