

“The Powerful Word”

Isaiah 55:10-13

July 13, 2014

5th Sunday After Pentecost

We are a culture fascinated by power. We want the computer with the greatest speed and most memory. We want the cell phone with the greatest coverage and most apps. In order to do great things, we have to have great power. Many see the same need in spiritual lives. Many think that there is a need for a new and different power to meet the spiritual needs of people in 21st century America today. Preaching and teaching are not enough. Are these assumptions true?

If the most important problem that we have to deal with in our spiritual lives is sin, then some people would say we don't need all that much power because sin isn't all that powerful. Many people today see sin only in terms of actions. Sins are the wrong things we do so, to overcome sin, all we have to do is stop doing wrong things. Some weaken sin even further by claiming there is no absolute standard for right and wrong. Sin is watered down to being only poor choices or inappropriate actions. Not a very powerful problem there.

However, if we see sin the way the Bible sees sin, everything changes. First of all, the Bible says that sin is a condition, not just a set of actions. Sin is our nature. Secondly, when it comes to actions, there is an absolute standard of right and wrong, established by God, which every human being is required to follow. Thirdly., sin is more than inconvenient or inappropriate. Sin has power. It actually does something. Sin separates you from God. Sin will kill you. “The wages of sin is death.” Sin will send you to hell forever. Sin, death, and hell – now there's some pretty powerful things that affect every one of us.

What is the solution to such powerful adversaries? Our text for today offers words as a solution. Despite the old saying that “the pen is mightier than the sword” (i.e. words and communication are more powerful than violence), many people think that talk is cheap and

ineffective. But that's probably because people think that words are merely descriptive, that is, words can only describe things.

Our text for today from Isaiah says that the Word of the Lord though is very different. The Word of the Lord does more than describe action and what should be done. The Word of the Lord takes action and accomplishes what needs to be done. Isaiah quotes the Lord as saying, "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."

The Word of the Lord is so much more than mere information. The Word of the Lord is a power that causes things to happen. The Word of the Lord is a vital life-giving force. It is like the rain and snow which come down from heaven and water the earth. This moisture produces life by causing plant life to grow and produce a crop. It sustains life by providing seed for the sower and bread for the eater. The Word of the Lord does the same thing. It does not do nothing, but accomplishes the Lord's will. It produces life and sustains life by doing what it says and giving what it promises.

We see that first when God brought life and creation into existence. He used no raw materials nor elaborate mechanisms to bring forth the universe. He simply spoke it into existence. "And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." (Gen. 1:3) Everything else came into existence in the exact same way. God spoke and the power of His Word brought it into being. As the book of Hebrews puts it, "the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible." (Heb. 11:3) The power of the Word of God brought everything into existence.

When sin and evil invaded God's good and holy creation, it was the Word of God which came to the rescue. The Word of God who was from the beginning, who was with God and who was God

Himself, became flesh and dwelt among us. The Word did not talk about love, but lived a life of love. The Word did not order obedience, but perfectly obeyed the Law of God in our place and for our sake. The Word did not describe salvation, but the Word, Jesus Christ, accomplished salvation for us and all people by taking our sin upon Himself, undergoing the punishment which our sin deserved, and enduring the wrath of God's judgment against our sin. The mercy of the Word of God earned for us forgiveness and a clean slate before God.

When life seems hopeless and the future seems dim, the Word of God not only promises hope but delivers salvation in ways beyond our observation or our imagination. Our text for today was written to encourage the people of Judah who had been exiled by the Lord to Babylon for their sin and refusal to repent. Now God was going to deliver them and bring them home to the land of Judah. The Word of God promised it and the Word of God would do it. They would go forth in joy and be led by peace. Everything would be completely changed and radically different. The Word describes mountains as singing and the rivers as clapping their hands to show how radical this salvation would be. The curse given to Adam in Genesis 3 would be reversed. Instead of thorns, there would grow cypress trees in the desert. Instead of weeds there would be beautiful myrtle bushes. Everything would become new.

In the same way, we live in exile on a planet cursed by sin. But God is going to deliver us from this world of sin and bring us home to Himself. God's Word has promised this and God's Word will do it. In that day – the resurrection of all flesh, everything will be changed and different. As the Word of God says, "For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' (1 Cor. 15:53-55) The curse of death will be reversed. Mortality will give way to immortality. And we, in resurrected bodies, shall live forever.

There is much discussion these days about what the Church has to offer the world. The fact that this question is even discussed indicates that people think the answer is “not much.” People talk about the church offering a place to belong, a place for friendship and fellowship, and so on. Many people don’t value those things any more and, besides, the world can probably do a better job on those areas. Others think the church can offer more “practical” things: food, clothing, shelter, and other physical necessities. Those things are needed but other places can provide them as well.

The Church is in the unique position to offer its greatest treasure to the world: the Word of God. As we talk about activities within the Church – divine worship, Bible Class, Sunday School and so on – the key thing we have to offer is not just a religious experience of some sort, but the Word of God. As we talk about outreach into the community – the block party, Vacation Bible School, the Farmer’s Market and Fair Booth – the key thing we have to offer is not just a fun time, trinkets to give away, and so on, but the Word of God.

We offer the Word of God not simply as an academic exercise so that people can learn Bible Stories or religious doctrine. Those things *are* important, but they are not the chief reasons for offering the Word of God to people. We offer the Word of God to people because of its living, life-giving power. The Word of God promises things to us and all people. The Word of God then causes those promises to come true.

The Law in the Word of God when spoken and taught in all of its harshness will bring forth guilt and sorrow in all who hear it. It shows us our sin and God’s judgment against us. We should not avoid this message or feel embarrassed by it. This leads us to repentance, which like a diagnosis leads us to seek a medical cure, leads us to seek a spiritual cure.

The Gospel in the Word of God when spoken and taught in all of its sweetness actually brings forth salvation. We don’t have to look for a more relevant message or a less offensive message. The power to save is in the message of Christ crucified for sinners. As St. Paul wrote to the Romans, “For I

am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” (Rom. 1:16).

The Word of God in the pastor’s mouth does not merely tell of the forgiveness of sins or simply declare it, but actually delivers the forgiveness of sins into our ears and heart. The Word of God in the Sacraments is the same. The Word of God attached to water makes baptism much more than a symbolic cleansing but actually cleans away our sin, brings the Holy Spirit into our hearts, and creates faith. The Word of God attached to bread and wine makes the Lord’s Supper much more than a memorial meal, but spiritual food which delivers forgiveness into our mouths and feeds, nourishes and strengthens our faiths just as food feeds, nourishes, and strengthens our bodies.

When we offer the Word of God, we are not offering just religion. We are offering the promises of God and the power of God to make these promises come true in the lives of people who hear the Word of God and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, believe the Word of God. We are offering peace for the present through the forgiveness of sins and a life with God now. We are offering hope for the future through the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. All of that is through the power and the activity of the Word of God. What greater power could we want? What more effective power could we need? Amen.