

On Having a Word from God

Genesis 1:1-5; John 1:1-18

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No doubt, you've heard it said that what we have in the four Gospels are sermons, narrative sermons to be sure, but sermons nonetheless. Each of them seeks to tell the story of Jesus for their varied faith communities, which is one way of describing a sermon. No doubt, you also know that Mark's Gospel is regarded as the first one written, which means that when Matthew and Luke finally got around to writing theirs down, stories they had been telling for years, they also had a copy of Mark in front of them. In fact, they seem to have been so impressed with his work (and another source we no longer have), that on more than one occasion they copied large chunks word-for-word. Do you have cut-and-paste on your computer? Apparently, so did they.

But they knew they couldn't copy *every* word. I mean, if you're going to do that, always use someone else's stuff, what's the point? Besides, Matthew and Luke, as pleased as they were with Mark's version, well, there were things they wanted to do differently. Mark's beginning, for instance. Preachers know that the first few minutes of a sermon are crucial, so they decided to use a different sort of introduction. As you well know, there's no birth narrative in Mark's Gospel, not a word about the birth of Jesus. And they thought, *You can't have a Gospel without a Christmas pageant*. So, thanks be to God, Matthew and Luke wrote the only two accounts in our Bibles of Jesus' birth—Luke's "Silent Night" version with shepherds, and angels, and an inn where they laid him in a manger; and Matthew's hellish soundtrack with Rachel weeping, Herod's jealousy, and the slaughter of the innocents.

So Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote their Gospels. And years later, many years later, along comes John, and he has to write a Gospel, too. I don't know why, not really. Maybe the same reason preachers have to preach. But what is he going to say? If he has read the others, he shows no real signs of it. He does decide to start with Jesus' birth, but nothing like the way Matthew and Luke had done. What's a preacher to say in Advent when everything has already been said? Not just last Sunday, but last year and the year before that.

What he does is borrow from another source, the first source, from the preacher who told the Genesis stories. He starts with a line from the first written sermon, and he opens with the same first three words, "In the beginning . . ." You know the Genesis 1 story, of God preaching, not a sermon, but a world into existence. God says, "Light," and there is light. God says, "Vegetation," and there are rose bushes and dandelions. God says, "Golden Retriever," and it wags its furry tail. God creates the world in six days and rests on the seventh. All these many years later, we preachers find ourselves working six days so that we might have a word to say come Sunday. As for rest, that's a different story.

There is no burden like the burden of having to have a word from God, nothing like it. We speak a word and wait to see what happens, like shining a light into the dark, or maybe it's like whistling in the dark. It is a burden, to be sure. Gardner Taylor is supposed to have claimed there were times in his ministry he wished he could have

switched places with those who pick up the trash. Anything to avoid having to find another word for Sunday. The Sundays do keep coming, don't they? They keep coming like telephone poles on the highway, and we're traveling the speed of light.

In a brilliant play on *words*, John speaks of the *Word* that has come. He describes Jesus present in the beginning, not in a bed of hay but as *Word*. Word! John begins his sermon, his story, in a form that is anything but a story. John's Gospel is about as far removed from "Once upon a time . . ." as you can get, more like, "Once before time . . ." He opens not with narrative, but a mixture of poetry, hymn, philosophy, and metaphor—these mind-boggling verses about Word of God that was with God, that was and is God.

And if reading these first few verses creates a certain distance between us and Jesus, then John has us exactly where he wants us. That's what he wants. He pushes Jesus back, out of the Christian bookstores where they sell pencils with his name on them and calendars with his face plastered on them, or bracelets with the eternal Son of God down to one cozy initial—"J." "W.W.J.D.?" The beginning of John's Gospel is a warning to preachers who would rush in where angels fear to tread. "So, what are the lectionary passages for this week?" we ask, often said the same way we ask, "So, what's on television tonight?" John pushes Jesus back.

And then, and only then, once he's pushed Jesus back far enough, only then does he write, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . ." The Word became flesh, or as a minister I know puts it, "The Christ put on the sweatshirt of humanity." You can push the image too far, but what a picture! And John says, Jesus "lived among us." Literally it reads, "he pitched his tent among us." He came to live with us. Out on the lawn where the kids play kick ball in the summer and build snowmen in the winter, that's where Jesus set up his tent. The warning of John's Gospel gives way to encouragement. The Word has come close, so close you can take him into the pulpit with you on Sunday, or let him take you.

Of course, maybe it's his coming close that ought to concern us. Do you know what I mean? Peggy Payne has written a wonderful novel about that very thing. It's entitled, *Revelation*.¹ Did you ever read it? She takes a short story she wrote earlier and expands it into a full-length novel. And what a story! It's the story of a Presbyterian minister named Swain Hammond, whom the author describes as having received his doctorate from Yale. Bright, articulate, and polished, he lives with his wife in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where he is the pastor of Westside Presbyterian Church, thank you very much.

His wife, Julie, is a medical librarian, successful and supportive. They have no children, and so they have lots of time to enjoy each other's company. You know, movies and meals out, or grilling in the backyard. That's where this particular story begins, in their backyard. They are grilling skewers of pork and green peppers on a bare-foot day in June. Swain wanders to the edge of their property, where the woods begin, to look at a flower in bloom when he hears the voice of God, the very voice of God. It sounds to him like a PA system suddenly switched on—"Know that there is truth. Know this," the voice says. Did you ever see the movie *Field of Dreams*? That's the scene, only what the voice does to Swain it does bodily. In that instant he feels "the murmuring life of each of a million cells" in him. "He feels the line where his two lips touch," he is aware of the spears of wet grass against his feet, half-circles of tears forming in his eyes. "His own bone marrow hums inside him like colonies of

bees.” And then it’s gone.

Julie doesn’t hear the voice. Not a sound. Not the second time either when all God says is, “Son.” One word. God calls Swain, “Son.” She never hears the voice, but Julie is supportive throughout. At every step of the way she believes in him and supports him. Swain tells her how when he was a kid he always hoped for something like this, a vision from God, a word, something, a moment when even the asphalt with which we have covered the world breathes with the very presence of God. He remembers little epiphanies, but not the kind that could get you into trouble.

The only problem is that he’s a minister now. And ministers aren’t supposed to hear God speak, not audibly. Seminaries keep people out for such things. Presbyteries ease folks out for things less threatening than this. The days go by and Swain thinks about his Sunday sermon. He looks at the blank yellow pad on his desk and wonders what to do. If he denies the voice, is he denying God? And if he testifies, will they lock him up and throw away the key?

Come Sunday morning, the choir sings the anthem, Swain steps into the pulpit, clears his throat, and announces, “Friends, I have heard the voice of God.” And no one is alarmed. Ministers everywhere say the same thing week in and week out, in one fashion or another. They’re Presbyterians! They know he doesn’t mean it the way televangelists do. But he presses on: “I mean I have really heard the voice of God. Just the other day, Julie and I were grilling in the backyard when . . .” Now people sit up. They cock their heads and squint their eyes. They look for a smile on his face, even a hidden one. They hope for a parable, a metaphor. But none comes. They become concerned. What has happened to their beloved minister? Some of them look like they’ve just eaten the bitter part of a pecan.

The comments at the door are typical, except for the unusual number who avoid him this particular day, especially those on the session. A meeting is called to discuss it. A vote is taken. By a slim margin he will be allowed to stay on, but only if he receives professional help. And he wonders what has happened to him. He wonders how it is that they want him to bring a word from God every week, but not to hear from God. And listen to what he says when the man on the session gives him the news, “You mean, it’s okay to believe in God, but only if God is distant?” Humph! It’s okay to believe, but only if God is distant.

Swain eventually resigns his position. It’s not just the pressure, the divisions in the church, that sort of thing. No, he comes to a realization about preaching the Word. In his letter of resignation he writes, “I give my notice as a minister today for this reason: I have come to believe that the experience of God is not something that one person can tell another about. It is an experience that no one can truly communicate to anyone else. God cannot be summoned, no matter how hard we try.” That sounds vaguely familiar to me. How about you?

But for a moment, hold that story on one side of your brain while I tell you another one. The two belong together. It’s a story Barbara Brown Taylor shares in her Lyman Beecher lectures on preaching, about a fellow going to hear W. H. Auden read some of his poetry at Princeton years ago. The hall was packed with hundreds of students and faculty, all there to hear Auden. The place was buzzing. When Auden, then an old man, began to read, even the microphone couldn’t pick him up, so soft were his words. So the folks in the audience began to whisper among themselves, guessing at what he was saying. Pretty soon, they drowned out the poet.

Taylor adds that something like this often happens in our churches, and that even if we covered our mouths with duct tape, we would still miss God's speaking. That's because the pulpit would be empty, she says. Things are different when the poet is God and the poetry is Bible. Listen to her description of the scene: "There would be no one on stage, because God does not show up to read God's own poetry. God has delegated that job. If the poems are to be heard, then someone must dare to climb up on the stage, open the book, and read."²

Caught between notions that no one can speak for God and a call that says we must read on God's behalf, what's a preacher to do? You will recall, of course, that the Church has always wrestled with this. Not God's transcendence, and not God's nearness, but the fact that God is both. In the first few centuries there were all sorts of councils, debates about the nature of God's Christ. Ministers getting together to arm-wrestle over their views of the Christ. There were some who exalted his divinity so highly they couldn't even fathom his humanity. They said he was God, sure, but that if he walked on the seashore, his feet made no prints. Divinity? Yes. Humanity? No way! Others gravitated toward his humanity, but at the expense of his divinity. He was a person, they claimed, but God come down to earth? Come on, surely you don't believe that, they said.

So what's a preacher to do? John's sermon on the Word has something to say to us preachers of the Word. We are reminded (and it is a reminder) that the eternal Word, the pre-existent and removed Word, became flesh. In fact, he came so close that he even showed up at weddings, turning ordinary ceremonial water into fine, vintage wine. He came so close that Nicodemus could knock on an actual door somewhere in Palestine and God's Eternal Word reached for the knob. He came so close he sat down with a woman shunned by her peers and he offered her a drink of refreshing water. He came so close that the blind could feel his very thumbs on their closed eyes, only to look into his face a few moments later. He came so close that he could shout and the dead be raised. He came so close that he shows up these days at weddings, too. And baby showers and soccer games. He's come so close you can feel him next to your heart the way a stole wrapped around your neck lies there, too.

If you read the rest of John's sermon, you eventually come to his conclusion. Not the epilogue with Peter on the seashore. That's his invitation to discipleship. No, the conclusion: stories of believers gathered together on Sunday. Sunday stories. And in each of them the Christ shows up. The believers gather and the Christ shows up. And you remember what he says. To his preachers, those who believe and even those who aren't so sure, the Christ shows up and says, "Peace be with you." That is the Christ's word for preachers. "Peace be with you."

Notes

¹ Peggy Payne, *Revelation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God Is Silent* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1998), 49-50; 94-95.