

“The Power of the Word”

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Hebrews 4:12-16

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

13 And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.

15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

A PRECISION MEDICAL INSTRUMENT

Modern medicine is truly amazing.

Laser surgery.

Microsurgery.

I remember a time when doctors sometimes did exploratory surgery.

But, now there's a different way.

All kinds of internal scans
that allow us to diagnose and treat diseases.

That's what I think of when I read today's passage.
We read that God's word is
sharper than any two-edged sword.

But, then we learn that this "sword" of the Lord
is more like a quality medical instrument
than a weapon of war.

It's like a surgeon's scalpel
cutting away diseased tissue.

It's an internal scan
that illumines a problem
hidden to the naked eye.

LIVING AND ACTIVE

In addition to this, this surgical sword of the Lord,
the word of God is "living and active".

In other words, the stories of the Bible are not just about what happened to
God's people long ago.

The stories of the Bible are about what is happening to God's people here
and now.

When we apply God's Word to our life,
we learn that the old, old story
still has the power to change things today.

Take, for example the familiar story
of the Exodus from Egypt
and the sojourn in the wilderness.

We might honor the "living and active" aspect of God's Word by asking
questions of that story.

We might ask:

How are we like the children of Israel?

How do we respond
to the wilderness times in our life?

Do we doubt God's ability to care for us
in the tough times?

Do we forget about the times God has delivered us from captivity in the
past

Do we doubt that God is leading us
to the Promised Land, to a place of salvation?

Have we lost hope?

Each week when I write a sermon, it's my task to ask questions such as
this. This is the task for Sunday School teachers and educators in the
church.

It's not enough to ask, "What does it mean?"
We also must ask, "What does it mean to me?"

This is also what the writer of Hebrews meant
when he said that God's Word is "living and active".
God's Word to his people in the past continues to be a guide for us today.

The prophet Isaiah wrote (Isaiah 55:10-11) that
Just as the rain makes the grass grow,
so the word of God has the power to change things.

God's word takes on a life of it's own.
When God speaks, the world not only listens.
The world changes.

God's word is not an empty promise.
God's word accomplishes what it sets out to do.

We certainly are not as faithful or
as strong as we would like to be.

But, we don't trust in ourselves.
We trust in God's Word, God's story.

Unlike us, God's Word is faithful and strong.
God's Word still has the power to change us in surprising and unexpected ways.

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments give us more than just information about God.

The Scriptures reveal the living Christ
and invite us into relationship with God.

The Scriptures are like a pair of glasses
that enable us to see the world more clearly.
They refocus our vision
so that we can see God's salvation in Christ.

Instead of a world in chaos,
we see a world where God's love
can bring good out of evil and hope out of despair.

THOUGHTS AND INTENTIONS REVEALED

The Reformers taught that the church stands under the Word of God and not the other way around.

To say it another way,
we don't get to judge God's Word.
God's Word judges us.

No authority in the church can give a final and authoritative interpretation of the Bible.

You should never tell someone that something is true because your preacher said it was true.

I am not the authority.
God's Word is the authority.

The Bible is the only rule of faith and practice.

Ministers are sometimes called servants of the Word.

That means that ministers must try to preach in a way that allows God's living voice in the Scriptures to be heard.

It's not about us.

It's about what God reveals to us in Scripture.

God's Word helps us see ourselves not as others see us but as God sees us.

That can be encouraging
and it can also be frightening.

According to our passage, the Word of God,
this double edged sword.

The Word pierces the exterior of a person.
The Word divides soul from spirit,
and joints from marrow.

The powerful word of God is even able to judge
the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Now that is a precision instrument.

Those things that we try to hide from the world are:

"laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account".

HIDDEN THOUGHTS AND INTENTIONS HIDDEN

Most of us keep the thoughts and intentions
of our heart hidden from others.

In fact, we sometimes keep the thoughts and intentions of our heart hidden
from ourselves.

Many of us just don't want to share too much personal information. And
quite frankly a lot of folks are glad we don't want to share too much per-
sonal information.

What's that abbreviation? TMI?

I'm not on Facebook. Why?
I want to keep my private life private.
I don't want my feelings and motives
and especially my political beliefs
out there for the whole world to see.

People will judge us.
How many friendships have been harmed or ended
because too much information was shared?

I don't want companies having access
to my personal information.
I don't want them to know
what I want and what I need.

Such information in the wrong hands
would be dangerous.

In this digital age it's getting harder and harder to conceal our personal information.

But, as far as God is concerned,
concealment is not an option.
The Word of God puts our soul
on the operating table.

PSALM 139

This passage is reminiscent of the 139th Psalm.
The Psalmist meditated on the fact that God knows us completely.

God was there when we were born,
when we were "fearfully and wonderfully made" in our mother's womb.

God knows what we're going to say
even before we say it.
The Psalmist wrote,

"Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely."

According to the Psalmist,
try as we might, we can't run from God.

We can go to heaven.
We can go to hell.
We can go to the farthest reaches of the earth.

But, no matter where we go, God is already there.

JUDGEMENT

It's can be frightening to think that our lives
are laid bare in this way.

Our lesson for today reminds us
that this all knowing God is also
"the one to whom we must render an account".

The God who knows everything about us
is also the God who judges us.

Many people fear being judged by God.
And rightly so.

This passage tells us
that God doesn't need a special prosecutor.
God already has the goods on us.

His Word lights up the darkest recesses of our life.
His Word exposes those things that we would rather keep secret ... even
from ourselves.

No wonder the Word of God is described as a double-edged sword.
The information God's Word uncovers has the potential to save us,
but it also has the potential to destroy us.

AN MRI OF THE SOUL

But, God is not like Facebook.
God does not sell our information.

God does not use His intimate knowledge of our life to put us into eternal debt.

Instead, the Word of God is like a surgeon's scalpel. The Word of God is like an MRI of the soul.

And God uses this very intimate information to heal us at the deepest level.

God's Word helps us resist the idolatries of the world. God's Word reveals the futility of worshipping power and money and sensuality.

This is not always an easy process. Learning the truth about our true motives can be quite painful.

We don't want to learn that we have failed, We don't want to learn that we have fallen short in life.

We don't want to learn that we have been worshipping false gods.

But, this diagnosis is the first step that leads to healing.

This is what the Word of God is designed to do. God's Word opens the human heart in order to treat it.

The Word of God helps us see our weakness, so that we might be open to God's strength.

And the one thing that makes this MRI of the soul bearable is this:

We trust that this Great Physician has our best interests at heart.

WHO IS IN A POSITION TO CONDEMN?

The Apostle Paul once asked a question
(Romans 8:34),
“Who is in a position to condemn?”
The answer: “Only Christ.”

And who is Christ?
He is the one who died for us.
He is one who rose for us.

He is the one who intercedes for us
at the right hand of God.
He is the one who prays for us.

Some of you may recognize these verses.
We often use them as a declaration of pardon after our confession of sin.

This promise is also reflected in the words of a hymn. “There’s a Wideness
in God’s Mercy” puts it this way,

“There is no place where earth’s sorrows
are more felt than up in heaven.
There is no place where earth’s failings
have such kindly judgment given.”

A PRIEST WHO UNDERSTANDS

Our lesson from Hebrews says something similar.

We don’t fear the judgment of God because we know the gracious character of God.
God has revealed that character in his Son.

He is a priest who makes atonement for our sins.
In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

And this priest understands us
because he knows what it means to be human.

He knows what it means to struggle.
He knows what it means to be tempted.

Jesus not only died for us on the cross;
Jesus suffers with us here and now.

God in Christ is able
to sympathize with our weaknesses.
He is personally involved because he has been there and done that.

He has been a part of our world.
And He is still a part of our world.

Christ endured the pain of the cross
for the salvation of the world.

And Christ still endures our pain.

He sticks with us, enduring our pain when it feels like we can't survive for
one more minute.

Our Savior meets us in those places
where we are weak and tempted.

He is faithful even though we are unfaithful.

The salvation of Christ is a salvation that endures.

The salvation of Christ is up close and personal.
He has experienced the best and the worst life has to offer.

Christ understands.

PERSONALLY INVOLVED

Several weeks ago when Wilmington, NC was flooded by hurricane Florence,
Carrollyn and I were emotionally involved in the news coverage.

Why? Because we had lived there.

I did an internship at a church in Wilmington for a year when I was in seminary.

We recognized some of the places that were flooded.
We still know families that live in the area.

So, for us this was more than just a news story.
This was personal.

We not only heard the news; we felt the news.
We had been there.

This past week we had the same experience.

Carrollyn's home town of Roanoke Virginia was flooded in many places.

We had visited those very locations this summer.
We have friends who live there.

Once again, we not only heard the news.
We felt the news.
We had been there.

I suspect many of you watched the coverage of hurricane Michael with the same interest.

Central Florida is no stranger to hurricanes.

It was just a little over a year ago when we were preparing for the storm. In 2004 a spate of hurricanes damaged our homes and our church.

We know the misery that a hurricane can cause.

And so the news of this devastating hurricane was more than just a news story.

It was personal.
We can sympathize
with these victims in a deeper way.

To a certain extent, we've been there.

That's what today's passage tells us.

God in Christ has come near to us.
The Word became flesh and lived among us.

He cares and understands because he has been there.

This is deep meaning of the incarnation.
This is what we will be celebrating
once again this Christmas

And that makes Jesus the perfect high priest,
the one who can represent us before God.

A DOWN TO EARTH GOD

In many religions the idea that God could be affected by our pain and sorrow is anathema.

When they think of god,
they think of a god who above it all,
a god who is not affected by pain or sorrow.

They think of a god
who is not bothered by temptation.

But, Christianity takes the opposite approach.

We have a down to earth God.
God in Christ was fully human.

He experienced sorrow and temptation.
And yet sorrow and temptation did not win.

In the resurrection God overruled sin and sorrow.
The power of God's Word as revealed in Christ
was stronger than the powers of darkness.

And the struggle and victory of Christ,

the story of the cross and the resurrection
is a continuing saga.

The Word of God is living and active.

And the drama of God's salvation as revealed in Jesus Christ is being
played out in our lives even today.

William Barclay summarized our lesson for today well when he wrote,

"Jesus is the perfect high priest because he is perfectly God and perfectly
man.

Because he has known our life he can give us sympathy, mercy and power.

He brought God to [the world] and he can bring [the world] to God."

God's grace as revealed in Christ is marked
by compassion and forgiveness,

...the two things that this world
needs more than anything else,
...and the two things that we
need more than anything else.

According to our lesson for today we can
"approach the throne of grace with boldness."

We have the assurance that God's grace
is greater than all our sin.

We have the assurance that
mercy will triumph over judgment.

We have the assurance that our God
is a compassionate God.

When all is said and done,
the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ
will win the victory.

This the powerful Word of God.
It is indeed amazing grace.

As the hymn puts it,

It is grace that teaches our heart to fear,
AND
It is the grace that relieves those fears.

Amen.