

“The Word Comes Alive”

1 Kgs 17:17-24

Matthew 17:1-9

2 Peter 1:16-21

Our worship is made up of holy rhythms: prayers and hymns, scripture and responses that frame our holy time here with G-d. And in many ways, this is a good thing for us. We rejoice as people come to worship the Holy One, we confess our sin together so that we may be open to hear G-d’s word read and preached, we give of ourselves and our treasures to the glory of G-d’s name, and we are sent back to the world. A familiar rhythm can highlight the promises and requirements of our faith, but, like any rhythm, if we don’t watch out, it can lull us to sleep or to distraction. Which brings me to our question this morning: “Why do we call the Bible the ‘word of G-d?’” Now, I’m gonna be honest with you. I’ve heard this phrase all my life, I’ve said it for years, and I never once gave a second thought to it. I mean, a holy book that records G-d speaking to humanity – why not call it the “word of G-d”? But this question is a deceptively tricky one – one whose answers are more like a symphony than a solo melody.

We shall begin with the words of scripture – a very nice place to start. “In the beginning,” as we read in Genesis, the earth was, “a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.” But G-d spoke and there was light. G-d spoke and there was sky and sea. G-d spoke and there was dry land. The first thing we learn about the “word of G-d” is that it is the source of all that was made. This word is the creative spark that brought everything into existence.

As the narrative continues, G-d forms human beings from the dirt and comes into relationship with us. G-d speaks and we come to know who we are. G-d speaks in covenants and we come to know how G-d would have us live. It is not surprising, then, that another important meaning of “the word of G-d” is revelation from G-d and, later, prophecy. G-d pierces the veil

that separates us from eternity and showers us with love – that is the record of our scripture. G-d chooses individuals to bear words of hope and love to the world.

In the Old Testament, the sign of such a revelation is the phrase, “the word of G-d” or “the word of the Lord.” And if you go looking for this phrase in scripture, you will find no small number of people that “the word of the Lord” came to: Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Balaam [who tried to curse the Israelites in the donkey-talking story], Samuel, David, Nathan, Shemaiah, Gad, Solomon, “a[n unnamed] man of G-d,” Ahijah, Jehu, Zimri, Elijah, Micaiah, Elisha, Jonah, Hilkiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Jonah [yes, two Jonahs!], Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and John the Baptist. They did not just hear the word – they received it and they shared it. G-d’s word is active – G-d has been busy talking.

And, as one example, we have our passage in 1 Kings. We can see that Elijah had pity on the widow who had offered him a room. Her son was sick and she prayed to the Lord, “O LORD my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” And the child was revived and made well – a miracle of G-d. And the widow said, “Now I know that you are a man of G-d, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.” Here, the “word of the Lord” is more than just receiving prophecies from G-d – it was the blessing of miracles, born of compassion.

Now, you might have noticed from that long list of people who received the “word of G-d” that except for John the Baptist, all of the people mentioned are from the Old Testament. It’s not that G-d stopped speaking – humans just started writing about G-d’s revelation differently. In the New Testament, the “word” is often a reference to preaching or teaching by Jesus and those in the early church. In the parable of the sower, for example, where Jesus talks about seed that falls on the path, seed that falls on rocky soil, and seed that falls on good soil, he later explains that the seed is the word of G-d. Jesus relates the word of G-d to belief in what G-d teaches and

says that, without belief, the word falls away from people. Jesus says that the word of G-d in good soil produces ones who, “when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.” When Jesus was teaching his words were not already scripture – they were recorded decades after his death. So, the “word of G-d” that came through Jesus was shared, taught, and passed down from person to person before it even found its way into the Bible. In various places in the New Testament, holding on to the word could just as easily mean keeping alive the words of Christ as keeping our faith alive.

Given the many ways that the Bible speaks of the “word,” it’s not surprising that followers of Christ came to understand the meaning of the “word of G-d” very differently. For example, in the year 100, it seems that Papias of Hierapolis thought the “word of G-d” in the New Testament only referred to the things that Jesus said, which would make him a very early red-letter Christian. Then there was Ignatius of Antioch who, in the year 107 became the first known martyr outside of those described in scripture. He was ready to face his death, but his church in Rome was trying to save him. He wrote to them that they should not speak up on his behalf. He said, “If you remain silent about me, I shall become a word of G-d. But if you allow yourselves to be swayed by the love in which you hold my flesh, I shall again be no more than a human voice.” For Ignatius, becoming a word of G-d meant imitating Christ – following him at any cost; even the cost of his own life.

This idea that the “word of G-d” was part of our lives’ testimony – part of what we preached – continued in the church. One of the great church fathers, Irenaeus spoke of preaching the word of G-d in the second half of the 2nd century. He wasn’t speaking about reading scripture specifically, but about preachers telling stories that they had heard firsthand from followers of Jesus – stories that may not have made it into the Gospels that we have today.

This idea of the “word of G-d” as teaching, preaching, revelation, and prophecy continued down the decades in the writings of the church. Every once in a while, someone had a unique view on it. A Christian mystic from the late 13th early 14th century named Meister Eckhart once wrote, “every creature is full of G-d and is a book about G-d. Every creature is a word of G-d. If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature – even a caterpillar – I would never have to prepare a sermon.” The notion that revelation still comes to us through creation is not a new one at all.

Because we are Protestants, the democratization of scripture is a big deal for us. Many people – even before the reformation – fought so that the Bible could be translated into common languages and made available to the people. But their writings still didn’t directly refer to the Bible as the “word of G-d.” In 1382, John Wycliffe translated the first complete Bible in English. He wrote in defense of his project that it was not heresy to translate the Bible. Rather, those who condemn the translation must also, “condemn the Holy Ghost who gave tongues to Christ’s apostles so they could speak the word of God in all languages that were ordained of God under heaven.” The word for Wycliffe was revelation from G-d like the one that the apostles received so they could preach to the world on Pentecost.

Getting into the Reformation time period, the “word” is still understood in different ways. In 1531, Philipp Melanchthon wrote in defense of the Reformation. He said, “in matters so highly important before God we must have a sure and clear word of God, and not introduce by force obscure and foreign passages.” Since he contrasted a “clear word of G-d” with other parts of scripture, it is certain that he didn’t think the whole Bible was to be called the “word of G-d.”

Here, we take a little detour to King Henry VIII. In 1539, the first authorized complete English Bible was released to the public – over 9,000 copies were printed by 1541. In the front of

each of the Bibles was a picture that showed the king surrounded by subjects with Christ looking on from the top right corner. Henry is portrayed like Moses received divine wisdom. And in his hand is a sword that reads “*Verbum Dei*” – “the word of G-d.” Henry wanted every single citizen to know that he was setting himself up as the Supreme Head of the Church – that he would be the conduit of G-d’s word and he would hold the final say on G-d’s word. Even though he communicated this notion of the “word of G-d” through the distribution of scripture, it still echoes with a larger claim to power and religious authority over all of his subjects.

Not surprisingly, the Reformers in England and elsewhere had a problem with a human being setting himself up as the sole interpreter of scripture. They fought for scripture alone to determine matters of Christian faith and practice: not like Henry who claimed that right for himself and not like the Catholic church who found spiritual foundation in the traditions of the church as well as scripture. It is difficult to say exactly who, how, or when, but it was during this time that the Reformers “took back” the “word of G-d” and applied it to scripture as the sole source of revelation about G-d and guide for their lives. In 1566, Heinrich Bullinger penned the “Second Helvetic Confession,” which is part of our Book of Confessions. The first sentence reads, “We believe and confess the canonical scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of G-d.” We made it, you guys! That’s the best answer I have to the question of how we came to call the Bible the “word of G-d.”

Now, the very astute among you will have noticed that I left a very important “Word” out – one from the Bible, no less! Jesus as Word incarnate from John 1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with G-d, and the Word was G-d...In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” Describing Christ as the Word of G-d occurs only in the first chapter of John and in the book of Revelation, chapter 19, where Christ is also called, “Faithful and True,” riding

on a white horse, coming to judge the earth in righteousness. Both of these depictions of Jesus are mystical and mysterious.

This leads us back to our holy celebration today: Jesus transfigured on a mountain. Jesus took a small portion of his disciples and went up a mountain – just the four of them. When, suddenly, Jesus began to look different to them. His face was bright as the sun, his clothes were awash in light and Moses and Elijah appeared to talk to Jesus. So what do you do if you're Peter, face to face with the greatest heroes of your faith? What do you do when eternity touches your heart and you suddenly know that somehow, however impossible it might seem, G-d is standing right in front of you – and talking to Moses and Elijah, no less! If you're Peter, you pitch a tent – or, at least, you offer to. You want to make camp and move in and stay forever because you know, unshakably, that this, right here, right now is a holy moment. And a voice from heaven echoes the words from Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, and I love him dearly. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!"

When we encounter G-d, we turn into idiots. And I really don't mean that to be insulting. There is nothing that we can say or do – no words that we could ever find to tell someone what just happened. We can't create this experience or give it to someone else. All we can do is receive it – this holy Word of beauty and truth. We didn't cause G-d to create the world. We can't choose when G-d speaks a word of hope or challenge into our lives. As our reading from 2 Peter reminds us, "no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit from G-d." We don't control G-d. We can't force a miracle because we are desperate. We cannot unite with Christ by the power of our own will and we cannot bend the scripture to produce what we want alone. The Word is active in all these ways, in all these places – is it any wonder that the church speaks in so many voices before the awesome glory of the

Word? We need as many channels to G-d and Christ and the Spirit as we can get and G-d makes a way for us to remain in touch, to remain connected no matter how distant or detached we might feel. The moments where we feel true communion with the divine are anchors of our lives of faith.

And so we listen for the word, however it comes to us; and we look for the vision of the Word incarnate. We look to expand our lives by letting Christ in more and more, but we know our limitations. When we peer into the unknowable and glimpse the glory of Christ, we are like those who look too closely at a tapestry with countless threads woven throughout. If we are lucky, we can pick out a shape – a lip, a sash, an eye – but mostly what we see is a glimpse at how G-d saturated that one strand. My friends, we are called together so that we can see together and speak together: visions and words of life. In describing the threads before us, we can grasp at more and more of the wonder that is Christ because, “In him [is] life, and the life [is] the light of all people.” Amen.