

X Pentecost: Proper 14 (Year A)

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Psalms 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

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13 August 2017
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Many of you know that during the last year I was a member of a community called Saint Hilda's House, a group of young adults living in an intentional Christian community and working at social service agencies in New Haven, Connecticut. As part of our program of spiritual formation, we were each paired with a spiritual director, a mentor with whom we met twice a month to reflect on our individual journeys with God, our changing sense of vocation, and to talk about the challenges we faced working with communities of great need in New Haven at our job sites. Sometime this spring my spiritual director gave me some excerpts from a book called *The Word is Very Near You*. It's a guide to praying with scripture published by the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, a monastery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I confess to you that I haven't yet read the book, but because it is on my radar I immediately noticed what must be its title's origin in our reading from Romans this morning: the word is near you.

Paul here is writing to the Christians in Rome about the law, about faith, and about salvation, and as I was trying to piece it all together, it wasn't long before I realized how important this one line is to the passage: the word is near you. The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart. The word is very near you, the book says. What does Paul mean here by the "word?" I think it's reasonable when hearing talk of the "word" in church to think first of the Bible. We believe the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be indeed the word of God. We preach the word, we say. Those are words written about God, words of ancient stories of faith, beautiful poetry, letters and gospels and other products of revelation from God to us. Words about God. Then there are those words spoken by Jesus: his teachings and commandments. His parables, his lessons, his words. That's actually the word Paul is using here: ῥῆμα. It means utterance, or saying, "that which is said," and it's used in the New Testament to refer to those sayings of Jesus, the very words that he spoke, and the faith that the apostles would later pass down.¹

So we have the Bible, words from God about God, and words of Jesus himself in the Gospels. But the Bible itself shows us another meaning of the "word," and that would be Jesus himself. Jesus is the λόγος, the very Word of God. "In the beginning was the Word," opens John's gospel, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."² These words that we often hear at Christmas tell us that "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."³ Paul isn't using this word, λόγος, he's using ῥῆμα, but I think the invitation here, and really any time we're looking at scripture

¹ *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (International Critical Commentary), pp.288-290

² John 1:1

³ John 1:14

like this, is to see how understanding Jesus himself as the Word of God deepens our understanding of the scripture. You see, the words of Jesus, the utterances, the sayings are near us because the Word, Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity and the only begotten Son of God, is near us. Because he came and dwelt here, among us. This is what we call the Incarnation. To incarnate means to, quite literally, take on flesh. The Incarnation is at the heart of our faith, the bold idea that God loved humanity so much that he took on human flesh—something, as it happens, that Paul so often reminds us is weak and feeble and prone to sin—this Word took on flesh to redeem our flesh, to free us from the grips of sin and death.

Because the Incarnation is at the heart of our faith it is all over our liturgies, and you'll hear a lot about it this morning. In the Nicene Creed, which we say every Sunday, we proclaim, "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man."⁴ This summer at the Eucharist we are using a sung version of the creed, a paraphrasing of the Apostles Creed, actually, put to music by Sylvia Dunstan: "I believe in God's Son, Jesus, now for us both Lord and Christ of the Spirit and of Mary born to bring abundant life."⁵ That's what we'll sing this morning, and it is, I suppose, a little easier to miss because of the poetic language, but the Incarnation is there. Jesus is born "of the Spirit and of Mary." The Incarnation is also central to the Eucharist prayers we pray as we celebrate the mysteries of the Body and Blood of our Lord. At communion the priest prays, "In your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all."⁶

So, why all this talk of the Incarnation today and every Sunday for that matter? Why focus so much on an event that occurred two thousand years ago in a time and culture as far removed from ours as you can possibly imagine? Well, you see, the Incarnation was not just an event in history, an act of God (maybe the biggest of miracles) to happen once and then leave us to ponder philosophically, discuss in seminary classes, or write sermons about. No, the Incarnation is still happening all around us. God's coming among us in the person of Jesus fundamentally changed the look, the texture, the meaning of this world. And through Baptism, we are buried with Christ in his death and rise again with him in his resurrection. We are born into Christ's incarnate reality, born into the Body of Christ, which is made up of you and me and every person who calls upon Jesus' name and is baptized into that reality. Born into the Body of Christ, which is just as living, breathing, and active today as it was in first century Palestine in the person of Jesus. Paul, writing this letter more than twenty years after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, Paul, who by the way, never met Jesus outside of a vision on the road to Damascus that left him temporarily blind but forever a disciple of Christ, Paul, writing to Christians in Rome, a city 2500 miles from the places in which Jesus lived, Paul has the audacity to say the word is near you. Not the word was near you. The word is near you. Friends, Jesus Christ is just as present here today as he was two thousand years ago. He's present in bread and wine on this altar, he's present in his living word, and he's present in the living Body of Christ, in you and in me and in your neighbor.

⁴ Book of Common Prayer (1979), p.358

⁵ Wonder, Love, and Praise #769, "I believe in God almighty"

⁶ Book of Common Prayer (1979), p.362

The Christian life involves participating in Christ's continuing Incarnation, and I don't think that I understood this in the same way before living at Saint Hilda's House this past year. Saint Hilda's House is attached to Christ Church, an Episcopal parish in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. This means that the theology and liturgy (the worship) of the parish emphasizes the Catholic heritage of our tradition, our Anglican tradition that some say bridges the gap between the Protestant and Catholic flavors of the Church. I discovered in this unique parish an emphasis on the Incarnation that was hard to miss. Every day at the end of Morning and Evening Prayer, we would recite the Angelus, the Marian anthem that recounts the Angel Gabriel's announcing to Mary that she would bear the Son of God. It's found in the first chapter of Luke's gospel, and it goes like this: The Angel of the Lord announced unto Mary, and she conceived by the Holy Ghost. And then a Hail Mary: Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed in the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. And it continues: Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And another Hail Mary. And then: And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. A third Hail Mary. And lastly: Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God, that we made be made worthy of the promises of Christ. And then it would end with a short prayer.

So this, every day, twice a day, and bells would ring at noon if you could remember to say it again. With such a constant reminder of Mary's role in the story of our salvation, it wasn't long before I began to grasp new truths about the Incarnation. Be it unto me according to thy word. This is Mary saying "yes" to God. Mary agreeing, almost giving permission, to God's great plan for her life. Mary aligning her will with God's will. Mary's yes is followed by that wonderful phrase, "And the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." Mary's yes to God allowed the Word of God to come to earth, when she literally bore the Word into this world. And after praying this day in and day out I soon realized that I can, too. I too can bear the Word of God into this world by aligning my will with God's, by listening to what God is calling me to do, who God is calling me to be, and responding. My vocation does not look much like Mary's but if I am doing what God is calling me to do, I am participating in the continuing Incarnation of Christ. I too can bring his Word close to earth. I can bring his Word near. The word is near you, Paul says. On your lips and in your heart. We participate in carrying the Word of God into this world, into the dark places of fear, and sin, and death, the dark places of despair, injustice, in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. We do this with Christ. That's what we are called to do: we are called to bear Christ as Mary did, to give birth to the Word in new ways in our lives. For this word, Paul says, is for everyone. Quoting the prophet Joel, Paul claims that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."⁷

That's great. That's good. But there's a catch. Paul then asks, "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?" Friends, the good news today is that we are called to participate in this work, in this incarnate reality. We, the Body of Christ, are called to bear Christ to one another and to the whole world; as the Blessed Mother did two thousand years ago. This

⁷ cf. Joel 2:32

is, I believe, our primary vocation as Christians, not just the vocation of those in ordained ministry, or those who work in a church building. But the vocation of all who call upon the name of the Lord, all who through faith have come to believe in this Word made flesh. The ways in which we do this are not the same. Mary can teach us that; let me know after church if you think you have one on her! The paths we take to follow this calling are as diverse and varied as the beautiful Body of Christ is itself, around the world, in all times and all places. And what a word there is to tell! What a Gospel to proclaim!

Jesus says in the gospel of Luke that he has come “to bring good news to the poor,” to “proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”⁸ This is incredible—in today’s Gospel passage from Matthew Jesus is walking on water, astonishing his disciples. Jesus, the incarnate Word, walks and talks and lives like us, but also heals and performs miracles, he’s crucified, dies, is buried, and he rises from the dead three days later, upending the whole world’s pattern of sin and death that he entered into when he was born. That’s exciting—and we’re called to be part of it, we’re already a part of it, by virtue of our Baptism. You’re already participating in the Incarnation whether you know it or not. By being part of the Body of Christ, by receiving the real and present Body and Blood at this altar, you are participating in the greatest thing this world has ever seen. And as exciting as that sounds, and as excited as a preacher can get talking about it, that can be, well...a bit scary.

I, and certainly I a 23-year old, shouldn’t have to tell anyone here who has lived any length a time as a Christian that it can be and is hard. We can’t find the words, we don’t have the courage. The reality of life hits us, and we encounter great hardship. We experience, either in our own souls or in the lives of those around us, sorrow and loss, injustice, great need, crippling doubt. We encounter real pain, real sin, real death. Too often we’re selling our brother into slavery, or we’re being sold, like in the story of Joseph and his brothers in our Old Testament lesson. I imagine that Joseph had no clue how God would use him in Egypt, sitting at the bottom of that hole. And surely no one could blame him for feeling downright mad at God. I doubt he had any clue how God would use him in the years to come; he was probably thinking that his years were at end. How could he have predicted how God would call forth his gift of interpreting dreams to win favor with the Pharaoh, to find a place in the Egyptian court, and finally to bring his brothers back to him in an act of reconciliation. Joseph played a key role—he participated—in God’s grand story for the salvation of the world, in a way he couldn’t see and probably didn’t fully realize even at the end of his life. There’s no way he could foresee Israel’s bondage in Egypt, Moses leading the people of Israel out in the Exodus, the claiming of the promised land, the coming of the Messiah, and the salvation of the whole world by Jesus on the cross.

And that’s okay. That’s actually comforting, I think, to us who are participating in our own ways, in ways that seem less heroic than Joseph’s or less miraculous than Mary’s. You see, by participating in the Incarnation, we do just that. We participate. It’s not our incarnation. It’s Christ’s. We’re only called to proclaim it and live in it. God used Joseph and Mary in the strangest of circumstances, and I bet he can use us too, if we open our hearts, our lips, and possibly too, our ears. If we bear the Word of God to one another. Next week we’ll hear the rest

⁸ Luke 4:18-19

of Joseph's story, and in the weeks to come the story of Moses and the Exodus, stories of God building upon what he did through Joseph in Egypt. And this Tuesday the Church celebrates the Feast of Saint Mary the Virgin, the Blessed Mother of God. How will you be like these saints, these incredible examples of faith? How will you bear Christ into the world? The word is near you. The word is very near you.