

"The Word Works"

Mark 1:21-28

January 28, 2018
Epiphany

4th Sunday After The

If you ever watched a magician's show, you realize how much is involved in performing the illusions: elaborate costumes, mesmerizing hand gestures, lights, smoke and so on. Magicians, from those long ago up to modern day, have used these effects to give the impression that these things were actually causing the "magic" to happen. (Actually, they are usually done to distract our attention and allow us to be fooled into seeing something happen that's not really there.) But these "bells and whistles" have become so much a part of the entertainment process that we would be genuinely disappointed if they were not there. It would be very dull to have a man come out in street clothes and simply say to his assistant, "Disappear....now re-appear." We probably would not appreciate that and would seek out the magician with the most vivid performance and spectacular special effects.

In some ways, we do the same thing in our spiritual lives. We have a tendency to believe in "bells and whistles" as the cause of spiritual blessings, rather than trusting in God's appointed way. For example, before mankind fell into sin, Adam and Eve had a very close and trusting relationship with God. God blessed them and they received those blessings with simple faith. Sin changed that. In eating the fruit forbidden by God, Adam and Eve were asserting their desire to seek happiness and personal satisfaction in a way other than what God had appointed.

Since that time, people have done the same thing. We have attempted to seek happiness and personal satisfaction in ways other than what God has appointed, even when we are seeking God and His blessings. We are attracted by the "bells and whistles", that is the flashy and appealing things of life. We have become rather cynical and seek God through those things which may interest us or stimulate us.

Consider what people look for in a religion today. Some may look for signs and miracles as proof of God's presence and channels for His blessings. Some people may seek a dynamic preacher who can keep an audience mesmerized with his words as a way to hear God. Some people desire new orders of worship and more contemporary songs to revitalize their relationship to God. And, the popular method of getting in touch with God, which is promoted by our modern culture, is to look for God within yourself through meditation and reflection.

Even Christians in congregations, not just individuals, can share some of these feelings. When there is conflict and strife, a congregation may look for God's intervention by the means I spoke of above. Maybe that's true here. Perhaps there are some who wish that God would perform some sort of awesome miracle within our midst to cease conflict among members, do away with the financial problems and turn this congregation around. Others of you might be thinking that newness is the answer to whatever it is that ails us: new songs, new ways of worship, even a new pastor or new leaders of the congregation. Not only could all things new help solve problems in the congregation, it is thought, but such things could bring more people to the Lord.

While I do not want to deny the ability of God to work through miracles, defend dull preaching, or reject any worship form newer than the Reformation, there is something misleading about this "bells and whistles" approach to receiving God's blessings. Our society does place an inordinate amount of emphasis on emotion and experiences. Everything from the way our children learn to our leisure activities must stimulate our senses and give us a pleasant experience. While being "wowed" by a miracle, mesmerized by a dynamic preacher, or having our emotions inspired by a song or worship form might indeed be pleasant experiences, these things in and of themselves do not convey God's blessing. To seek out God and His blessing only through our experiences is to be in danger of missing God's blessings all together. God works in a much different way. God works through the Word, a very common means which is neither a bell nor a whistle, to accomplish good things for us and to deliver His gifts to us.

God created the world in which we live through His word. Many reject the teaching of creation because they cannot accept the notion that mere words could accomplish something so great. Yet, the account of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 does not say that God needed spectacular and cataclysmic events to form the world. As the hymn, "Thy Strong Word", says of the creation, "At thy speaking it was done." God merely spoke the word and things came into being. His Word accomplished His purpose in creation.

God redeemed mankind through His Word. In order to have the happiness, satisfaction, and peace which we desire and seek, that which destroys happiness, prevents satisfaction, and causes conflict - namely, sin, - must be done away. God accomplished that, yet He did not do it with power and might to wow the masses. He accomplished it through the Word -- the Word who became flesh and made His dwelling among us -- His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus entered this world, not with "glitz" to dazzle people, nor power to overwhelm them, but in lowliness and deep humility. He came to reconcile the conflict between God and people because of our sin and He did that, not with "bells and whistles" that would stimulate and emotionally charge people, but by means of a humiliating death on a cross one Friday afternoon in the Judean countryside.

Many overlooked this event. His disciples fled the scene out of fear; other ignored the execution of a supposed common criminal because it seemed irrelevant. As far as it being of any religious significance, Jews would reject it because they could not understand God working in such a weak and humble way. Greeks would reject it as being foolish and philosophically illogical.

Many today see this unglamorous means of God working as being either incomprehensible or foolish. Yet through the Word, Jesus Christ, His death on the cross, and His resurrection from the dead that sin has been removed and people have been reconciled to God. As the Bible says, "when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:10).

It is even by means of the Word that God brings the benefit of Christ's work to people. In our text for today, Jesus shows that Himself. He comes to Capernaum on

the Sea of Galilee and begins teaching in the synagogue. The people are moved and amazed. Why? It's not because Jesus had a good sermon that day which was interesting or made people feel good. The Word, Jesus, proclaimed words that had authority. The text says they were moved and amazed "because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law." Teachers of the law taught mainly minor details of the law by quoting other rabbis, "Rabbi So-and-So said this while Rabbi Such-and-Such said that." They would never take a stand themselves. Jesus spoke as the Son of God, probably like He spoke in the Sermon on the Mount where He said, "You have heard it was said...But I say unto you...". Yet this is no mere critique of style. There is a fundamental difference. Rabbis taught the opinions of men. Jesus proclaimed the Word of God. And that word has power for authority means not only the right to do something, but the power with which to accomplish it. Jesus' words had the power to move and change people and they accomplished that purpose.

In our text, Jesus also does battle with a servant of Satan - an unclean spirit who possessed a man in the synagogue. Here Jesus has an excellent chance to pull out some "bells and whistles" to overcome evil. What a show He could have put on, like an ancient magician, to dazzle the people -- waving His hands, muttering mysteriously, or showing strange facial expressions. Yet He does not do that. When confronted with evil, Jesus merely speaks the Word, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And by this word, the unclean spirit is defeated and cast out.

God continues to deal with you today in a similar way. He continues to change people and deliver His victory over Satan by means of His Word and not by glitz, power, or might. He reveals Himself and His will for you in the written Word - the Bible. He conveys His forgiveness to you through the spoken Word - when called and ordained servants of the Word, speaking on His behalf and with His authority, stand before you and say, "As a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore forgive you all your sins." He conveys His Gospel - His Good News - through the proclaimed Word - when these same called and ordained servants proclaim His Word in sermons. He conveys His assurance and strength to you through the Sacrament which St. Augustine called the Visible Word.

These means accomplish God's purpose, giving the blessings, He intended, not because of those who convey them, but because of the authority and power of God's Word. The absolution, or forgiveness, spoken at the beginning of this service conveys God's actual forgiveness to you, not because I spoke it authoritatively, but because of the authority God has given to the pastor and by power attached to these words.

When pastors preach, people may complement them for their sermons because they are interesting, funny, or touching. Some people will praise a pastor's sermons and credit them for everything from bringing in the young people to causing church attendance to increase to causing the church membership to grow. These kind, well-meaning words, in addition to making the heads of pastors to swell unnecessarily, are not true. People, including young people, may be moved to attend church or even join church after hearing the sermons here, but it is not the preacher who has the

power. It is the word which he proclaims. The message has the power, not the messenger.

In a few minutes, many of you will come forward to receive Holy Communion. And you will be comforted and strengthened in your faith. Yet it is not the nutritional value of a morsel of bread or the taste of a sip of grape wine that gives you this comfort or strength. It is God's word of promise attached to these elements that causes you to be comforted and strengthened.

What Good News this is -- God's mercy, forgiveness, comfort, strength, and blessing come to you through His Word and not through your experiences. Is this an excuse for boring preaching? No. Does this mean that we shouldn't use any song or worship form newer than the 16th century? No. Does this mean that we shouldn't feel good about worshiping God? No. It means that you do not need to depend on these things as a measure for whether you are actually receiving God's blessings or not. Don't give into the temptation to think so

There will be boring sermons. Every preacher has them. There will be times when worship services may seem dull and hymns may seem difficult and uninspiring to you. There will be times when you don't feel forgiven, comforted, and strengthened. But that doesn't mean that you haven't been forgiven, blessed by God, renewed and strengthened. As long as a pastor proclaims God's Word in granting the absolution or preaching, His power is there. You are forgiven, whether you feel it or not. As long as a worship form or song proclaims the Word of God, His power is there. It is able to strengthen and uplift you. As long as the Word of God is used in connection with bread and wine, His power is there. You will be comforted, assured, and strengthened, whether you can explain or understand how it is possible that Jesus' body and blood are truly present or not.

Although we live in a "show biz" world that emphasizes happiness and contentment through entertainment and emotional stimulation, resist the temptation to seek your spiritual well-being in the same manner. Look for God in His Word, not necessarily in miraculous signs and wonders. Receive His forgiveness by faith, not by how you feel. Rest in His assurance and peace, not by what the preacher says or how he says it, but because of what God promises through the Word. In evaluating the success or failure of something, people may say, "Well, whatever works!" Long ago, the prophet Isaiah said, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." For us, God's Word works. His Word contains His authority, is attached to His promises, and has the power to deliver the goods. Try it and see. Amen.