

God works in spite of us

John 2:1-11

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

We are in the season of Epiphany, the season of the coming of the light. There's a problem with this and the problem is like the line you know from the poem, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: "Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink."

There's light, light everywhere, but who's got the light?

This comes out in two major ways. There are about 40,000 Christian denominations in the United States, although they can be grouped in about seven major groupings. Why is this? In part it's because every single verse in the Bible has all multiple interpretations so there is no way to say: "Ah, yes, this verse is self-evident." Or: "That verse is clear." There is tremendous variation in terms of how things are interpreted.

That's the first problem: Is every interpretation throughout history right so it's O.K. to say that everybody has his view and every view is fine? Then what? I have the light? This church is right?

The second problem has to do with language and how language works. Language is about metaphor and picture. We say: "My love is like a red, red rose," but she doesn't have green leaves.

When it says in Scripture that we are to hear, then we think that we can hear the word, however, in fact, we're deaf.

Or when it says: "See and look," we assume we can see and look, not facing the fact that spiritually speaking, we're blind, lost, and in darkness.

When it says in Scripture repent because of sin, we say O.K. we can do that, not realizing that in spiritual terms we rebel, we run the other way.

In looking in this season of Epiphany at how the light works, something throughout the Bible tells us that God works in spite of us. The light comes in spite of our blindness, and we are able to hear in spite of being deaf because God makes it so, and that even though we don't repent but rebel, he gives us life.

All of this may seem counter-intuitive to us. In order to show that throughout Scripture it says that God works in spite of us, and he gives us light and life in spite of us, let's look at a series of verses that say this:

Isaiah 55:11: "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." In other words: It works because I do it, says the Lord.

Jeremiah 1:12: ". . . I am watching over my word to perform it."

Mark 4:28: This is from the parable about the seed which is sown, it says the seed grows automaté, automatically.

John 1:13: “. . . born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

John 2:1-11, which is the text for today about turning water into wine. It says this is the first sign that Jesus did to manifest his glory. This is the way God comes and makes evident who he is.

Romans 10:17: “Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ.” It’s not our doing, it is not up to us to hear carefully and rightly. Rather, the preaching produces the hearing.

1 Thess 2:9, 13: “We preached to you the gospel of God . . . and when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”

James 1:18: We know that the book of James is a misunderstanding of Paul, but there in 1:18 it says: “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth . . .”

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 . . . that word is the good news which was preached to you.”

Throughout Scripture it says God works through his word to do what is good for us.

We talk about this word both as visible and audible. His word comes to us visibly in Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and audibly in the preaching and the declaration of forgiveness that we have at the beginning of the service. This is how God works, most strikingly of course in infant Baptism where that little one doesn’t understand, doesn’t decide, and yet that one becomes a child of God and receives the Holy Spirit and eternal life.

You may say to me: “Pastor, I’m not convinced. You haven’t proven things for me. You haven’t solved for me the problem of all the different preachers and the different points of view. Moreover, Pastor, you haven’t solved the problems of language and language that can be understood differently.”

To which the answer is: “It’s not my problem. It’s not my problem because it’s my task to declare to you that your sins are forgiven for Jesus’ sake.”

And when you ask: “How do you know that’s truth?” My response is: “Your sins are forgiven for Jesus’ sake.” Because the problem isn’t relativism and all different kinds of points of view. The problem is that you are caught in sin and death and the answer is to proclaim this word that is effective, that your sins are forgiven for Jesus’ sake.

So what? So what does that mean for walking out of church today with your feet on the ground?

What it means is summed up in Romans 1:16: “The gospel is the power of God for salvation.” That comes in the proclamation of this gospel. As it says in John 1:4: “In him was life and the life was the light of men.” It is his life that comes to us in this light, this word that comes to us. It doesn’t come elsewhere. It’s not a light in nature. It’s not a light in which I understand that I know that. It comes in the doing of it, in the preaching of it, in the declaration of forgiveness, in Baptism and the Lord’s Supper and not elsewhere.

Two illustrations. To be sure, words break down, metaphors and illustrations break down, but here are two which may help us to see what is at stake. The first one is about organ transplants—kidney, liver, lung, heart—and when you get an organ transplant, for the rest of your life you take anti-rejection medicine and you go in for regular check-ups. You can’t say to yourself: “I feel O.K. I’ll take those anti-rejection medicines when I feel like it.” You can’t say: “I’m too busy this week to bother with those medicines and to bother with going for a check-up.” That’s deadly! Your life is at stake. And you don’t say to yourself: “I feel fine. I’ll decide when to go depending on how I feel.”

That’s what the word received through preaching, absolution, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper is like. Baptism is like getting an organ transplant, and going to church regularly is like taking those anti-rejection medicines and going for those regular check-ups.

The second illustration is about loving someone, not necessarily “being in love,” although that, too, but even loving a child, a parent, a friend. When you love somebody, you want to be connected to them, talk with them, hear from them. You don’t say: “I love you, and who knows if we’ll ever talk again?” You want to hear from them, and you know it’s a matter of the reality of the tie between you. It’s not a matter of: She knows that. I know that. It’s in the doing of it.

This is what the word of God is like, the light that is the life. It comes to us this way, and it produces life; it produces life now and life forever. Amen