

“The Lord of the Word”

The crowd roared. Chancellor Robert R. Livingston, New York’s highest-ranking judge, prepared to administer the oath of office, the words of which are contained in the Constitution. Suddenly, Livingston and Washington realized that nobody had thought to bring a Bible for the ceremony. Swearing on the Bible wasn’t constitutionally mandated, but it was unthinkable not to. Hastily, Jacob Morton, master of the St. John’s Masonic Lodge, went for the Bible in the lodge rooms, located at the “old coffee house” on Wall Street. Morton found a Bible complete with the Old and New Testaments and Apocrypha that had been published in London in 1767. When the Bible arrived on the balcony of Federal Hall, Washington with one hand upon it and the other over his heart, repeated the oath of office, adding at the end “So help me God.” Washington bent forward to kiss the Bible. Livingston shouted, “Long live George Washington, president of the United States.”

An unbeliever in the supernatural, Thomas H. Huxley (1825-1895), a 19th Century English naturalist and the very able defender of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, arrived at the following conclusion after careful research with respect to the Bible: *The Bible has been the Magna Charta of the poor and of the oppressed; down to modern times, no state has had a constitution in which the interests of the people are so largely taken into account, in which the duties, so much more than the privileges, of rulers are insisted upon, as that drawn up for Israel ... Nowhere is the fundamental truth that the welfare of the state, in the long run, depends on the uprightness of the citizens, so strongly laid down ... I do believe that the human race is not yet, possibly may never be, in a position to dispense with (the Bible).”*

In today’s first lesson, as the walls are rebuilt in Jerusalem, a scroll is found. It is a Torah scroll, a scroll that contains the words of Israel’s law. Ezra stands on a wooden pulpit and reads. When the scroll is read, the people weep. They weep perhaps because it has been so long since anyone in Israel had heard the law, or because they realize, when the word is read, how far they have strayed from faithfulness to God’s law. Or perhaps they weep for joy. They weep because they joyfully realize that God has not left them, forsaken them to their own devices.

God has come to them in the word. God speaks to them through these words of Scripture. Without these words, they wouldn’t survive, couldn’t make it. These words constitute the people of Israel and preserve them through thick and thin until today. When Ezra finishes, the entire solemn assembly has a liturgical, formal feel to it, ending with the word, “Amen.” This is a picture of Israel at its best. A people convened to hear the law, to listen, to have it interpreted, then to align their lives accordingly. This is clearly affirmed in Psalm 19; a psalm that concerns itself with the creation of the world, the way creation keeps on happening through the power of the Word.

The lesson from Nehemiah has an obvious linkage to today’s gospel, the story of Jesus preaching and interpreting at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. Here we see the same dynamic that has preserved Israel to this day, a people gathered around the Word. Therefore, it is important for us to ponder the significance of a people gathered around the word, because to gather around the word can be a painful affair. Our gospel lesson reminds us that judgment begins with God’s own house. Just as the word gathers and confirms God’s people, it also judges and criticizes them, calls them to be more than they would be without the word. All three of our lessons today remind us that we are people of God’s word. And one of the reasons we gather each week is to be confronted by that word, that life-giving, world-provoking power of the word.

The word of God is what has brought us together today. The word of God is why we are here. The word of God is what holds us together. You may not hear such statements in many churches today, but you will here such an affirmation at Boyds Presbyterian. For 130 years, the word of God has been the cornerstone of this church’s mission and ministry. My predecessors were all excellent interpreters of the word, a legacy I have found to be both a challenge and a privilege. I am clear, as I always have been clear, that we are gathered here because of God. God convenes us on the basis of the Word. Words seem to be the primary way that God works with the world. In Genesis, when God began creating the world, God did so through the word: “And God said, ‘Let there be light.’” And there was light. Just by speaking, God created the world.

God continues to speak. On a starry night, God speaks to old Abraham, making a promise to him: "Abraham, even though you and Sarah are very old, I am going to make a great people out of you." Israel is created from the word of God. From nobodies ... this ragtag of nomads ... comes forth a nation that is a great blessing to all the peoples of the world. And as the story of Jesus begins, with John the Baptist standing in the muddy Jordan waters, John warns those in Israel: "Do not say to yourselves: 'I have Abraham as my father,' as if mere membership were enough. I tell you ... God is able to raise up a people out of the stones in this river, if God wants it."

God had done it before. From nothing, God created on the basis of words. The words of God made a world. The words of God are living and continue to create this very day. This is why I say that the word has convened us. Not my words as a preacher, but the word of God calling us to be the church ... Jesus calling each of us to be disciples.

Sometimes, I am absolutely amazed that we are a church when I take into account the variety of people gathered here. We have so little to hold us together ... as the world judges these things. We come from an assorted variety of backgrounds, perspectives, geographic locations, religious traditions, and economic classes. That we are here at all ... is a miracle ... is a great testimony to the power of God's word. God brings something out of nothing through the word. God created Boyds Presbyterian. God gathers us together and sustains us as a church.

You have experienced this in your own life here on Sundays. As you have told me numerous times ... there are Sundays when you come to church empty, down, depressed, despondent, and lack hope. Then during the service, through the word ... the words of the hymns, the anthems, the responses, the Scriptures, even the sermon preached ... through the word as if spoken directly to you, you actually felt that you heard God speak into your darkness, bring order out of your chaos ... and there was a reality formed not by you but by the word of God. In such moments, we know some of that primal, originating dynamic at the heart of the Creation and Re-creation of the world.

You know what that feels like. One of the reasons why you may have come today on this cold January morning ... even if you didn't fully know that is why ... you came because God knew you needed the word. Your faith always needs refurbishment, encouragement, and sustenance that come from the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word. This is the way of our faith, a faith that arises through the word.

Every Sunday is a kind of reenactment of the first chapter of Genesis when God called the world into being through the word. Without it, we wouldn't be here as Christians or as the church. The word of Scripture reaches out to touch you, to grasp your life and redirect it. The word of preaching hopefully enlivens, makes relevant the word of Scripture. In such reading, preaching, and hearing, our faith is confirmed. We live by the word. Paul says, "Faith comes from hearing." The Christian faith is an auditory, acoustical affair. This faith arises not from miracles, but through the word ... unless hearing itself is regarded as a miracle!

When the Nazis took over Prague, they rounded up all the Jews. In one of the synagogues, before they torched it, they found an old rabbi sitting in his study, working on his sermon for the next Sabbath. To utterly humiliate the old man, they forced him to strip naked. They had him stand up in his pulpit naked, clad only in his rabbi's hat. "Say something in Hebrew for us," they taunted. "Yes, preach to us, preach what you were going to say next Sabbath. Preach."

The old rabbi stood there. Then he began to speak in a Hebrew none of the Nazi tormentors could understand. He spoke the words that had time and again constituted Israel: *In the beginning God created the world. And God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light. And it was good.* Power shifted from the cruel Nazis to the old rabbi in that moment. In speaking the word ... just in speaking the words ... the rabbi was assaulting, dismantling all that the Nazis believed. A new world was being claimed, reclaimed by God. Nothing those Nazis could do, not even their reign of death, could defeat the ultimate triumph of the word ... could negate the word's way with the world. That is the way of God and God will have the last word.

For in the beginning was the word. And in the present, the word still is. Amen.