

10 June 2018

Text: 2 Corinthians 4:13

But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture – “I believed, and so I spoke we also believe, and so we speak. . .

I BELIEVED, AND SO I SPOKE: A PEOPLE OF THE WORD

As Episcopalians we like to point out to those less fortunately church-ed, that our faith is based on the three-legged stool of Bible, tradition and reason. While all three legs of the stool are essential, surely the Bible “leg” must be the stoutest of the three. We learn early on in our Episcopal journey that the “Bible contains all things necessary for salvation.” We don’t worship the Bible, we don’t transform it into things that it is not – a real estate guide to the Middle East, a book of modern history or, worse yet, a science text. We revere the Bible, as the basis for our faith and as the book detailing humankind’s search for meaning. We are happy to be called “people of the Word.”

As I read the Bible four words course through me repeatedly, acting as both guides and summary to my study. They are *creation, challenge, redemption and eternity*. Let us spend a few minutes, as “people of the Word,” thinking about those four words.

Creation seems like a good place to start. Who has not been moved by the opening words of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” And the wonderful words of verse thirty-one: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” The wonder of creation did not stop with the Genesis story – God is creating today, in us and through us and all around us. It is humbling to think that today’s Godly creativity is using us as His instruments! I am not talking just about works of art or scientific advances – although I do consider them God’s creations – I am thinking of creating homes of love, work spaces of co-operative endeavor, inter-personal relationships of affection and support and churches of fellowship. We are all charged with being creators of God’s space in the world. Free-will has allowed humankind to build evil and ugliness, which is creation without God, but good and beauty is God’s continuing touch on the world and He continues that touch through each of us! And that brings us to the second word:

Challenge is present at an early stage in the Bible. Adam and Eve had a simple challenge: They only had to obey God and refrain from eating the fruit of one single tree! It was a challenge they failed. The Israelites were constantly challenged to follow God – and just as constantly failed to meet the challenge. But even in their failure, the people of Israel learned. They learned the importance of trying again and again, of persevering in the face of overwhelming obstacles, and, most importantly, of always keeping their faith in God. One cannot exist without some kind of challenge being always a part of living. We know that God never allows anything to happen to us that we cannot handle – of course, we also all say the old joke: I wish God did not have quite so much confidence in my strength!

Regardless of our means, to live is to be challenged by many things. Some challenges are disasters we experience, others are opportunities we happily face. Whether the challenge is good or bad we are best equipped to deal with it when we recognize our own limitations and know when we had better turn the challenge over to God. Indeed, the key to a good life is not to try to avoid challenges, but to embrace them and, with God’s grace, meet them. Most of us can see this in occupational challenges, but when it comes to illnesses, it is a bit more difficult. God does not ever give

us illness or pain or sorrow, but when we do experience these things, God may make use of them to help us build our faith and qualities of mind and habits of action that will serve us well in other parts of our lives. From time to time all of us also simply fail a challenge. If we are young we may regard something as just too much fun to miss. When we are older the sins tend to be ones of omission, rather than commission! There is something we should have done, but we were too tired, too occupied with other things, too self-absorbed to do it. Those happen to be my personal sins! Fortunately for humankind, we have a third word of great hope and that word is:

Redemption. In what we used to call the Catechism and now call An Outline of the Faith, redemption is defined as the “act of God which sets us free from the power of evil, sin, and death.” I like to think of it as the powerful helping hand that lifts me up every time I fall down. And I am one clumsy Christian, I fall a lot! I appreciate the notion that it is not just from the power of sin that redemption save me, but from the power of evil. I personally think that the world is composed of much more good than evil, but evil gets the attention of the media, and rightly so. But if I am not careful, I will let myself be overwhelmed with a seemingly unstoppable tide of evil that sweeps the news. In reality, evil is the news because it is the exception. The rule is that we live in peace and harmony with our fellow inhabitants of spaceship Earth. We are already a redeemed people, living in a place that God has called “very good;” it is just that the rough edges leave a lot of work still to be done! Not so incidentally, that work is our work as Christians. We do directly participate in the redemption process. Redemption is an act of God, but we are Her instruments to help bring the loving act of redemption to others.

The Catechism also tells us that redemption sets us free from the power of death. So now we turn to our last special word:

Eternal. We often hear from Christian fundamentalists that the Bible is eternal, never changing. To me that is saying God does not exist. But, if we believe in a living God, then the Bible is always changing because God’s creation is changing. The Bible speaks to every generation in a meaningful way. Eternal describes the presence of God in the interpretation of the Bible for today’s believers. It does not say that the interpretation was frozen in time. We are not a primitive nomadic tribe. We do wrestle with the eternal question of humankind’s place in the universe of meaning and we receive an eternal answer: That place is with God. That is also the only spiritually sound answer to the eternal question regarding life after death. After death, we are with God, just as we are now, but in an altered state of being. One may fill in the details as one wishes – I suspect that God will have the last Word!

In the Diocese of West Texas this is a year set apart to read and study the Bible. Our text for that is Deuteronomy 30:14 The Word is very near to You. The Word is about creation, the challenges we face, the redemption we receive and the eternity of God’s presence in our forever lives. We are indeed, a “People of the Word.” Amen.