

## “The Word of the Lord...Not What It Seems”

The Rev. Jim Trimble; St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Louisville KY

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*Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18; Hebrews 11:29-12-2; Luke 12:49-56*

Blessed be the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

During our weekly celebration of the Holy Eucharist at St. Matthew's, we follow a tight order of service as spelled out for us in the Book of Common Prayer. We stand at the entrance of opening hymn; we sit during the psalm; we stand again at the Gospel and sit for the sermon.

When we hear “The Lord be with you,” we automatically respond with..... (And also with you). And when we hear the lector say, “The Word of the Lord,” we respond with..... (Thanks be to God). So, the readings we hear from the sacred book of scripture are seen as the Word of the Lord. But, it isn't always that simple. Things aren't always as they seem.

Many people have faith that everything in this holy publication is straight from the mouth of God, and what's said is said...there's no grey area. Why should there be when it's from God? I chatted with other priests this week, as well as read other writings and commentaries on the text in studying our readings. And, let me tell ya, don't let anyone ever tell you that the Bible is pure black and white, because, it never is. Yes, we do end our readings with “The Word of the Lord,” but what does that really mean.

Does it mean that God dictated these books to a secretary and had them self-published? Does it mean that the Word of God can only be found in these pages? What about Jesus being the Word made flesh? Things aren't always as they seem. A Maryland priest, Kirk Kubicek, writes that the phrase “The Word of the Lord” is found all over the Old Testament, beginning with Genesis and it usually comes to people in and out of visions. This tells me that this Word of the Lord is never a finite thing, that it's not something that is so concrete, but is always in transit.

For instance, when we look at the Book of Revelation, which some regard as a blueprint for the end of days and a foretaste of things to come, we find that about 75-percent of the verses are direct quotes from the Old Testament. Someone, or some people, have gone over the Jewish Testament and picked out some real good stuff and threw in stuff to bring it all together.

In Genesis, we tend to think that we have one story of Creation, when we, in fact have two and some think, three. We know the story of Noah's Ark and how a pair of each species of animal was brought on board, and then a chapter later, we read that there seven pairs of each animal. Bet you didn't catch that one, huh? So, for the folks who insist on reading this book literally, or study this book for answers, what are we to do? How can there be more than one version of the Word of the Lord?

In the reading from Isaiah, we hear of a love song describing God's relationship with the people of Israel, as God will give the people everything they need, but it turns nasty towards the end as the people don't quite live up to their part of the relationship and God destroys the vineyard. This is, indeed, the Word of the Lord, and our response to it is “Thanks be to God?” Sounds like an odd thing to be thankful for, I think.

The Psalm today describes God's vineyard, Israel, being ravaged by wild boars, as its walls have been broken down and people have plucked the grapes, the fruit of the vine. And this Word of the Lord is something we thank God for? And the clincher, the one that really bowls me over is Luke's telling of Jesus getting pretty angry at the disciples and the crowd, telling them that he does not come to the earth to bring peace, but to bring division. That we are all hypocrites as we can't read the signs of the time in terms of the coming of God's Kingdom.

What happened to that small babe wrapped in swaddling clothes whom angels greet with anthems sweet? What happened to the image of the Prince of Peace? What happened to the warm, fuzzy Jesus who welcomes the little children with outstretched arms?

Today we hear Jesus coming to bring fire to the earth, and division to every household. How can these things be the Word of the Lord when they foster so much separation between us and God? How can these things be the Word of the Lord when it seems our hope is all but lost at sea? How can these things be the Word of the Lord when we are thrown to the wolves and cut off from God and our families?

This strikes as counter-productive to the coming of God's new Kingdom of peace and love, of mercy and grace. But, what these readings are telling us is that things aren't always as they seem. That this new world, this new Kingdom of God will definitely come with a price, and don't you forget it. The price might actually be breaking families apart, as some choose the work involved in following Christ, and others don't. So, it's not so easy, I think, to read the Bible so literally, or to find just one answer. You have to study. You have to read, mark, and inwardly digest. You have to take this book seriously not as an instruction manual, but as a starting point for further reflection and discernment.

While in seminary, my classmates who were of more Protestant backgrounds than some others of us, more Bible-thumping than some of us, knew their Bibles backwards and forwards, inside and out. They can shout out chapter and verse for just about everything. At that point, I think I knew Psalm 23, one of the birth of Jesus stories, and Psalm 40, because the rock group U2 had a hit with those verses. And then there were some of us who could really go to town on the interpretation and study of those verses in relation to their context in that book of the Bible, or in terms of the socio-economic settings of when they were written. And between all of us, we had some pretty good Bible Study. We really started to get in tune with the Word of the Lord.

Will Scott, a priest in San Francisco wrote on his blog, "I think we can learn a lot from our Evangelical Bible thumping brothers and sisters, by taking what we know of the Bible, and find ways to share it without being bashful about it, but with strength, agility and comfort."

For me, experiencing the Word of the Lord, whether through daily and weekly prayer, or in the face of my neighbor, I'm always supposed to be challenged by what I see, read, or experience, never assured that I have all the answers. Feeling quite uncomfortable. But that's what Scripture is supposed to do. That's what the Word of the Lord is supposed to do....make us uncomfortable enough to explore what it's really trying to say to us, not so much take everything at face value with a blind faith. But approaching the Word of the Lord with a faith grounded in the Spirit working through us to open our minds and hearts.

The British bishop Tom Wright shares an illustration of when Beethoven used to play a trick on the very polite salon audiences, especially when he guessed they weren't really interested in his serious music. He would start off with a gentle, beautiful movement from one of his pieces; lulling everyone into thinking the world was soft and cozy, and full of cotton candy and figgy pudding. Then, just as the final notes were fading away, he would bring down his whole forearm crashing down on the piano keyboard, and laugh at the shock he just gave the crowd.

This is exactly what Jesus does for the people when he starts talking about the fire of judgment, and division to the households. He's ticked off that people can't see what's going around them, right under their noses. That there's a crisis brewing and they're totally oblivious to it. Between the Roman occupation and to Herod's regime, and the arrogance and false piety of the high priests and Pharisees, and then a young prophet proclaiming the Kingdom of God while healing the sick and welcoming the outcast. This is what Israel has been waiting for forever, and they can't see it.

The Word of the Lord will constantly challenge us as we try every day to live our lives as Christian people. As followers of Christ. As hearers of this Good News. As people endowed with God's good gifts of thought, discernment, and prayer. As people ready to face the fact that things aren't always as they seem.

Amen.