

The Word of God at work in you believers

1 Thessalonians 2:8-13

A sermon for the end of the season of Pentecost

Most of us know the story, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," because of the Disney cartoon version, "Fantasia," starring Mickey Mouse as the sorcerer's apprentice. The story goes like this. The sorcerer leaves his workshop, leaving his apprentice, Mickey, with chores to do. Tired of fetching water by the pail, the apprentice enchants a broom to do the work for him, using magic in which he is not fully trained. The floor is soon awash with water and the apprentice cannot stop the broom because he doesn't know the magic required to do so. The brooms multiply, the room floods, and the great music, written over 100 years ago, gives the sense of this growing catastrophe. When all seems lost, the old sorcerer returns and quickly breaks the spell.

The story goes back into classical antiquity, to a man named Lucien. But it was written up by Goethe, and then we think of it in the way Disney did it. There is this power of the word, the incantation, the sorcerer, and that's unknown in our day except in using curses. That should be what happens or at least it's the logical meaning of curses.

In the Scripture we have the indication that when you have somebody's name, you have access to them. We think of the story of the burning bush in Exodus 3:14 that the Lord gives them his name, Yahweh, and that they have access to him and he has power over them and their destiny. He is their Lord; they are his people.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:13 Paul writes: "And we thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a word from men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."

It's evident that if you go back to verses 8 and 9 of this passage that the word of God which is being talked about is the Gospel. It says in verse 8: "the gospel of God" and in verse 9: "We preached to you the gospel of God." The word of God carries the power of God to achieve his ends.

Throughout Scripture this is a major theme. The first chapter of Genesis seven times it says "the Lord spoke and it was done." He's not "making" something. Rather, it is his "speaking" that does it. It is carried out in a remarkable way in Psalm 104:7 where it says about creation: "The Lord rebuked the waters and they fled." He spoke and the dry lands and the waters separated. Or we recall the famous dry bones in Ezekiel 34. The dry bones are the people of Israel and it says: "Let the people of Israel hear the word of the Lord." Of course, then they come alive.

First, then the Word of the Lord is that which creates. He creates with the word.

Second, the word of the Lord is his promise and his promise doesn't fail. And it's brought out beautifully in Isaiah 40:8-9: "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever." God's word doesn't not fail. What he says, he does. That's different from the grass which withers and our words which fail.

Finally, one of the more terrible verses in Scripture is Amos 8:11, which talks about the word of the Lord disappearing. It says: "Behold the days are coming when I will send a famine, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord." That's really bad news. Not having and hearing the word of the Lord.

We Lutherans understand "the Word" has three meanings. First of all, the Word is Jesus Christ. That's spelled out neatly in John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This is obviously a play on the first verse of Genesis.

Nowadays Jehovah's Witnesses carry with them their translation of the Bible and say: "That's not what John 1:1 says." They will claim it says that the Word was divine or the Word was a god. But that's not the case and it's why it is helpful to know the Greek and that the grammar has certain rules, and a translation can't be whatever you make it out to be. It really says of all things that the Word was God. That's who God is.

And then in John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father." The Word is God and God is the Father of Jesus Christ, not just creator. (The New Testament identifies God as Father 261 times and as creator only 14 times.) This is intended to counter prevailing views in Hebrew literature (Proverbs, Ben Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon) which claimed the creator is known through the Torah. As John 1:17 says: "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." He is the Good News.

In the second place, the Word is the preached word, the proclaimed word, including sermons, but also in hymns and prayers and the things we say and do in worship. The preached word, is well expressed by Romans 10:17: "Faith come by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ." That takes away all kinds of misunderstandings.

This is also part of 1 Thessalonians 2:8-13. Verse 8 says: ". . . we were ready to share with you the gospel of God . . ." Verse 9: ". . . we preached to you the gospel of God." This is not only in Paul but also in 1 Peter 1:23-25: "You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." Then 1 Peter quotes that famous passage from Isaiah 40:6-9: "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." Then the passage in 1 Peter 1:25 concludes: "That word is the good news which was preached to you." It is this word which is proclaimed, the preaching of Christ, the living Lord of heaven and earth, who is with us in his Word.

In the third place, there is this book, the Bible, we call the word of God and people most of all refer to 2 Timothy 3:16 where it says: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching . . ." It is a famous mistranslation. And it reads like that because it was done that way in the King James Version. It is simply not what the original says. It is not a predicate adjective; it's an attributive adjective and so what it says is not: "All scripture is inspired by God," but "all inspired scripture . . ." Thus, it is not a definition; rather it is describing what this inspired scripture does. We can see this in the RSV in the footnote to that effect.

But this, too, can be misunderstood because people often say that scripture means "this book," but there is a big difference between the word "scripture" and the word "canon" or "an authoritative list of books."

At the time of the events to which the New Testament witnesses there was no collection of scripture as we know it. This did not come until much later. This is true not only for the New Testament, but also for the collection we know as the Old Testament. The Old Testament collection cannot be found until the Second Century after Christ. They simply had not gone through that process in the Jewish faith until late in the Second Century. What 2 Timothy 3:16 is referring to as "scripture" is a whole host of writings. As we look at Jewish literature (we have a lot of it), it includes all kinds of books and writings that you have never heard of. Only scholars who specialize in studying these texts would know what they are. Thus, that the word "scripture" is a very broad category and doesn't refer to a particular authoritative list of material called a canon.

These then are the three meanings of the Word of God: First, the Word is the Lord himself ("the Word became flesh"), and then his proclaimed word, and then there are written collections of materials which are historical references to him, his cross and resurrection.

To sum this all up in several points.

First of all, the Lord does what he says, and he says what he does. That's the basic nature of God; he says what he does. That's the nature of promise.

In the second place, the Lord comes to us not only in audible words but in visible words. That's what Augustine famously pointed out. The Lord comes to us in that which we hear and also in the bread and the wine and the water and the word in Baptism. The Lord is living now and with us in his word and sacraments.

In the third place, he comes personally and directly to each one of us. There's a preacher's story about the couple in marital difficulties who went to a marriage counselor. After a while the marriage counselor said to the husband: "The problem is that you never tell her you love her." And the husband said: "Well, I told her that when we first got married."

In a similar way the Word of the Lord is not information. To be sure, it has an informing part to it. But it's a doing in which the Lord does it again and again. His word is active and

creative and therefore does what it says, in contrast to all our failings and problems with words. Again it is summed up in words we have heard often as Paul describes in 1 Cor 1:18-21. It's the word of the cross which saves us. First 1 Cor 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 then in vs 21: "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe."

This word of God is not the word of men, as it says in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, but it is really the Word of God. He comes to save us and give us life and life forever. Amen