

THE POWER OF THE WORD
(Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10; Luke 4:14-21)

I don't know if this story is true or not, but it could be. And besides, it's too good not to tell. It was Sunday morning in a large downtown church. The preacher had finished reading the scripture and was taking a deep breath before launching into the sermon when suddenly a man stood up in the balcony – a stranger – and shouted out, "I have a word from the Lord!" Heads spun around to see what was going on. What was the "word from the Lord" that this fellow was bringing to the startled congregation? No one will ever know because the ushers stormed up the stairs before he could say another word and none too gently ushered him out of the building.

Like I said, I don't know if that story is true. But I do know that at my former church in Connecticut we had a contingency plan to deal with disruptions like this. There was a group down there that were followers of some guy who claimed to be the second coming of Christ. In fact, he called himself the Lord Julius Christ. One of his disciples, Brother Peter, visited me a couple of times at the office and warned me that I was leading the church down the road to damnation. About the third time this happened, I told Brother Peter I had been patient and listened to him but had heard enough, and that he should leave and not bother to come back. That was one thing, but these disciples of the Lord Julius actually showed up at a few churches on Sunday morning and disrupted their services. Since I had shown Brother Peter the door, I figured we had better be ready in case they tried the same thing with us. So we came up with a plan. First, we would ask them to leave, and if they didn't leave immediately, we would call the police. Fortunately, we never had to put the plan into action.

Do I think the Lord Julius had a "word from the Lord"? Certainly not from the Lord Jesus Christ, no more than David Koresh or Jim Jones or countless other false prophets did.

What would we do here at West Parish Church if someone came in on Sunday morning and announced that he or she had a "word from the Lord"? Would we tense up? Would we look around to see who was making such an audacious claim? Would the ushers leap into action? Do we need a contingency plan?

Well, you may never have thought of it in these terms, but isn't that what every preacher claims to have – a word from the Lord? You probably come expecting to hear a sermon. But a word from the Lord?

I'm saying this as much for myself as for you – because it's easy for me to fall into a familiar routine. Sunday's coming, time to write another sermon. I need to remind myself once in a while that a sermon is more than nice religious words. A word from the Lord may not be religious words at all. A sermon can be tucked away and ignored. A word from the Lord disrupts our routines and changes things. A sermon can lull us into complacency. A word from the Lord challenges us to change.

I used to think I knew when I had written a good sermon. Not any more. I've learned over the years that a sermon that I thought was pretty darn good can leave the congregation cold. And that one that I thought was pretty mediocre and uninspired might touch someone who heard it in a profound way that I never intended and would never have dreamed of.

That's the humbling thing about preaching: the realization that the 1500 or so ordinary English words that I string together to make a sermon may be transformed by God's grace into something more – into a word from the Lord. It's humbling because when it happens, it's not because of anything I do. It's in spite of anything I do. It's humbling to think that God might somehow be able to use anything I could say. It's one thing to believe that "God is still speaking." It's quite another to imagine that God might be speaking through *me*.

What do you think the good folks in Nazareth expected when they went to the synagogue that day? It sounded a lot like a sermon. Nobody got tense. The ushers didn't try to muscle Jesus out into the street. People smiled and said how proud they were of the hometown boy.

But then his words hit them. "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." He wasn't talking about something that happened long ago and far away. He was talking about Nazareth *today*. He wasn't talking about something that *might* happen in the future. He was talking about something that *was happening* then and there. This wasn't just a sermon. This was a word from the Lord.

And the aftermath showed just how powerful it was. As Jesus went on speaking, the mood changed from pride to anger to outright hostility. The ushers not only threw Jesus out of the synagogue, they dragged him out to the edge of town and were getting ready to throw him off a cliff.

We got a hint of that in the first reading this morning from Nehemiah. It says that when Ezra the scribe read from the book of the law the people began to weep. They began to weep because they realized how far they had wandered from the ways of God. There was power in the simple reading of the word to people who heard it as a word from the Lord for them. At least they didn't try to hustle Ezra out of town or throw him off a cliff.

Worship is supposed to bring us into the presence of God, to put us in touch with God's word for us. We come to worship to find God. But it's also true that worship protects us from God. It brings us close, but not too close. Like Jews who refuse to speak the name of God, we know we're dealing with something a lot more powerful than ourselves, dealing with a power that can be dangerous. So we're careful what we say. As Annie Dillard once observed, the words we use in worship are "things we have learned we can say to God without being killed."

We want God to be active in our world, but we don't want things to change too much. We want God's presence, but maybe just outside the door.

Michael Frost tells of a worship service he attended in a dusty church hall with the congregation perched on folding metal chairs. At one point in the service a woman with a big voice walked onto the stage and started belting out Bette Middler's hit song "From a Distance." You may know the words. The main

line, which is repeated over and over, is “God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us, from a distance.” The idea is that God keeps an eye on the world but doesn’t get too close, and that the world’s problems don’t look too bad from a distance.

Well, that seemed like a strange song for a worship service. But everyone listened politely until, halfway through, a woman in the front row jumped to her feet, walked onto the stage, and started singing the same tune but with different words, “God came near to us, God came near to us, God came near to us.”

Today in sanctuaries around the world, someone is reading scripture – reading about a God whose Word called the universe into existence, a God who stretched the star-spangled heavens, a God who might, indeed, be watching us from a distance. But there’s more to the story. That same God is also a God who loves us with a love that will not let us go, a God who brings life out of death, a God whose Word became flesh and dwelled among us. There’s nothing distant about a God like that.

Today the scripture is fulfilled in our hearing. Today the word becomes alive in our lives. Today and every day God draws near to us, and there is a word from the Lord!