

# "The Power of the Word

Romans 10:8b-13

February 17, 2013

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

You might think your pastor is a bit off his game today. After all, it looks nothing like October outside, yet he has chosen that great Reformation hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God", to be sung today. (Actually, he didn't choose it. It is the selected hymn of the day.) Why are we doing this? Aren't we supposed to be starting Lent? What does this hymn have to do with Lent? Many think of Lent in terms of its traditions: soup suppers and Wednesday evening services. Others will think of the theological themes: repentance and self-denial. The high point of this hymn and the main theme of Lent is, however, the Word of God.

If we go back to the beginning, we see that the Word of God has power. God spoke into being the entire universe. Everything that exists does so because God *said*, "Let there be...." and there was.

The Word of God also expressed God's love for the first humans, Adam and Eve. He told them that they now had everything they wanted or needed. They were to tend the Garden of Eden and could eat the fruit of any of the trees in the garden. The Word of God spoke one word of Law when He said to them, "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Satan came in the guise of a serpent. He did not try to tempt Eve to do wrong and sin. He tempted her to doubt the Word of God. And he was successful. She doubted the Word of God which said they had everything they needed. She disbelieved the Word of God which spoke of God's perfect love for them. Instead, she chose to believe that there was something else she and her husband needed and that God was holding out on them. Therefore, she ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and gave to Adam who ate of it also.

This act of doubt and disbelief, rebellion and sin, immediately ruptured the perfect relationship Adam and Eve had with God. The Word of God came with judgment. Life would be miserable because of this sin. There would be conflict among people, external suffering as people lived in their vocations, and, of course, death. Adam and Eve were reminded of that horrible truth as we were reminded of it last Wednesday. The Word of God said, “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

We suffer today for the same reason that Adam and Eve suffered. It is not because there are guns. It is not because of lack of laws. It is not because of insufficient funding for important governmental programs. We suffer because of sin. It has cut us off from God. It has alienated us from one another. We cannot stop it or make it better by passing new laws, funding new government programs, or educating people. We are doomed.

God knew that the very minute that Adam and Eve sinned. The Word of God brought a promise, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel.” There would come a champion who would defeat the devil who had caused this problem, remove all the pain which came from sin, and destroy death itself.

This good news – this Word of God – is what our text speaks of today. Paul writes, “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart.” Paul is actually quoting a verse from Deuteronomy here (40:14) What word is Moses referring to in Deuteronomy? It is the word of the Law. Moses and the people of Israel did not have to go out, searching for the Law of the Lord. The Lord God stooped down to give them His law through Moses that they might possess it and obey it.

But this Word of God cannot save. The Law cannot correct the problem of sin and its symptoms and consequences. It can only expose them. Therefore, Paul uses this quotation to show how God has sent a different word – a word of Gospel - which would save people from sin, death, and destruction.

The Lord would do more than stoop down and give the Word of God on stone tablets to a human intermediary like Moses. He would come Himself as the Word of God in human form. The Gospel of John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1, 14) Here was the champion, promised from of old.

We see the beginning of this epic confrontation in our Gospel reading for today: the Word of God vs. the devil who had destroyed the Word of God in the hearts and lives of humanity through his temptations many centuries before. The devil unleashed his temptations upon Jesus much in the same way as he did upon Adam and Eve. He tried to get Jesus to doubt God’s providence by urging Him to use His powers to make bread out of stone. He tried to get Jesus to worship something other than the true God (namely, the devil). He tried to get Jesus to tempt God by throwing Himself off the top of the temple to see if God would save Him.

These are pretty common temptations which we often face. We are often tempted to doubt God’s providence, especially in the midst of suffering or when we lack something.

We are often tempted to bow down and worship something other than the true God. It usually isn’t the devil himself, but it can be things he uses to draw us away from God: money, possessions, popularity, fame, acceptance by the culture, or anything we love and desire the most, on which we depend upon the most, and to which we go in time of danger and need.

We are often tempted to tempt God by putting ourselves in dangerous situations, physically and spiritually, and expecting God to deliver us. We smoke, overeat, fail to exercise and pray to God for good health. We put ourselves in situations where we know sin can occur – that tavern, that website, that group of friends – and pray to God, “Lead us not into temptation. So often, we given in to those temptations.

But, with Jesus, it is different. The incarnate Word of God uses the written Word of God to defeat the devil's temptations. Jesus wins the battle which Adam and Eve lost centuries before and the battle you and I would lose centuries later. All Jesus has to do is say, "It is written..." and the devil is defeated and had to leave.

But the Word of God would do more than battle the devil in the desert. The Gospel ends by saying, "And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time." Do you know when that "opportune time" came? According to the Gospel of Luke, the next time the devil makes an appearance is when he enters into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus.

Jesus did battle with the devil on the cross. The devil tempted Him again to forego God's mission for the sake of His own well being. Through the mouths of the religious leader, Roman soldiers, and fellow prisoners, Jesus was urged to come down from the cross and to save Himself. But, Jesus, carrying the weight of the sin of the world, refused to do so. He defeated the devil's temptations a second time so that He might stand between us and God's wrath, accept the punishment for our sin, and die, physically and spiritually.

We are the beneficiaries of the Word of God's battle against the devil, the father of lies and the doubter and destroyer of God's Word. Because Jesus overcame the devil's temptations in the desert and obeyed God, our failure to reject temptation and our lack of obedience is stricken from our record and replaced with Jesus' perfect obedience.

Because Jesus overcame the devil's temptations on the cross and carried out God's plan for salvation, our many sins of thought, word, and deed – what we have done and what we have left undone – have been forgiven. We have God's peace instead of God's wrath. We have become justified (declared "not guilty") before God instead of being condemned. We live new in Christ now on this side of death and will live forever in Christ on the other side of death. This was signed, sealed, and guaranteed by Jesus' resurrection from the dead on the third day.

*This* is the word of God which is in our hearts and on our lips according to our text today: “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” This faith by which we believe is a gift of God, created by the Holy Spirit. It receives the gifts which the Word of God promised to us and which the Word of God won for us.

The confession which we speak is a gift of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is a natural result of our faith and a means by which that Word of God is shared with others. For this salvation and this life is intended for everyone. There is no distinction among peoples in God’s eyes. Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

The Word of God – Jesus – employed the Word of God – the Scriptures – to defeat the devil in the desert and on the cross – so that He might bring the Word of God – the Gospel – to us and all people. We have received it by God’s grace in His Word and Sacraments. We have confidently believed it by the work of the Holy Spirit. We boldly confess it by the working of that same Spirit as we hear that Word, read that Word, and incorporate that Word into our lives and our very beings.

Will it be difficult at times to believe the Word? Yes! Will it be hard at times to confess that Word? Most definitely! The devil has been defeated but he hasn’t given up. But we have what he does not have and cannot have: the Word of God – incarnate, inscripturated, and internalized. We can boldly believe and confidently confess what Martin Luther wrote and what we just sang:

*The Word they still shall let remain  
Nor any thanks have for it;  
He’s by our side upon the plain  
With His good gifts and Spirit  
And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife  
Though these all be gone,  
Our vict’ry has been won  
The Kingdom ours remaineth.*

Amen.