

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on August 8, 2021

LISTENING TO GOD

One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Matthew 4:4

Today we continue our summer exploration of worship. We have been working our way through our Sunday morning liturgy. The first section we looked at was the call to worship. This was followed by the confessional part of worship. Last week, because it was a communion Sunday, Judith shared the meaning of the Lord's Supper. The Eucharist comes later in the service as a response to the good news of the Gospel. So, we are a little out of order. Today we go back to the part of the service that follows confession. This is the core section of Protestant worship which is listening to the Word. In our recent *Book of Common Worship*, we find these words:

The scriptures bear witness to the word of God, revealed most fully in Jesus Christ, the Word who "became flesh and lived among us." Where the word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the living Word is present by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, reading and hearing, preaching, and affirming the word are central to Christian worship and essential to the Service of the Lord's Day.

In our worship the longest part of worship is the reading and interpretation of Scripture. We begin this section of worship with the prayer for illumination. Again, our new *Book of Common Worship* tells us:

A prayer for illumination calls on the Holy Spirit to empower the reading, understanding, proclaiming, and living of God's word. This sense of utter reliance on the illumination of the Spirit is an important and distinctive mark of the Reformed tradition.

The prayer of illumination helps us to approach Scripture in the right way. We believe that we need the help of the Holy Spirit in order to read and understand the Bible. We trust in the Spirit to guide us.

I would like to begin with several mistaken ways men and women approach the Bible.

First the Bible is not to be an object of worship. I believe that there are times when people approach the Bible as something that we ought to idolize. I have heard people say, I do not need creeds, I do not need the church, I believe in the Bible.

Yet we are called to believe in Jesus, not the Bible. Remember there was a community of faith before there was a New Testament. After the resurrection the early Christians believed in Jesus. They did not have any of the Gospels or Epistles to read. Yet the Christian faith was still strong and growing because they knew the story of Jesus' death and resurrection.

The books of the New Testament were written to record the events of Jesus' life and pass them on to those who would come later. The Bible is not an end in itself. The Bible is a

means to an end, and that end is a relationship with the living Christ. God has given us the Scriptures as a tool. They are a tool for us to use to discover Jesus and his will for us. The Bible is not to be worshipped but rather used to discover Christ. As II Timothy tells us **all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the faith.**

A second mistaken approach to the Bible is as a source of all knowledge. If I had trouble remembering how to strap in the car seat for my grandson when we were on vacation last week, I doubt the first thing I would do is pick up my Bible to try and find directions.

That sounds funny when I say it, but some people act as if the Bible were the source of knowledge about all things. The prime purpose of the Scriptures is not to be a history or scientific textbook in our terms. The Bible contains all kinds of material. There is poetry, hymns, philosophy and the history of God's interaction with his people. But the Bible does not pretend to be a book that contains all knowledge. It will not answer every question in the world.

A third mistaken approach, common among Protestants, is the belief that we can understand the Bible all on our own. Several years ago, there was convocation at Princeton Seminary called "Reading Scripture Together." The title of the convocation tells us exactly how the Scriptures are meant to be read. In the keynote address the President of the Seminary at the time, Ian Torrance, quoted Stanley Hauerwas, **"No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America. North American Christians are trained to believe that they are capable of reading the Bible without spiritual and moral transformation. They read the Bible not as Christians set apart, but as democratic citizens who think their common sense is sufficient for the understanding of Scripture."**

Hauerwas is not saying that individuals are to stop reading the Bible. He is not saying we should never read the Scriptures sitting at home. He is saying that interpretation is not a matter of personal whim. He is telling us that we need both the Holy Spirit and each other to discover God's truth for us in his word.

What then is the proper approach to the Scriptures?

The first step is prayer. We pray that the same spirit that inspired the writers to record the words will be at work in our hearts and minds. Yes, we bring our reason, but we also need God's guidance. That truth is demonstrated each week in worship. Before we read the Bible there is a prayer of illumination. In this prayer we ask for the Holy Spirit to be our guide and interpreter. Our individual reason is not enough.

We move from the prayer of illumination to seeking God as we hear and read the Scriptures. In our service we have at least three readings. One from the Old Testament, one from the Psalms and one from the New Testament. I find it very interesting that many Churches that call themselves Bible believing often have very little of the Bible read in worship. If you notice many television preachers only read one or two verses.

We believe that God can speak to God's people directly through the word. I may have planned a service around one particularly theme from the Gospel lesson. But you come with

your own needs and the reading from the Psalms for the day speaks directly to you. That is the work of the spirit.

After the reading of Scripture, we come to the sermon. The task of preaching to a congregation week after week is humbling. One of the dangers for a preacher is to commit what I call pulpit abuse. This is to share one's personal opinions instead of interpreting the truths of Scripture. There is a lot of this happening in America today. Preachers are telling their congregations who to vote for in elections and what positions they should take on a host of issues. Preaching is not an opportunity for the preacher to share his or her personal opinions and agenda. It is the time when the people of God gather to hear a word from the Lord.

Anyone who knows me well, realizes that I have an opinion on everything. I have been fascinated with the political process since I was nine years old. I have always read extensively on many issues facing the nation and world. I believe I know the best plan for saving social security, tax reform, helping the poor and how foreign policy should be constructed. I know I am right.

But I do not pretend that my positions on issues of public policy are God's will. Yes, I seek to bring my understanding of the Gospel to these issues, but I do not pretend that there is only one Christian position on every issue.

For the truth is that there is not a unique Christian position on 99% of the issues that face us. Yes, there are Christian principles that we are to use to guide our lives. We are to work for peace and justice in the world. We are to treat each person as having ultimate value. We, as citizens, seek to allow our Christian understanding to shape our engagement with the culture. But this does not mean Christians have to agree.

Most questions are about implementations of principle. Christians are called to serve the poor, but we will certainly disagree about the best way for this to happen. The Bible does not give an answer to every policy question. A preacher must have the humility to hold their personal opinions in check.

So, what are the questions that should shape preaching?

The primary function of the Bible is to teach us about the nature of God. Timothy tells us **all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof and for correction.** You and I are to approach the Bible seeking to find God. The nature of God is not self-evident. God is outside this created order. Since he is not part of the created order there is no human faculty, which enables us to discover him. Yet the hidden God has revealed himself to us through the Bible. It is the record of God's interaction with his people.

Recall for a moment the over-all flow of the Bible. The Old Testament begins with the creation of the world. We are told why God created human beings and what our purpose is in the world. It describes our sinful nature. It moves to the story of Abraham who is called to be a new nation. Moses saves the people from slavery in Egypt and leads them to the Promised Land. We learn how the nation of Israel grew and prospered under King David and how the nation was unfaithful to God and how the prophets continually called the people back to faithfulness. We are told how the people began to look for a Savior.

The New Testament tells the story of Jesus. We are told of his life, death and resurrection. The story is then told of how the church spread the story of salvation into the world.

The story of God's love for us is what the Bible is all about. Thus, the first questions a preacher seeks to explore are:

What does this passage say about God?

What do these words reveal about God and his relationship with human beings?

A second set of questions to shape our reading of the Scriptures involve seeking direction for how to live our lives. The second clause in Timothy reads **for training in righteousness**. The Bible teaches what we should do in our lives. It does this in several ways.

The most obvious way is with rules. The Ten Commandments are the primary example. God has revealed his will that you and I are to live by. Some of these rules guide our relationship with God and others, such as not stealing, help us live in community.

Another way the Bible sets the direction of our lives is through models. If we might wonder how to pray, we can look for models in the book of Psalms. There are Psalms for people who are joyous, others for people who feel guilty, others for those who feel defeated. There are Psalms, which reflect almost every human condition. These can serve as models for us.

There are human models in the Bible as well. The Bible is full of stories that record the experiences of men and women seeking to be faithful to God. They are shown with all their shortcomings and failings as well as their victories. We can learn from their examples.

Thus, a second set of questions a preacher brings to a passage of Scripture include:

What does this tell me about how I should live my life?

What change does God want me to make?

The task of the preacher is to interpret the Bible that it might inform the congregation about the nature of God and Christ's call upon their lives.

The task of the people in the pew is to actively listen. One writer tells us "The word 'listen' contains the same letters as the word 'silent'. We are to silence our hearts and minds that we might listen, not so much to the words of the preacher, but to listen for God's word coming to nurture our hearts and minds.

When all is said and done,

After all the arguments have been made about the authority of Scripture,

What really matters is reading the Bible together listening for God.

We come seeking bread for the journey

One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.