

His word is power and protection

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

A Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Do you know any magic words? To be sure, we know of magic words in fairy tales. Like “Abracadabra” and “Open Sesame.” In the Middle Eastern folktale, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, at the command, “Open Sesame!” a door hidden in a rock wall opens to reveal a cave filled with treasure. In Cinderella, magic words turn pumpkins into royal coaches, and mice into coachmen.

In short, in fairy tales there are words that can make things happen. What about real life? What about our life as Christians?

The name of God is like a magic word. In the Old Testament there’s idea that when you have somebody’s name, you have access to them, to their power and protection. We think of the story of the burning bush in Exodus 3:14. The Lord gives them his name, Yahweh, and from then on, they can call on him. Even more than that, he has power over them, power to protect them and guide their destiny. He is their Lord; they are his people.

We find this same idea in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians about “the word of God.” 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” (I Thessalonians 2:13).

There it is. The word of God, the power of God, at work in you. You can’t see it. You can’t feel it. But it’s there, working in you.

What is that word? It’s the “the gospel of God” (verse 8), and the Thessalonians found out about it because it was preached to them. It came from outside of them. They had to hear about it: “We preached to you the gospel of God” (verse 9). That word carries the power of God to make things happen, to achieve his ends.

Like in Genesis 1. It says seven times: “the Lord spoke and it was done.” It’s his speaking that does it. He speaks and brings something out of nothing. He speaks and brings forth the heavens and the earth.

Psalms 104:7 says: “The Lord rebuked the waters and they fled.” He spoke and the dry lands and the waters separated.

Or think of the 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.” And they do and 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. Listen to Isaiah 40:8-9: "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever." God's word doesn't fail. What he says, he does. That's different from the grass which withers and dies. God's word is different from our words and promises which fail.

Third, there is the danger of itchy ears, of other gospels, of going astray, of churches losing their way. One of the most fearsome verses in the Bible is Amos 8:11 which 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 bad news, really bad news; it means we can get lost, go astray, and lose the word of the Lord.

We Lutherans say "the Word" has three meanings. First of all, the Word is Jesus Christ himself. 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.

[Jehovah's Witnesses say that John 1:1 means the Word was divine or a god of sorts. But that's not right. If you know Greek and that the grammar has certain rules, you know it really says the Word was God. That's who God is. And you can't twist the translation into saying something else.]

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; he is not just the Creator.

In the New Testament. God the Father and God the Son identify each other. It's an aspect of the scandal of particularity. God is not "Father" in general. God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

261 times in the New Testament God is said to be "the Father," and God as Creator is found only 14 times. This is a way of countering the idea in Hebrew literature (Proverbs, Ben Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon) that the Creator is known through the law, the Torah. As John 1:17 says: "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

God the Father vindicated the Son by raising him from the dead, establishing his authority. God the Father can only be understood in relation to the Son.

In sum, the Word of God is, first of all, Jesus himself.

In the second place, he comes to us in the preaching of him, the proclaimed word, not only in sermons, but also in hymns and prayers. In these ways he comes to us, claiming us as his own, giving us faith and eternal life. As Paul writes: "Faith come by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

That takes away many misunderstandings. It means that God is not some "X" in the sky that we can or should name according to our whims or sense of what or who God is.

Some say that instead of addressing God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we should and could make up other names, and for example, call God "Rainbow, Ark, and Dove." Or: "Our parent in heaven." But we shouldn't do that because in doing that we make ourselves "God" and "Lord." When we give God other names, call God whatever we want, what we are really doing is being pretentious, acting like gods ourselves, the ones in charge.

Rather, the gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ, who called God his Father and invited us to pray in his name to Father as "Our Father," giving us access to his power and protection.

Paul says in our text today: ". . . we were ready to share with you the gospel of God . . ." (verse 8) . . . we preached to you the gospel of God" (verse 9).

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 Isaiah: "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" (Isaiah 40:6-9) And concludes: "That word is the good news which was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:25).

To sum it up so far: The word of God is first, Jesus Christ himself. And second, the word of God is the proclamation, the preaching of Christ. One more to go.

In the third and final place, there is this book, the Bible, which we also call "the word of God." The Bible is a holy book, a treasury of the vast cloud of the witnesses to the One who led the ancient Hebrews out of slavery, and who came himself to die and rise again. Only he could solve the terrible problem of evil, sin, and death, and he did.

The Bible is a book about life and death and God, not a book of secular history and science, as we think of those things today. Our faith is not threatened by studying the Bible because our certainty is in him, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ himself, and he is living now.

What then about 2 Timothy 3:16, which is sometimes translated as: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching"?

First, that's a misleading translation of the Greek. (Not a predicate adjective, but an attributive adjective.) What it says is not: "All scripture is inspired by God," but: "All inspired scripture is profitable."

In the early church every baptized Christian was believed to be "inspired," along with all writings that pointed to Christ alone. How should they, the early Christians, sort all the letters and writings and gospels floating around? Decisions about which letters and gospels to include in what was to become the Bible were based on whether the particular writings in question were trustworthy. Did they point to the cross and resurrection? Or to something else. This is what mattered. (See Everett Kalin, "The Inspired Community.")

To sum it all up, the Word of God has three meanings: First, the Word is the Lord himself ("the Word became flesh"). Second, the word is the proclamation, the preaching of Christ. Third, the word is the written witness, that collection of materials, sermons and letters which point to him, his cross and resurrection.

Finally, there are important consequences of this for our lives.

First of all, the word of God is the power of God. It is "not the word of men," as it says in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, but it is really the power of God. The Lord does what he says, and he says what he does. His word is sure, his promises, true.

Second, the Lord comes to us in his bodily word. It's not a head trip or about hearing only. It's not up to us to think it right. We don't and we can't. He comes in his bodily word, in Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He forgives and redeems our bodies as well as our minds.

Third, it means we are not like those who can only, as Shakespeare put it: "trouble deaf heaven with our bootless cries." Heaven is not deaf. Our prayers are not bootless, useless. Rather, he, the Lord of heaven and earth, has, through his word and sacraments, claimed us as his adopted children. We are his. We are Christians. He has given us his name, and with his name comes his power and protection. Amen