

- Exodus 24:12-18
- 2 Peter 1:16-21
- Matthew 17:1-9
- Psalm 2
- or Psalm 99

Over the summer, I was invited by the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit to teach a class on preaching. And for the past several weeks, a group of students from Detroit and Metro Detroit had been coming to the church. And we've had a time in which we have an opportunity to learn about preaching.

I have cobbled together a syllabus and I'm teaching the class, and one of the things I'm doing is I'm having the students give sermons to one another and engaging in a bit of critique with each other. These students have been an absolute privilege and honor to work with because so many of them are already serving churches in Detroit, and so many of them are struggling with incredible opposition in their lives to fulfill their call, to be a pastor.

They are experiencing economic hardships. They're staying faithful through incredibly difficult times in their family or in their health. They are often struggling to balance their lives between the demands of caring for their parishioners, and their charges and the demands of caring for their family members.

I am in awe of them and I am reminded constantly of what they do with the little resources they have, how incredibly faithful they are. And one of the things I've asked them to do is to preach an occasional sermon, a sermon that you would give, not in the regular Sunday preaching, but at a funeral or a wedding, or at an opening of a church.

And this past week, one of my students, Pastor Harold Cadwell, who is a pastor down in Detroit at a Baptist church, he gave an incredible occasional sermon. It was actually a repeat of a sermon he had given the week before for his best friend's funeral. His friend Bull (sp?) had died at the age of 52. And Harold spoke in his sermon about how he had known this friend, this best friend throughout his life, and that his best friend had been with him at every step of the way and had lifted him up and celebrated him and stood by him through thick and thin.

And the sermon was based on a passage of scripture from Philippians which says, keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. And Pastor Harold said that when he was thinking about his friend Bull, he was just crushed because this person who had been with him through thick and thin was now gone.

And then he wrote and said in his sermon, the Holy Spirit whispered in my ear, and the message was this: through Bull, I was with you, and before his body touched the earth, I carried his soul into Heaven. Bull is with me but I am still with you. And having received

that word from God, that whispering of the Holy spirit in his ear, Pastor Harold believed that he understood the promise of peace that was made in Philippians.

Now, I begin with this story because for the past several days, I have been reflecting a lot on that turn of phrase that Pastor Harold used, the Holy Spirit whispered in my ear, and the thing that struck me as so powerful in the kind of witness he was giving to me through that was that pastor Harold was telling me a little bit about what it meant to go through difficult times. Through times in which you experienced oppression, through times in which you experience death, through times in which you experience opposition, through times in which you experience persecution, and somehow still hear the word of God.

And the remarkable thing about Christianity is that we do not simply promise a well devised myth as we read in our epistle today, but Christianity stands or falls on the belief that God is speaking a word to each of us. And of course you have heard many people claim to be bearing a word or receiving a word from God.

And oftentimes those messages that they receive are by the definition fantastic. When I was growing up, there was Oral Roberts, a television evangelist who claimed that God spoke to him 23 times explicitly, and at one time told him to found a university, which he founded. Now, it's not for me to tell you or to doubt what anyone would say about a word that God has given them. But what I can promise you is this: experience has taught me that it's in the midst of death, it's in the midst of opposition, it's in the midst of struggle, it's in the midst of trial, it's in the midst of persecution, it's in the midst of tribulation that the Word of God comes to me as peace.

And the specialness of what it means to be a Christian in those moments, is I feel as if I know a Jesus who knows me and stands with me and walks with me and talks with me and cares for me and loves me and wants to be with me and has promised never to forsake me because that is what it means to be a Christian.

And you and I have been invited into this relationship with Christ. That is the good news of the gospel. That is the promise of God in Christ Jesus. And so the question I have for you today is not whether God is speaking to you, but what is the word that God is speaking to you today? In what ways is the Holy Spirit whispering in your ear? Through whose lips is God's word being spoken? And where do you find the Word of God? Whether it's in this beautiful day, in the pages of your Bible, or even face to face in a moment of revelation.

You and I are closing out this incredible season called Epiphany. Epiphany began when the Magi came and followed a star and found the Christ Child and brought Him gifts. And Epiphany ends today with an incredible moment in which Jesus takes a few of His disciples up to a mountain top, and His countenance has changed and He becomes completely white and shining. And this is a foretaste of the glory of resurrection. But between that moment of glory and the moment that is waiting for us on Easter day, you and I have to walk the way of Jesus as He makes His way through the Cross and through His crucifixion and through death and through His resurrection.

And so as I was reading the passages today, what was striking to me most was not the moments in which you read about Jesus's appearance being changed. It was the moments in which God continued to speak to His people and to give them a word. And so, on a reading from Exodus, God calls Moses up to the mountain. In our reading from our epistle, Peter, does not even mention the fact that Jesus looked different when He was on the mountain. Peter can only say that we are testifying to a truth. We heard a voice on that mountain saying, this is my beloved. And in saying that, God was saying that everyone connected to Jesus was His beloved, and that includes me and you.

And finally in our gospel for today, you have this incredible moment where Jesus after He appears to them with Moses and Elijah. And while Peter is still making plans to build and raise money through a capital campaign to create some booths to honor Moses and Elijah and Jesus, a dazzling cloud surrounds them and a voice from Heaven comes. And that voice says, this is My Son, the Beloved. With Him, I am well pleased. Listen to Him.

And when the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear, and then Jesus came appearing all alone and touched them. Now, all of that is meant to create a kind of emblem in our mind, a kind of graced imagination in which you and I are to imagine those moments when we hear God's word speaking to us.

When the Holy Spirit whispers in our ear, as Pastor Harold said, we are to see those moments in which Jesus comes through a voice to give us a word and to touch us and to carry us with Him as He makes His way to cross and resurrection.

So you and I have a task this coming Lent. It's to listen for the Word of God as it's being spoken to us. And today I want to finish with two images that might help you get into the mood of that reflection. The first is from a couple of paintings done by first George Tooker in 1972. It's called Voice II. This is the second attempt that Tooker wanted to articulate somehow through visual imagery, what it meant to seek a word and to try to give a word to one another.

He paints this in '72 which of course was the year in which Kent State happened in the country. The country was incredibly polarized. People did not see eye to eye. They did not understand each other. Generations were at odds with each other, and so Tooker paints this in which one figure who is very much like the figure that is on the other end. One figure is speaking and one figure is listening and the figure who is speaking has no way of knowing that there's someone on the other end of the wall straining to hear every word that is spoken. And the person who is listening has no assurance, who is placing his ear against that wall, has no assurance that someone is trying to speak.

And Tooker paints this because he wants the viewer to see the conflicts of his age in the context of eternity. He wants the viewer to see it from a God's eye point of view. He wants the viewer to see it from the position of grace, which is that God is making it so that the words will get through. And Tooker who converted to Roman Catholicism, this is a powerful statement of what it means to listen and to be told a healing word of God.

A few years ago in 2016 another time of incredible social change. Another artist, Alex Gross, painted and homage to Tooker's Voice, calling it Voice. It has two women who again, look exactly the same, speaking to one another through a wall. And this is, again, to invite us into a God's eye point of view, to a grace point of view on our own challenges around us.

Now, my intent today is not to suggest that things will become easier for us if we listen to one another, but I believe that we have been called to be a community that listens first and foremost to God. And in listening to God find ourselves transformed and find a way to be a place of sanctuary and hope and healing to others.

And perhaps you can even see in these two paintings a promise of reconciliation. Not merely in our wider body politic, but within your own bodies. And this is why the artist depicts them as the same person. Because sometimes when we live our lives, we can be divided even within ourselves, and through all of this, God is speaking the word to transform and heal us. God is speaking to us constantly. The question is whether we are willing to hear it.

The last image I want to give to you is actually a story. Three weeks ago when we had that cold snap, I was making my way to the church. It was about 7:45, I was a little bit late for the 8:00 service, but thankfully I live next door, so it's not so bad. And so as I made my way there, there was a guy that was salting and shoveling the sidewalk. In fact, his name was Guy, funny enough. And he introduced himself to me and he said,

“What kind of church is this?”

“Well, it's an Episcopal church.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, we have bishops, but we're not quite Catholic. I'm married.”

“You're married?”

“Yes, I have two children and they're right in there.” And after a while, I finally said, “You know, Guy, it's quarter of eight and I don't want to be late to work. I need to go.” He's like, “Oh, okay. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry.”

And then as I was leaving, I stopped and I said, that was an opening. He wanted a connection. So I turned around and I went to him. I said, “Guy, how can I pray for you?”

He said, “How can you pray for me?” I said, “Yeah, I'm a priest. That's what I do. How can I pray for you?” And he stopped and he put his shovel down and he said, “Please pray that the Creator continue to work in me the good work He has already begun.” Now, whatever else Guy has been called to do on this earth, whatever else he does with his life, whatever obstacles he face on that day, he became a witness, a bearer of God's Word to me.

This Lent may God, the Creator, and Christ, your Redeemer, and this spirit that is inspiring you even today, though you barely have stopped to notice it. May that God, that triune God,

Father, Son, and Holy spirit continue to do the work in you that He has already begun.
Amen.

[End of Recording]