

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
October 11, 2015

The Living Word

Hebrews 4:12-13

“For the word of God is living and active” (v.12a). Some of you may have memorized that piece of Scripture, and the sentences that follow it, at some point during your years of studying the Bible. You internalized that Scripture. You made it part of your spiritual storehouse, so that as time went on, you could draw it out and remember that the Bible didn’t just speak to you then. It could speak to you at anytime, anywhere, in any circumstances.

Of course there’s a danger in Scripture memorization as well. Namely, that the words of the Bible become too familiar to us. Not that we don’t want to know them. But we don’t want to know them so well that we assume we’ve mastered them. After all, isn’t the relationship actually supposed to work the other way around? Aren’t the Scriptures supposed to master us? We aren’t supposed to just search them; they’re supposed to search us. We aren’t simply supposed to know the Bible; the Bible is supposed to know us. The story is told of a woman in an East African village who walked around always carrying a Bible. Her neighbors teased her and frequently asked why she carried it everywhere she went. They suggested there were many other books she could read and carry. Her response was, “Yes, of course there are many books which I could read. But there is only one book which reads me.”¹

“The word of God is living and active.” Part of what this means is that the word of God is bigger than the Bible. It’s true to say that the Bible is the word of God. But it’s also true to say that the word of God is more than the Bible. When the Bible itself speaks of the “word of God,” it’s primarily referring to God’s self-revelation. The word of God is the manifestation of God’s being and nature. It’s God expressing his will, purpose, and priorities. The word of God is God communicating with human beings so that we may know God and live in relationship with him.

The Bible itself is a written witness to God’s revelation to humankind. We believe that the Bible’s authors were Spirit-inspired and that they give us trustworthy testimony to God’s expression of himself to the world. What’s more, as Christians, we believe that Jesus the Messiah is God’s supreme and most decisive act of self-communication. Jesus Christ is how, as the Gospel of John describes it, the “word became flesh” (1:14). In other words, Jesus is God coming down to meet us at our own level, revealing himself to us in human form. Based on that foundational conviction, we look to the Bible as our authoritative guide for faith and practice, trusting that it points us to Christ as the center of God’s will and purpose for us.

So the Bible is central to what we mean by the word of God. But what we mean by the word of God is greater than just the Bible. One way to come at this is to use the framework laid out by the great theologian Karl Barth, who operated with a three-in-one concept of God’s word. Barth said that the word of God is first of all and preeminently the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Secondly, the word of God appears in written form as the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Thirdly, the word of God is the church’s proclamation of Jesus Christ the Son, as the revelation of God the Father, in the power of the Spirit. Pull all

this together, and what we've got is Jesus as the word of God, the Bible as the word of God, and preaching as the word of God.

This is more than just a fancy theological explanation of God's word. It's also a reminder that the word of God is, as today's text from Hebrews says, "living and active." Keep in mind that this morning's passage is the culmination of a section that began way back in chapter three. Since then, the writer has been warning his fellow believers to learn from the example of God's people Israel, whose faith faltered in their pilgrimage through the wilderness. They doubted the trustworthiness of God and didn't get to experience the full fruition of God's purposes. But God is faithful, and his "rest," the fulfillment of his promises, is still open and available to the community of believers. That's why they need to persevere in obedience. They need to see out beyond their own immediate circumstances of discouragement and defeat. They need to live with a steady sense of accountability to God, who will eventually make good on his promises and bring this story of salvation to a close.

One of the ways God's people can know that God is still working is that God is still speaking. Nothing, after all, could be worse for God's people than to have God go silent on them. Without God speaking into their lives, they couldn't be who God intended them to be or do what God intended them to do. God's word was the source of their existence. It was the power that sustained them. It was the means by which they would eventually reach their destiny and purpose. For God's people, the word was life.

From the opening pages of the Scriptures, God speaking is linked to God creating. "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). Not, God gestured with his hand. Not, God waived a magic wand. Not, God nodded his head. No, God said. God spoke. Earlier this week, I quoted God's words in my worship time with the children in our day care ministry. We used a darkened sanctuary as a setting to talk about how God separated the light from the darkness. When it was time to be dismissed, I said, "Let there be light," and turned the switch back on. Though at first some of the children seemed impressed, I'm pretty sure they knew that Pastor Kevin's words don't possess that kind of power.

But God's words do. So one of the reasons that I, as a human being, stand up here on Sunday morning and speak words to you, as human beings, is because we believe there's more than just human exchange, human interaction, going on here. We believe there's a divine-human exchange, a divine-human interaction, happening. I speak words through which we encounter the word who is named Jesus. And as we meet Jesus, God works to remake us. My desire is that the sermon will be more for you than just a weekly download of biblical information. Most of all, it needs to be an event of transformation.

In a lecture on being formed in holiness, pastor and author Eugene Peterson notes some of the people whose experience of God in worship stuck in his memory. There was Matt, an elder in the church who was always asleep before the congregation finished the first hymn. There was Rusty, a teenager who hated being in church, and sat on the back row reading comic books. Then there was a woman who showed up one Sunday with a stenographic pad in hand. She kept attending faithfully, and would sit there writing down every word of Peterson's sermon. This is wonderful, he thought. She's such a gift, such a source of encouragement to me in my preaching. Here's someone who's really taking all of this seriously. Until Peterson learned that the woman was planning to leave her husband, and was practicing her shorthand so that she could get a job when she left. Here was someone whose attentiveness to the message was more a matter of skill development and job placement than it was a matter of encountering and hearing the living God.

Like the God who speaks it, the word is living and active. Its primary aim isn't to inform us but to transform us. And the way it often does that is by exposing us and calling us to account. If, as I said earlier, you memorized the first portion of Hebrews 4:12, you probably memorized the rest of the verse: "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." It's certainly not a pretty image, but it's effective. The writer uses one of the primary weapons of the day, the sword, to describe the word's capacity to cut. In other words, God's speech slices us open, with greater precision than we can imagine.

There's no use trying to hide anything from God. His word exposes us all the way down to our thoughts, our motives, our attitudes. Is it any wonder, then, that we're cautious about getting within earshot of what God has to say to us, and about us. When God starts talking to us, the things he says often reveal the gap between what we're called to be and what we actually are. His words force us to see more clearly the contrast between what we profess and what we practice.

One person has said, "Men do not reject the Bible because it contradicts itself, but because it contradicts them."² When you come here on Sunday morning and put yourself in the presence of God's word, you're opening yourself up to the strong possibility that you're going to be contradicted by God. For when he speaks, it will often go against the grain of our own attitudes and actions. This is what we mean when we speak about the power of God's word to judge and convict. And that can happen not only during a worship gathering as the word is preached, but also in personal devotions, group Bible studies, life experiences, conversations with others, or in whatever ways God speaks into our lives.

In her book *Amazing Grace*, writer Kathleen Norris shares what she calls "the scariest story" she knows about the Bible. Norris and her husband got into a conversation with a man called Arlo. He was a rugged, tough, self-made man facing terminal cancer. During the visit, Arlo started talking about his grandfather, who had been a deeply religious man. The grandfather had given Arlo and his bride a wedding present. It was an expensive leather Bible with their names printed in gold lettering on the cover. Arlo left the Bible in its box and never opened it. But for months afterwards his grandfather kept asking him how he liked the Bible. Even though they had sent him a thank you note, and had expressed their gratitude in person, grandpa just wouldn't let it go. Finally, Arlo grew curious enough to open the Bible and discovered that the joke was on him. He found that grandpa had placed a twenty-dollar bill at the beginning of the book of Genesis, and at the beginning of every book, over thirteen hundred dollars in all. He knew Arlo would never find it.³

You miss a lot when you don't open the Scriptures. Probably not cash, but certainly something more valuable. Namely, an encounter with a holy God who speaks with surgical precision and lays bare our souls. That kind of thing is scary, and spiritually painful. But the truth is, before God's word can heal it often has to hurt. Remember that an even worse pain would be for God to go silent and just leave us to ourselves. But that's not who God is. In fact, the reason he keeps speaking is because his communication with us helps hold us accountable, to him and to one another. And the fact that God has spoken by showing up personally, in the form of Jesus, tells us everything we need to know about how committed he is to his relationship with us, and how faithful and committed we need to be as he exhorts us toward our destination in Christ. The word of God remains alive and active, a word of judgment and mercy.

¹ Donald A. Wells, "The Book That Reads Me," *Comment*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 1997) 1.

² Source unknown.

³ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 1998) 94-95.