

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Sexagesima – February 4, 2024
Luke 8:4-15 – The Living Word
Rev Peter Wagner

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

Today is about the word of God. This word is the clear theme of the hymns. Almighty God, your word is cast, like seed into the ground. Preach you the word and plant it home. Thy strong word did cleave the darkness. Lord, keep us steadfast in your word.

And the word of God is the clear theme of the readings. It's in the Old Testament reading from Isaiah 55, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

And God's word is in the Epistle from Hebrews 4, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

And the word is in the Gospel, the Parable of the Sower. For when Jesus explains his parable, what is the first thing and most important detail? "The seed is the word of God."

Now, all of us know that the Bible is the word of God. Thanks be to God, who has given us the words of Scripture, who has preserved them down through all the centuries for us to read. It's truly a miracle, that we have the ancient words God actually spoke to Moses and the prophets. And thanks be to the Holy Spirit, who inspired the prophets and apostles to write it all down.

But there's more to this seed, this word of God. The word is more than words written on a page. The Bible is the word of God because every line on every page points to Christ, the living Word. As the Bible itself says, in John chapter 1, the Word is Christ. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men."

So yes, the word of God is the Bible. But the Bible is God's Word because the Bible reveals the Living Word, the Son. God the Word, made flesh among us, come down to live and die for us.

The Son is the word by whom all things were made. In the beginning, at creation, when God spoke all things, he spoke through the Son, the living Word. "Let there be light," and there was light. Thy strong word did cleave the darkness – that was Christ Jesus.

And this is why the epistle from Hebrews 4 calls the Word a person. Pay attention. "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." The word of God is a living, active person, who sees all things, to whom all must give account. The word is Christ.

So the word of God that goes out from his mouth is the Son, God the Word. And the living Word obeys his Father, he goes out and enters our lost and fallen creation. He comes to do his Father's will and redeem us. And this Word does not return to the Father empty. He accomplishes the purpose for which he is sent. He succeeds in his mission to die. And then he rises triumphant, returning to sit down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven. Therefore all things are in subjection to him, the triumphant Word.

So we have the written word, the words on the pages of the Bible that point to the living Word. But there is also the preached word, spoken words that point to the living Word. All three work together. A spoken sermon meditates on a written text from the Bible, helping you to see the living Word alive for you. The preached word and the written word bring the living word before your eyes, to see and believe in him. As Paul wrote, when he preached to the Galatians, "It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified."

We preach Christ crucified, the incredible love of God for you. See him now, in his love. God hung dying on the cross in your place. God the Word, breathed his last in love for you. We preach from words on a page, interpreting the Bible. But the Holy Spirit works through that preaching, to make you believe in Jesus.

Words and preaching like this – words that point us to the living, active, breathing, triumphant Word, who

was once enthroned on the cross and now sits enthroned in glory – preaching like that never returns void. It accomplishes the purpose for which God sends it. It brings hardened hearts to faith. It brings eternal life.

Now that we understand who the Word of God truly is, perhaps we are ready to consider the Parable of the Sower.

“The seed is the word of God,” says Jesus. But now we have learned that the true word of God is Christ. So Jesus is speaking of himself. I am the seed, I am the living word. I am scattered throughout the world, whenever the words of Scripture are faithfully preached. I was planted in the ground, and as I myself said, when I predicted my own burial, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,” I said, “it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” I died. I was buried in the ground, like a seed. And yet I sprouted from the earth on the third day. I rose to bear much fruit, to establish the church. Just as I spoke life and light at creation, I rose to speak forgiveness and salvation for all who hear and believe my word.

So the seed is God the Word. And the sower is the preacher. Preachers do not get to pick and choose who gets to hear the gospel. They are called to recklessly scatter the seed everywhere, publicly portraying the crucified seed before the eyes of the whole world, the seed that was buried and sprang up with life eternal.

What about the soil? The soil is you, your heart. As there are many kinds of soil, there are many kinds of hearts. In fact, each of our hearts at various times is like each of the soils. The ones along the path hear the word, they hear of Christ the seed, but their hearts are hard-packed and shallow by exposure to the world. There is no depth of faith. It’s too easy for the birds, for Satan and his demons, to come and snatch the word from their hearts, so they never get a chance to believe.

As for the ones on the rocky soil, these receive Christ the living word into their hearts with joy, but they have no root. When times of testing come, they fall away. Christ says to them, “Take up your cross and follow me.” This means suffering. It means dying with him. We will be hated by all for the faith. But blessed is he who endures.

Then there is the seed that falls among thorny soil. The thorns are the cares and riches and pleasures of life, competing for your heart, and sadly they often win out. Because Jesus does not clamor or shout. God the Word speaks by a still small voice. The world is a noisy gong and a clanging symbol, doing its best to drown out his voice. The world will try to distract you and make you think you don’t have time to read the word on the page, or come to church and hear the word preached. The world doesn’t want you to see the true, living, crucified Word, or believe in him. These thorns must never win. Listen to the still, small voice, for he fills all things with power. When he speaks, he silences all voices but his own.

Finally, there is the good soil. When God the Word is planted in a heart that listens and hears and holds him fast in an honest and good heart, then Christ springs up in that heart. He rises as the new man in your heart, to bear abundant fruit with patience. For died and now is alive, and living in you, he makes you alive. This is your baptismal life. In him, you daily die to sin, and daily rise to life eternal.

But the key word here is patience. The living Word bears fruit with patience. Not your patience, his patience. For your heart is hard-packed, rocky, and thorn-choked. Your heart is not good and honest, not the rich loamy soil that bears abundant fruit. Like land that has never been tilled or cultivated, your heart is not ready for the good seed. Thanks be to God, for his patience with you. Not only does he send the living word into your heart, but he also sends the Holy Spirit, to till and cultivate you, to make you rich farmland. A sower only scatters the seed all over the place. But the Holy Spirit, speaking through the Word, is the patient cultivator. He applies his word for his purpose, so it never returns empty. He uses the word to uproot thorns and break hard-packed soil and sift out rocks and pluck weeds and bring in rich fertilizer. He gives seed to the sower, and then he sends the rain and snow of his word to water the earth, and he makes it bring forth and sprout. Our God does it all.

For all this to take place, for the seed to do his work, you need to be in Christ, and in his body, the church, constantly hearing God’s word read and preached from the Bible. This is how Jesus the living word comes to you. He enters your heart by his word and sacrament, through the means of grace, to tend and cultivate your bad soil, to make it rich and receptive.

Blessed be our God our Father, and blessed be the living Word, and blessed be the Holy Spirit, for all their work of salvation. What great love, that God would scatter his precious seed into poor soil like ours. What great love, that he tends and nourishes us. And what great patience, that he keeps planting his seed in us as often as it takes, not matter how hardened and rebellious the soil of our hearts may be. And he succeeds. His word springs up in us with life eternal, his word is triumphant. He overcomes all things in his chosen children, to save them. Oh give thanks to the Lord, our living Word, who lives and reigns in our hearts forever, to make us alive in him. Amen.