



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION
WASHINGTON, DC

THE WORD OF THE LORD

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Acts 13:13-44, Luke 4:16-21

Dan Claire

June 17, 2018

Whenever we gather as a church, we read the Bible aloud together. Usually there's some kind of liturgical response to the reading; in most cases the reader says "The Word of the Lord," to which everyone responds, "Thanks be to God." We can trace this practice back to ancient Israel, when selections from the Old Testament would be read loudly and reverently, and then the congregation would say, "Blessed is the Lord, the Blessed One, for ever and ever." These calls and responses have varied through the ages, but the meaning has been essentially the same for thousands of years: God has spoken, and his people want to say, "Thank you." The Word of the Lord is a precious treasure for which God's people are profoundly grateful.

In this message we're going to look under the hood of this whole process and consider what's happening when the Word of the Lord comes to us. First, *how* does God speak? Second, *where* does God speak? And thirdly, what's God saying?

HOW DOES GOD SPEAK?

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

In Judaism, this passage is known as the *Shema*, because of the first word in Hebrew: "Shema O Israel!" For thousands of years, the *Shema* has been central to the daily prayers of Jews everywhere. One might say that the *Shema* is to Judaism what the Lord's Prayer is to Christianity. But unlike the Lord's Prayer, the *Shema* doesn't begin by addressing "Our Father." It's directed to God's people. It calls us to "*Shema*," to *listen*, to the Word of the Lord.

There's a lot we can learn about God from the *Shema*. It presupposes that God isn't some impersonal force, but a living being—someone who can be loved with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. God can be loved in this way, because God can be *known*. God isn't hidden from us, nor is he silent. He didn't wind up our world like a clock and then abandon it to run on its own. Rather, God is always communicating. For example, as the creator of all things, God is always communicating through *nature*, whether in the grandeur of the stars and the mountains and the seas, or in the beauty of flowers and animals and people, or the countless other wonderful things he has made. God is also always communicating through *circumstances*. As the ruler over all things, God directs whatsoever comes to pass in our world,

so we can know him not only through what he has made, but also what he's doing. When everything in your life aligns perfectly, just at the right time, for some new opportunity that you have been praying for, it may well be that God intends for you to go for it. Or, on the other hand, if like Jonah you find yourself running away from God, and the ship you're on is threatened by stormy seas, it's likely that God intends for you to turn back. In any case, whether through nature or circumstances, God is always communicating.

Yet the fact that God is always communicating doesn't necessarily make it easy to get the message. It may be because our faculties are darkened by sin. Or it may be simply that the medium isn't particularly clear. Lavender Mist is an enormous Jackson Pollack drip painting hanging upstairs in the East building at the National Gallery of Art. I know there's a message in it, but I'm at a loss to know what it is. In the same way, it can be hard to make sense of what God is saying to us through nature or circumstances.

Thankfully, God is also always communicating through the Bible. It's through the Bible that we hear him most clearly, and that's why both Judaism before Jesus, and historic Christianity ever since, have always been centered on the written word of the Lord. We don't worship the Bible, but we do worship the God whom we know most clearly through the Bible.

This primary orientation towards the Bible is a practice that Jesus taught his disciples. In the Gospels, Jesus occasionally made reference to other ways we hear from God (e.g. nature, circumstances). For example, Jesus illustrated his teaching with the beauty of nature, pointing out the lilies of the field, and ravens, and mustard seeds. He also spoke of circumstances such as wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes and storms. But far more frequently, Jesus taught from the Bible. For Jesus, the Old Testament was the clearest and best way to hear the Word of the Lord. For example, when asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus quoted the Shema, saying that the greatest commandment was to love God with all your heart, soul and strength. In so doing, Jesus was modeling for us the primacy of the Scriptures. Yes we can know God through other means, but the clearest and best way is through the Bible.

Further, the only way we can be confident of what God may be saying through nature or circumstances is through the clear guidance of Scripture. So, for example, if you think God is leading you through circumstances, the first thing you want to do is consider what the Scriptures have to say. If the new open door before you involves the exploitation of widows and orphans—something the Bible explicitly forbids—then it's not of God.

Another way God sometimes communicates is through dreams, but these also can be notoriously difficult to interpret. In recent years there have been many stories from Christian converts around the world of Jesus appearing to them in dreams. Interestingly, they often report that their dream was of Jesus bringing them a Bible, or Jesus leading them to someone with a Bible. Then, by reading the Bible, they came to faith as Christians. We shouldn't be surprised by these reports, because this is what God intended. He wants people to come to him through his Word, because God speaks first and foremost through the Scriptures.

In other words, we mustn't think of the various ways that God communicates as different television channels, such that if you don't like what God is saying on the "Bible channel," then switch over to nature or circumstances or dreams. Rather, the Bible must be our primary means of making sense of what's happening in God's world. We are to interpret everything through the Word of the Lord.

This is not to say that the Bible in its entirety is easy to understand. In past weeks in this sermon series we have taken time to explore some of the more complicated and confusing elements of the Bible. Yet the overwhelming majority of the Bible is straightforward and clear, and the principal characters—especially Jesus—have a way of focusing our attention on what's most important. The chief example being when Jesus identified the Shema as the greatest commandment, and the second being like it, namely loving your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said that the entirety of the Old Testament can be summed up in those two lines. With Jesus' help, we can make sense of the Bible.

So how does God speak to us? He speaks to us in many ways, but most clearly through his word. Therefore, *Shema!* Listen! And give thanks that Almighty God speaks to us.

WHERE DOES GOD SPEAK?

There's a common misconception that when we really want to hear from God, we need to get away from it all and head for some exotic destination. Every few years my wife and I love to lead groups to the Holy Land, to meet God in the land of the Bible. We also love to go on retreats to places of natural beauty and seek the Lord. But let me be clear: you don't need to go far in order to hear God speak. The local church, gathered for worship, is the best place to be. The Church is the bride of Christ. She eagerly listens for her bridegroom. And the Church gathered together for worship is where God promises to always find his people and speak to them.

The Bible repeatedly teaches that the church at worship is the primary context for hearing God speak. For example, think again of the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4. It calls the gathered people of God to listen to him: "Hear O Israel." "Listen, people of God! Listen to the Word of the Lord as the gathered People of the Lord."

Or think of the story of Jesus returning to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16ff). God's people had gathered at the synagogue to hear a reading from the Bible. It just so happened that on that particular day that they were reading from the Isaiah scroll. When it was handed to Jesus, he unrolled it to Isaiah 61 and read:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to proclaim the gospel to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives*

*and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

After reading this passage, Jesus explained it to them, saying, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Or think of the story of Paul and Barnabas at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13ff). After reading from the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament), Paul carefully explained the Word of the Lord to all who had gathered. In the end, the people couldn't wait to hear more, and on the following Saturday it says "almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord" (Acts 13:44).

All these Bible passages (and many more) share a common presupposition: God speaks to his people when they gather for worship in his name.

One of the things I love about the Anglican tradition is that it fosters a way of life that is saturated with Scripture. Few other traditions read as much of the Bible in public worship. Few other traditions give as much emphasis to daily reading from the Old Testament, Psalms, New Testament and Gospels. With the other churches of the Great Tradition, we live the story of the Bible every year through the liturgical calendar. And I love how word and sacrament are held closely together in such a way that the Lord's Supper comes only after the public reading of Scripture and a sermon. After listening and taking the Word of the Lord into our hearts, then we come to the Table to feast on the Word. The Lord's Supper is the original altar call, offering a way for believers to respond physically to God's word in worship. We receive into our mouths what we have already taken in through our ears.

Of course, the church gathered for worship is not the only place where God speaks to his people. In our tradition, at the end of every service, God sends us out into his world in the power of the Holy Spirit, empowered to walk in the Way of the Lord. Following him throughout the week will require a continual posture of listening to his Word. Our daily reading of Scripture is vital to keeping in step with the Spirit in the interim between services. Nevertheless, when we think of the place where we hear the Word of the Lord most clearly, it ought to be the church in worship. This is because we hear best together, in a posture of corporate worship, under the guidance of faithful leaders who have devoted themselves to the apostolic tradition.

WHAT IS GOD SAYING?

Finally, what's God saying when he speaks? So far we have explored *how* God speaks, and we've seen that God speaks most clearly through Scripture. We've also considered *where* God speaks, and observed that the best place to hear the Word of the Lord is together in corporate

worship. Now, what about the *content* of the Word of the Lord? What's God saying when he speaks?

The overall message of the Word of the Lord is about the reign of King Jesus. He's the main character, and his reign as king is the focus of the Word of the Lord.

This might come as a surprise, given that Jesus doesn't emerge as a character in the Old Testament; not until the Gospels, over two-thirds of the way into the Bible. Still, Jesus is the focal point of the Old Testament. His reign is what the entire Old Testament anticipates.

Not long after my wife and I were married, we went to Central America to visit missionaries who were translating the Bible into an indigenous Mayan language. After we arrived we learned that the missionaries had finished translating the New Testament and were preparing to move back to the States. They had no plans to translate the Old Testament because they believed that the New Testament was all that the indigenous peoples needed. I remember being indignant, and urging them to stay and finish their work, or else send reinforcements who could carry on where they left off. Twenty-five years later, I'm more convinced than ever that people need the whole Bible. The whole thing—the Old Testament as well as the New Testament—is about the reign of King Jesus.

The Apostle Paul made the same point before the people gathered at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13). As Paul understood it, Jesus fulfilled the whole Old Testament story. After the reading of the Law and the Prophets (13:15), Paul summarized the story of the Old Testament, from the Patriarchs, to the Exodus, to the Judges and the rise of the monarchy under Kings Saul and David (13:17-22). Jesus came to be King through the lineage of David (13:23). Even though the prophets had foretold his coming (13:27), the Jerusalem authorities didn't recognize Jesus, so they put him to death (13:28), and laid him in a tomb (13:29). Yet God restored him to life by raising him from the dead (13:30), and he appeared to many witnesses (13:31). Then Paul quoted four Old Testament passages (Psalm 2, Isaiah 55, Psalm 16, and Habakkuk 1) to confirm that what was now happening with the reign of King Jesus had been long foretold by the prophets. The people begged to hear more the following Saturday (13:42), such that nearly the entire city gathered to hear them that day (13:44).

The point of Paul's Old Testament survey was to demonstrate that even though Jesus didn't come into full view until the New Testament, he was still the focus of the entire story. Not only Paul, but every New Testament author believed this. The reign of King Jesus is the answer key. His story unlocks and completes the story of the Old Testament.

The narrative unity of the Old Testament is absolutely remarkable if you think about it. The component books were written, little by little, over a dozen centuries—probably more like 1500 years. Few of the authors of the Old Testament knew one another, because few lived in the same century as one another. Over those years there were enormous changes to language, writing, culture, economics, technology, and politics. Many empires rose and fell. Yet despite

the massive changes that took place between the writing of Genesis and of Malachi, the thematic unity of the Old Testament is undeniable. It holds together so well, even though it's clearly incomplete and unfulfilled. As N.T. Wright likes to say, the Old Testament is a story looking for an ending—and King Jesus is the only ending that makes any sense. The whole story points to him and his reign.

The New Testament, on the other hand, was written in its entirety in just a few decades by a group of people who all likely knew one another. The reason they could wrap it up so quickly is because Jesus had come. His kingdom had begun like a tiny mustard seed and was now spreading all over the world. Eyewitnesses recorded the essentials of Jesus' story, and the earliest days of his kingdom spreading from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and on to the ends of the earth. From that point on, the story of the Bible was complete. Of course, God continues to communicate with his people even today, as the Holy Spirit leads us to understand and apply the Bible in our lives. But God will never contradict or overrule or change what we find recorded in the Bible. Because God's ongoing communication is always consistent with the Bible, we can stay true the message of God's Word, come what may.

What God's saying in the Word of the Lord, then, is that Jesus is the King, and his reign has begun. Christians sometimes summarize this message using the word "Gospel." But Gospel is so widely misunderstood that we often need to explain it when we use it. Gospel means "good news," announcing the good times that will come through the reign of a benevolent king. The Gospel of King Jesus is good news because it means that the reign of Satan—and every other wicked tyrant—is coming to an end. Our broken world is being restored. For all who swear allegiance to King Jesus, there is the promise of forgiveness of sins, and an eternal role in Jesus' kingdom. This is the message of the word of the Lord.

We need to hear this message again and again, because even though King Jesus' reign has begun and continues to spread throughout all creation, the kingdoms of this world aren't going down without a fight. Some fight back in plain view, as, for example, the gospel of King Jesus is ridiculed as antiquated, ignorant foolishness, or an unfulfilled life, devoid of pleasure. As often as not, however, the fight is more subtle. Instead of an outward and public fight, the kingdoms of the world try to subvert the kingdom of God—to co-opt it and us as part of their kingdoms—by claiming Jesus for their side. For most of my life, within our government here in the States, both the Republican and Democratic parties have used this tactic continually. Both parties have asked for the church's allegiance, because WWJD? What Would Jesus Do? He would undoubtedly support trickle-down economics, or universal health care, or increased defense spending, or decreased defense spending, etc.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions' reference last week to Romans 13 in the controversy surrounding illegal immigrant families is a prime example. In remarks that he directed to "our church friends," General Sessions called Christians to support the administration's policy of separating children from parents caught illegally crossing the border. He defended the practice by saying, "I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13,

to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order.”

Followers of King Jesus ought to step back and consider whether such a reading of the Bible is indeed friendly to the church. Is it an encouragement to be true to our primary allegiance to King Jesus, or is it an attempt to somehow bring King Jesus and his people into line with another kingdom and an authority that is presumed to be higher than the Lord's? As many have pointed out, there have been times in the history of the United States when Christian people have chosen allegiance to King Jesus over the law of the land, because they have found the laws to be so deeply at odds with the Kingdom of God. Whatever you may say about the rightness or wrongness of the American Revolution, hopefully you will agree that such action was merited during the Civil War era with the abolition of slavery. King Jesus' special concern for children's welfare should make Christians wary of any government policies that cause them harm.

In any case, my point here is to highlight the relevance and urgency of returning to the central message of the Word of the Lord, i.e. the reign of King Jesus. No other cause or kingdom should shift our focus away from living our lives in accordance with his Gospel.

*For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.
He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord. Psalm 33:4-5.*