

“The Living and Enduring Word of God”

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1Peter 1:17-23

If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. 18 You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.

20 He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. 21 Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

22 Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.

23 You have been born anew,
not of perishable but of imperishable seed,
through the living and enduring word of God.

WORDS THAT ENDURE

The title of this sermon comes from the last phrase in our lesson for today, “the living and enduring word of God.”

We know that some words endure.

For example, when the minister says, “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” those words mean something. They endure.

They create a new way of life.

And sometimes those words are the beginning of new life when the couple has children.

I have had the privilege of speaking those words to some in the congregation today.

And when I look at your family, I see the power of the living and enduring word of God.

Your life together is a living breathing example of God's grace.

Now does this new way of life happen automatically and without effort?
Of course not.

God's blessing on our marriage is only the beginning.

We have the responsibility to love and care for one another.

God's blessing is only the beginning of an exciting journey.

I remember when I received a diploma.

In that case just my name was called.

There were many more names called that day.

(I've always said that graduation has all the excitement of reading the phone book!)

But, my family drove thousands of miles and sat in a hot arena in order to hear my name called. Why? Because those words meant something.

When they called my name that meant I had received a degree from that school.

It was the culmination of my effort and considerable financial sacrifice by my parents.

Now did that mean I had completed my journey?

Did that mean I could sit back and take it easy?

Of course not.

In order to make good use of that degree I had to do more.

I had graciously received the opportunity for this education.

But that grace called me to do more and be more.

BECOMING WHO YOU ARE

In a greater way the gracious Word of God calls us to do more and be more.

The Word of God is not just a set of doctrines that we file away in our head.

Faith is more than just giving verbal assent to a set of propositions or a celebration of God's forgiveness.

Faith is a call to action.

One commentator suggested that a good title for a sermon on this passage would be "Becoming Who You Are". I think he's right.

The Word of God calls us to live in a new way ... to become who we are ... not out of compulsion ... but out of grace.

Faith is always on the move.

We are always on the road to becoming who we are in Christ Jesus.

In verse 23 we read that have been "born anew" or "born again" through God's living and enduring Word. This phrase means to have our minds so thoroughly changed that we live a new life that is conformed to the will of God.

Have you ever changed your mind completely on something?

I've found that if someone is very passionate on some issue, quite often they have changed their mind on that topic.

When we change our mind completely it is not a minor decision.

It is a life changing.

We become passionate and dedicated to that cause.

It is like we have been reborn.

For example, when we get married, it's a life changing decision.

Our whole way of thinking and living changes forever.

When we take a new job, our life is dominated by that job. Our beliefs and ways of thinking are changed by that decision.

We become a part of that corporate culture.

In an even greater way, when we decide to follow Jesus, our life changes.

Like most changes, it doesn't happen overnight.

But, it does happen.

As we study and follow His Word, little by little we become a new creation.

It is like we have been born again.

THE ENDURING WORD

And according to this passage, this change happens because God's Word is living and enduring.

The changes we experience in life ... even important changes like marriage or education or a new job ... are all, in the final analysis, temporary. Not so with God's Word.

In the verses that follow our lesson for today, Peter quotes the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah reminds us that "all flesh is like grass".
And the "grass withers and the flower fades".

I like a pretty lawn.

But, my struggle to keep that pretty lawn in this dry weather is a continuous battle.

Every day I learn the lesson.

The grass withers and the flower fades.

That's true in nature.

And of course that's true for us as well.

We are quite aware that life often seems short and insecure.

Last week we talked about the fact that the Christians who first received Peter's lesson were people who felt insecure and out of place.

They were resident aliens.

They were strangers in a foreign land.

They were exiles.

What hope can we bring to the exiles?

What hope can we bring to people who feel alienated and alone?

We find hope in the promises of God.

Our lesson for today lift's up the nature of God's Word. In a world filled with loss and decay, God's Word endures.

In fact, the Bible tells us that "the Word of the Lord endures forever."
God's Word is about eternity.

HOW CAN I BE SURE?

Long ago there was a popular song that began with a question,
“How can I be sure in a world that’s constantly changing?”

This song by the “Young Rascals” wanted to know if we could be sure of a love interest.

How can I be sure that the young lady is really interested in me?
I could sing that song with great passion back in the day.
Where we stand with that special someone is of paramount importance for a young man or woman.

But, that question keeps coming back to us throughout our life.
How can we be sure in a world that’s constantly changing?

How can I be sure when children come into our marriage?

How can I be sure when the kids go to college, and we become “empty nesters?”

How can I be sure when someone I love dies?

How can I be sure when it’s time to retire?
How will I find meaning apart from work?

How can I be sure?

The changes that come to every life can make us feel uncertain.
Life sneaks up on us.

The Young Rascals thought that the world was constantly changing in the late 1960s.

But, compared to our world today, the 1960s looks like the horse and buggy days.

Now we have new trending topics every day.
Everyone gets into the act with the advent of social media.

And today it seems like everyone is entitled to their own “facts” as well as their own opinion.

MUTUAL LOVE

How can I be sure in a world that is constantly changing?

The Young Rascals answered that question by singing, "I'll be sure with you."

They would find solace in a commitment to love another person.

That's not a bad an answer ... especially for a rock and roll band from the 60s!

Love and commitment are good responses to a world that is constantly changing.

In fact, Christians believe that when we love one another, we are reflecting the very nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

In verse 22 of our lesson for today Peter wrote that what feeds our soul is obedience to God's Truth. And obedience to the Truth leads us to love, "genuine mutual love that comes from the heart."

On Maundy Thursday we remembered the time when Jesus acted like a servant and washed the feet of his disciples. Why did he do that? It was a symbol of his love.

He told his disciples that he was giving them a new commandment, that they love one another as he had first loved them. The Word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ calls us to love one another.

People often ask me why we refer to our Thursday Holy Week service as Maundy Thursday. Well, the word Maunday is an old English word that means mandate.

The mandate of Jesus to his disciples is the mandate to love.

And when we follow that mandate ...

When we love one another as God in Christ first loved us,
The Word of God becomes a living and enduring Word in our own lives.

In a world that is constantly changing, we are empowered by the Spirit to love one another. And it is that love that brings us stability and security.

Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians that three things remain forever in life: faith, hope and love. "And the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:13)

The Word of God comes alive through the lives of Jesus' disciples. When we love one another as he first loved us, the Word comes alive.

THE LIVING WORD

God's living Word gives us a unique way of looking at the world. We take the old, old story and apply it in new ways to the living or our days.

We have a good example of this in our lesson.

The background of our passage is the exodus from Egypt. God's people were slaves without hope.

But, God led His people to freedom.
The blood of the lamb was splashed on the door of their homes.

And the angel of death passed over God's people.
(Thus the name Passover.)

Pharaoh was forced to let God's people go.
And God's people left their homes in Egypt in order to follow God into the wilderness.

Notice. Salvation came with risk as well as reward.

In the same way, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and the resurrection opened up the possibility of salvation for God's people.

In Jesus they had the promise of eternity, but like their ancestors in the faith they also had the challenge of leaving the old way of life behind, taking up a cross and following Jesus.

Peter applies this theology of sacrifice to the Christians living in Asia Minor.

Their heritage and their faith had made them exiles.
They were persecuted and did not feel at home in the place where they lived.

But, instead of feeling despair or being overwhelmed with anger toward their persecutors,

... Peter suggests that they live in “reverent fear.”

They were to live with a sense that salvation from this exile would be right around the corner.

Just as God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt and just as God brought hope for life eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus, ...so God would also bring hope and salvation to these exiles in Asia Minor.

The story of God’s salvation was not over.
It continued in the lives of these believers.

Anger and fear would not win the day.
God’s grace would win the day.

They had something more precious than silver or gold.

They had the eternal promises of God.

SEEDS OF FAITH

As I put it in last week’s sermon, God’s promises don’t have an expiration date.

His Word is living and enduring.
And that’s just as true today as it was when Peter wrote this letter long ago.

The seeds of God’s grace do not have an expiration date.

Someone sent me an article this week about what people who attend worship regularly want most of all from their church.

The number one thing that people want is sermons that teach Scripture.

And number two they want sermons that are relevant to life.

Having served as a Presbytery liaison for many Pastor Nominating Committees, I can attest to this desire. These are the primary desires of almost every church seeking a pastor.

People have a hunger to know God's Word, and they have a hunger to understand how it applies to their life today.

Today's lesson teaches us that these two desires are not mutually exclusive.

Since the Word of God is "living and enduring" we can look at the trending topics on Facebook through the lens of the gospel. We can look at the struggles in our own life through the lens of God's salvation.

What does it mean to be an exile for the gospel in the place where we live? What does it mean to be (as our lesson last week put it) a "chosen stranger?"

Jesus often compared the coming of God's kingdom to sowing seed.

Even the small mustard seed can grow to be an impressive plant.

And in an even greater way, when we plant the seed of the gospel, it can take root and become something bigger than we could ever imagine.
(Mark 4:30)

I wonder. What is the trending topic in your life?
What are your joys? What are your challenges?

Every stage of life offers both.

But, today's lesson teaches us that when everything else fails, the love and promises of God as are still there.

THE CONSTITUTION OF OUR FAITH

I once heard a commentator on the radio describe the Bible as the "most over-studied book in the world". His point was that most of us, even those who don't believe already know the basic stories in the Bible.

Why do people read it so much?

Why do we insist on studying the Bible so much?

I would say that if these stories of the Bible were just about what happened “way back when” that the commentator might have a point.

But, we believe that the Bible is also about what happens here and now. It is not just their story. It is also our story.

And example of how we view the Word of God might be the Constitution of the United States.

The Constitution was written during the colonial period under circumstances that were much different than what exist now.

But, that document still guides us today. When our leaders take an oath of office, it is an oath to “preserve, protect and defend” the Constitution.

In this regard, the Constitution is a living document, and the principles of that document guide who we are as a society.

It is the Constitution that keeps us together as a country. The courts use the Constitution as a way of understanding what is right and just.

It’s true that judges interpret the Constitution in different ways. And this can cause quite a bit of controversy. But, we all agree that the Constitution is important for our country, and we vow as a nation to protect and preserve it.

The Bible, the written Word of God functions in much the same way for the Christian church.

That’s why it’s important for us to continue studying the Bible throughout our life.

God’s written Word is our guide to the life of Christ and the Kingdom of God.

If we try to be a Christian without a deep understanding of Scripture, it’s like trying to be a Supreme Court justice without a deep understanding of the Constitution.

We must read the stories of the Bible again and again, and then ask ourselves, “So, what does the Bible say about the trending topics of the day?”

This is not an easy process because quite often Christians will come up with different answers.

This will inevitably cause conflict.

The story of the early church and the story of church history ever since is the story of disagreement and sometimes conflict over the interpretation of the Word. But, despite the conflict, the church keeps trying to understand God's Word because we believe it provides the foundation for the Christian life.

We believe that the Bible is the written Word of God. It is the Constitution of our faith.

But, more than that, we believe that behind the words of the Bible stands the Word of the Creator who spoke the Universe into existence.

Our Scripture for today says that before the foundation of the world, the salvation of God in Jesus Christ was planned. (1Peter 1:20)

God's grace was not an afterthought.

It was part of what God destined from the very beginning. And this Word of grace will triumph at the end of the age.

Faithful Christians cannot abandon the Word of God any more than faithful Americans can abandon the Constitution. The Word of God is living and enduring. The Word of God is eternal.

But, there is one difference between God's Word and the Constitution.

We pledge to defend the Constitution.

We don't have to defend the Word of God.

The Word of God defends us.

The Word of God preserves us in our time of exile.

The Word of God saves us.

The Word of God is the means by which the grace of God comes into our life.

May we be obedient to this living and enduring Word.

It is through this Word that we become God's new creation. It is through this Word that we are born again.

Amen.