

From Words to God's Word

Nehemiah 8: 1-10 (*selecs*) Luke 4: 14-21

Words convey meaning on their own, sometimes several different meanings for a single word. We string words together into sentences to convey ideas and communicate. From those sentences, we provide context so that we understand what meaning of the word is intended ... well, usually. All of which is to say that there is activity in our own minds that assembles a variety of words into thoughtful expressions. Words by themselves don't often suffice until we bring them into context which is designed to give them meaning in communication.

Every Sunday in worship, we have a couple of scripture readings. After the reading, the lector says, "This is the Word of the Lord," and the congregation responds, "Thanks be to God." The "Word of the Lord" phrase happens almost without thinking. Yet how we understand that, and understand it differently among different Christians, is at the root of many contentious discussions in the church, and it's been that way for a long time.

We commonly accept that scripture, the content of the Bible, is God's Word – with a capital "W." But it is appropriate to ask how these words in the Bible become God's Word. This brings us to the question of Biblical authority, that very contentious matter among Christians.

There are those who believe that God essentially wrote scripture, that the biblical authors were mere passive vessels as God's Word flowed through them and onto the pages of their text. The biblical authors are thought to have added nothing of their own, and that God's Word for humanity simply came into being through their writing what God had them write, presumably through the work of the Holy Spirit. I don't know of anywhere in scripture that such a claim is made as to its composition, but it is held as the explanation for the Bible being known as God's Word in certain Christian circles. There are also variants of this view, a bit less extreme, that may allow for minor errors in the transcription, but the end result is the same: the expression "This is God's Word" means that it is God who got recorded what God wanted to be stated.

This view of biblical authority was pretty much the status quo in Christianity until the Enlightenment, an era of asking questions and seeking answers in more rational terms. Faith and reason collide naturally. As reason gained more traction, some in the faith community reacted by denying reason any meaningful place at the table, and fought (sometimes literally) to make faithfulness to a particular conservative understanding of biblical authority as a litmus test for faithfulness to God and to God's Word. It's actually quite contrived, but nevertheless defined the conservative understanding of biblical authority.

It's contrived because we've accepted reason and rational thought into most every other area of society, and indeed must count the move toward rational approaches over spiritual or faith-based approaches as accounting for many of the advances of modern

society. At the same time, we have also realized that considering all things with reason alone is woefully inadequate in application. There is a blend and a balance between the spiritual and the rational that is needed.

Weighing reason in biblical authority has brought plenty of conflict. The document we often excerpt for our Affirmation of Faith, the Confession of 1967, put the terms for modern approaches to scripture and biblical authority into the words of a faith statement. The selection we read this morning spells it out. A summarizing phrase would be: *The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding.* We should take a reasoned approach, in essence.

What happens then to the spiritual, the arena not conditioned by reason which is faith? Is it gone, removed, irrelevant?

Today's scriptures provide insight into how we might better understand the expression, "the Word of God."

When we hear the text from Nehemiah, we need to realize that we are in the years following the return from exile. Despite the possibly over-hyped promise of the return of God's people from Babylonian exile to the Promised Land, the people have discovered that life back in the home country, even under God's care, isn't a land of milk and honey. After two to three generations in Babylon, there were probably few who remembered what the holy city of Jerusalem had been like. Surely, there were great expectations among the people that somehow things would be much better when they were free from Babylon and back in Palestine.

Sadly, it turned out to be a frustrating time. Living under the Persians who could be helpful at times, but they were in the empire business for the money. The people in Judea never seemed to get ahead. They had adjusted to being occupied, being dominated, being taxed heavily and felt the promise of God was empty.

Nehemiah is the governor of Judea, and, together with Ezra the priest, is determined to rebuild the land and its people. It has taken an exceptional amount of work, but the city wall has finally been rebuilt after lying in ruins for over 50 years. People are coming to realize that they have the potential to accomplish far more. It is at this crucial time in the life of the nation that we have today's account.

As the people have begun to recover and see themselves in a new light, Nehemiah and Ezra realize that the people of God need to find their direction and need to get re-acquainted with the magnetic north of their spirituality, their guideposts in religious and social life that will lead them into the promise of God's future. On the occasion of what was to continue to be celebrated as New Year's Day on the Jewish calendar, all of the people were gathered and the Torah was read aloud to them from dawn until noon. Despite this long duration, it wasn't enough time to read all of the Five Books of Moses, but they read enough and preached enough to cause the people to weep.

As Presbyterians accustomed to an hour-long service, let me assure you: they were not weeping because they had to endure a six hour sermon. They wept because scripture had been revealed anew to them as God's Word. They understood themselves once again, bowing down in reverence and humility, mourning in awareness of their sinfulness before God, openly emotional as the covenant of God was not only re-stated but renewed in their hearts.

Ezra ended the occasion by declaring that this day was holy, that it was not an occasion for weeping and mourning, but a day of thanksgiving and commitment to the way of God and God's Law. Then Gov. Nehemiah steps up and echoes Ezra in declaring the day sacred, instructing the people, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared." Nehemiah has the people practicing the way of God right away, sharing with those who had nothing ready. Their identity as a people was being restored and they discovered the connection renewed to God's covenant.

God's Word can have this very effect, connecting us with the way of God and understanding ourselves as sharing the journey of God's people, not only today but also throughout history. Those who came out of Babylon certainly heard in the reading about the enslavement in Egypt and their exodus from bondage, something that must have stirred close memories, enabling their self-perception as God's people once again. The Promised Land wasn't a cake walk for Joshua and those who came after. They fought for every inch of ground. Surely the people saw themselves in that light now, in a different light from the being a defeated, dominated people to those standing as the people of God, inheritors of the promise.

We see here how the words on a page, the words inscribed on a scroll like we have on our bulletin cover, evoke a sacred power. Yet, there are many words, many pages, many books. For example, the Bible can be regarded by an individual as just another book. In that light, its contents get seen as strange, violent, chaotic, scary, depressing, and contradictory to the point of meaninglessness. The words of scripture are simply words on a page. What's missing is that spirit of faith, the desire to be connected and identified with God. The aspect of faith changes words into Word – capital W – as a revelation of the presence and promise of God in one's life. We understand that crucial difference in the work of the Holy Spirit as well as in the spirit of the individual. Through reception of God's Word, read and spoken, and the meaning preached, the people are awakened to their faith in profound ways. They are made new.

It is this promise of God who is always faithful to his people that Jesus seeks to awaken in the hearts of his friends and neighbors when he accepts the preaching role in his home synagogue in Nazareth. According to Luke's gospel, Jesus had just returned from the temptation in the desert, preaching God's word in towns and villages along the way, and Luke notes that he is filled with the power of God's Spirit. The withdrawal and temptation in the wilderness brought Jesus definition and strength for his life's work. He understood himself and his calling by God, but he needed to orient himself to a sacred compass to ensure his direction would follow what God desired.

At the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus preaches from the Isaiah scroll and selects Isaiah 61, verse 1 and 2, acting in the pattern of Nehemiah and Ezra in reading the scripture and then preaching its meaning. Luke edited the text a bit to suit his purposes, but the clear intent is that Jesus is announcing the focus and form of his ministry. He doesn't do this by reading a mission statement, or by outlining the seven helpful habits of holiness, or a ten step wellness program, or by unveiling a five point plan for personal perfection. He connects himself to the promise of God in this powerful expression in Isaiah 61.

He defines his ministry in the terms lifted up by Isaiah, namely, focusing on the poor, freeing those in bondage, giving people a sacred vision, bringing justice to the oppressed, and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor, meaning the jubilee year described in Deuteronomy when slaves were freed and debts were forgiven. Jesus wants it to be very clear that he is on a mission to do God's will, and he is the One who has come to fulfill the promise announced in Isaiah.

The thoughtful words of Isaiah get new vision and new life as Jesus enlivens them with his spirit, with his faithful witness. The familiar words of Isaiah are given form and substance as the promise of God and the purpose of his faithful servants. Jesus takes this one step further as he closes the reading saying: *Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. It says: All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.* Great, they like him.

But Jesus doesn't quit while he's ahead. He chides them about their expectations of him, saying, *No prophet is accepted in his hometown.* By the end, they're running him out of town. This is the other side of God's Word. It is *God's* Word, not *our* word, not set in whatever order, context, or meaning *we* prefer. We can take God's Word and distort it into something preferable, and correcting that understanding to what is more authentic and accurate will not win you popularity points.

The words on the page become God's Word when faithfulness is met by the Holy Spirit. That's what brings the encounter with God's Word, the revelation of God's promise, and affirmation of one's identity and purpose within that promise.

Today we see in both scriptures how God's people get connected once again to the promise of God for them. In turning to scripture, there is restoration of the promise and renewal of the spirit, awakening as well as empowering people to see themselves participating in God's mission, and fulfilling God's promise.