

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
 October 5, 2008
 10.05 Means of Grace—Scripture

Exodus 20:18-21; Psalm 19; Matthew 21:33-46

Resource: *Claim the Name: Confirmation Teaching Plans for 6-15 Weeks*, 2006.

“When all the people witnessed the thunder & lightning, the sound of the trumpet, & the mountain smoking, they were afraid & trembled & stood at a distance, & said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, & we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you & to put the fear of God upon you so that you do not sin.’ Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.” (Exodus 20:18-21, NRSV, slightly adapted)

The word of God is powerful & fearful. Moses reassures the people. Still, they shrink into the distance. Moses enters the darkness alone. When he emerges they cannot even bear the appearance of one who has been exposed to the word. Terrified, they make him wear a veil.

We’ve been talking about the Methodist Societies, the one condition for membership, & the three General Rules of evangelical living for those who would continue. To review:

One Condition: “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, & to be saved from [our] sins.”

Rule #1: “By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind.”

Rule #2: “By... doing good of every possible sort, & as far as possible, to all.”

Rule #3: “By attending upon all the ordinances of God.” (*The Book of Discipline of TUMC*, 2004, pg. 48)

The ordinances of God which we have covered to date include communion, prayer (both family & private), & fasting or abstinence. Along with these we have included several means of living & growing in grace: generous living, simplicity, intercessory prayer & meditation. Today I want to talk about two more of the ordinances: “the ministry of the word (both read & expounded)” & “searching the scriptures.” Today is about the power of the word.

Have you ever been so scared that you couldn’t move, & afterward you couldn’t believe you’d survived? That’s what the Israelites experienced at the foot of Mount Sinai (or Horeb). They are so frightened they make a request: that the word of God be mediated to them through Moses. God grants grace to their fears, allowing for mediation not only through Moses but through prophets, priests, & the written word as well. In the process, by means of this grace, the fear of the people is transformed into celebration, the kind of celebration we find in the words of the psalmist. Listen to these opening words from Psalm 19: (NRSV, slightly adapted, emphasis added)

“The heavens are telling the glory of God; & the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, & night to night declares knowledge. *There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, & their words to the end of the world.*”

Can you hear it? Can you hear the word of God? Words cannot express it & yet its voice is heard everywhere. The psalmist goes on...

“The law of GOD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of GOD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of GOD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of GOD is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of GOD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of GOD are true & righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, & drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

The word of God is powerful, life-changing, world-changing. As we hear the word read, as we hear it taught & explained, as we search through the scriptures & study them, they lay a claim on our lives. Through them God calls us & moves us to ministry. Through them we find ourselves addressed by God & charged with evangelical living. And that's what we're going to sing about right now. No, the meditation for this morning is not quite finished (we haven't gotten to the "Greatest Fears Redux" yet), but right now I would like for us to stand & join together in singing our closing hymn, #413 "A Charge to Keep I Have."

We have a charge to keep—to glorify God, to serve the present age, to live in God's sight, trusting fully in God alone. Are you ready for my fear redux? It is not the terror of hearing the word. It is rather the possibility that I might never hear it again.

In Matthew 21:33-46 Jesus tells the parable of the wicked tenants who rent a vineyard but refuse to release its harvest to the owner when the time comes. They abuse the servants, they kill the heir, & what will the landowner do? Kill them & give the vineyard to others who will be faithful.

The parable is about God's reign & those who have been entrusted to produce its fruit. In Jesus' day they were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Levites, priests & scribes. Entrusted with the stewardship & power of the word, they have been faithless in producing its fruit. More concerned with protecting its purity, they have withheld it from those who need it. So it will be taken from them & given to others who will be faithful. Ironically, Jesus has described in the previous passage who some of these folks are—prostitutes & tax collectors, some of the very same people whom these leaders have shunned & denied God's grace. Now in this parable, tax collectors & prostitutes enter God's reign before they do.

But God's grace toward those whom either the church or world has shunned is not what I fear. Actually, I find comfort in knowing that those who have hungered & thirsted after the very grace they've been denied would not only rush in first but be fully embraced by the love of God. No, my fear is not that those who've been shunned will enter first—it's that those who have done the shunning will enter before me. My fear is that somehow I will have been even less gracious & compassionate. My fear is that somewhere along the way I will have betrayed God's trust, having heard the word & known what it says, but failing to be moved by it to live it & share it. My fear is that, indeed, I might have betrayed my trust & thus forever die—not as in eternal oblivion (why would it matter?), but as in rejection, being abandoned forever, eternally alone & unable to hear God's voice ever again.

Hear once more the plea of the psalmist. He/she captures the sense most plaintively.

"But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, & innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth & the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O GOD, my rock & my redeemer."

Such is the power of the word. The only thing more terrifying than to hear it spoken from the mouth of God is never again to hear it at all.

What do I want us to do this week? ^(question asked of Bishop Blake by a Texas 6-year-old) Thirst for God's voice. Hunger for the word. Read the scriptures. Listen to them as they are opened & made plain by others. Search them & study them, both with others & alone. Be open to the word. Let it speak to us, move us, claim us & call us...

...that the harvest of God's reign might be fulfilled.