

“The Word of the Lord”

1 Samuel 3: 1-10; John 1: 443-51

Dr. George Sinclair

“The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.”

We say the Bible is “the word of the Lord.” And that’s true enough. Presbyterians believe the Bible is God’s Word. The Bible is a collection of books, 66 in all, a library of religious classics—poetry and prose—beginning with the narrative of the Jewish people—their origins, the desert and liberation from Egypt, their sojourn through the wilderness, punishment for disobedience and ultimately their conquest of the Promised Land—the time of the judges, kings, prophets—the collapse and recovery of the nation—a story spanning 1,800 years from Abraham to Jesus.

And then of course there is the New Testament—27 books—four gospels telling the life of Jesus—13 letters from Paul, the most prolific New Testament writer—other letters written by people like Peter, James, and John and one very strange book—Revelation.

Jesus died around 30 A.D. Ten years later, Paul wrote his first letter. 75 years later, the last book of the New Testament was written. We say the Bible is “the word of the Lord,” and it is—an ancient library written over 2000 years ago spanning 2000 years of human history. “The word of the Lord” is a book, not a book from a single author from a single time, but a host of anonymous, unknown writers spanning a thousand years.

Some people revere the Bible as a kind of icon. Believing in the Bible is a matter of believing that it is literally true. If the Bible says Israel crossed the sea on dry ground then that’s just what happened. If the Bible says Jesus walked on water that settles it. Others cast a skeptical eye to stories like these, “Hold on, I’m not so sure. Maybe there’s symbolism there, but hardly historical truth.”

Still others are not so much concerned with the question “Did it happen?” as with “What does it mean?” These readers are more interested in the “so what?” Even granting that Israel escaped Egyptian slavery and granting that Jesus walked on water—“so what? What possible difference does that make for us, or for me living these many thousands of years later?”

What *is* the point of believing *in* the Bible? Is it that God can do difficult things, fantastic things, impossible things like walking on water or dividing water? What is the purpose of faith in “the word of the Lord?” Is it that God did all of these powerful things in a long ago past so there must really be a God or because God did all of these fantastic things in the past we should trust the moral demands he makes today? Let’s assume that is the case. How then do we decide which rules to follow, which rules may and should and ought we obey? Are some rules more important than others, are all rules equal, are any negotiable? Take for example rules about the treatment of slaves. The Bible supports the institution of slavery and even regulates it. Does that mean slavery is right? You’d be hard pressed to find anyone who believes that today. Another case in point.

For well over 200 years Presbyterians, and before that the vast majority of the Christian world, disallowed women preachers. In 1850 it would not have occurred to Presbyterians to elect women as elders, much less as pastors. The word of God explicitly barred women from teaching men and yet we overcame this barrier, we listened to other texts that trumped prohibitions. We think it perfectly sound to elect women to the offices of elder and deacon. In fact, we don’t think

we're overturning the Bible when we do so. We insist that Scripture itself instructs us to ordain women.

Again, fifty years ago the church frowned upon divorce. Now we find it odd, if not unchristian, not to welcome divorced men and women—even to the office of elder, deacon, and pastor. We accentuate texts which champion forgiveness, new beginnings, and freedom from the past not just for the married but even for the married and divorced. We believe this is a word from the Lord. How did we arrive at this consensus?

More recently, Presbyterians have argued about the immigration law in Alabama. Some see the law as clearly unchristian, contrary to Scripture; while others insist that it is clearly within the bounds of Scripture. Who's right? Does the Bible give a single, ringing answer declaring one side right and the other wrong? Presbyterians are equally divided over issues of poverty, homosexuality, the use of violence as a political tool. How do we resolve these living issues of faith? How do we hear God's word for today?

Some would write off the Bible as any solution, a relic of the past. They would argue that the Bible was written in a time of monarchy so how can it inform people who believe in republican forms of government and self-rule. Likewise, the Bible is silent about modern forms of contraception, paper currency and a host of moral and social question never anticipated by 21st century life—not the least of which is stem cell, gene therapy and like forms of medicine. Psychological maladies like bi-polar disorder were seen by the New Testament as marks of demonic possession. Harsh skeptics of the Bible insist that these, and like examples, argue persuasively that the Bible is of little value to modern people and should be tossed aside as a relic of the superstitious past, to say nothing of Christians who have used the Bible to justify evils like the Holocaust or the atomic bomb.

These and other questions about “the word of the Lord” are important but behind or before issues regarding the interpretation or use of the Bible is a more important issue. Before there was a Bible, there was “the word of the Lord.” Before there was a collection of books known as the Bible there was the living reality of “the word of the Lord.” The New Testament claimed this living reality became flesh in Jesus Christ. God communicates with humans. God has a word for human beings. Even before John's gospel, the Bible refers to this communication as “the word of the Lord.”

Samuel is a good case in point—a story which helps us go deeper than simply reading the Bible as a record of God's acts in history or using the Bible selectively to justify whatever moral claims we happen to believe at the moment. Living faith is not first of all about the truth of the Bible. It is about the God of the Bible, God who still speaks, who still acts, who still calls, redeems sins, heals, the God who works to make this a just world, the God who creates weal and brings woe, the God who kills and makes alive. That faith is more than believing in miraculous stories that happened in a long ago time and place. What I'm arguing for is a living word which leads us to the living God—the Word made flesh today in your life and mine.

Think about Samuel. The Bible had not been written when Samuel lived. There was no Old Testament in Samuel's day. The Old Testament came hundreds of years later and yet the storyteller clearly understands there was “a” word or there was “the” word of the Lord. “The word of the Lord” existed before the Bible and, as it appears in this story, knowing “the word of the Lord” is equivalent to knowing God. To know “the word of the Lord” is to know God. Let me explain.

While I was away in Wilmington, North Carolina this past Thursday and Friday, I was visiting with my cousins and one of them asked me what my sermon title was. And I told him and I began to explain a bit about what I was going to talk about. And when I said Samuel was “churched” another of my cousins looked at me and said “Samuel didn’t go to church.”

And I said, “I know that. Samuel didn’t go to church. But my congregation will understand that I’m not speaking literally.” But my cousin insisted that you would take me literally. And I said, “You don’t know my congregation. They’re smart people. They will understand Samuel grew up at Shiloh. They’ll know that Shiloh was an ancient temple even before there was a temple in Jerusalem and they will understand that I am not speaking literally when I say that Samuel was churched. They will understand that Samuel grew up in a religious environment. You know like kids who go to Sunday School, Youth Group, Montreat, that sort of thing.”

“I doubt it,” my cousin said. So I stopped arguing with her.

You get me don’t you when I say Samuel was raised in the “church?” I don’t mean that literally. There wouldn’t be a church for another thousand years. I mean Samuel’s mother gave him to the temple at Shiloh and he grew up right there under the watchful eye of Eli, right in front of the altar where the law of God was kept. Samuel slept on the floor, on a bedroll, right in front of the Ark of the Covenant. That is what I mean when I say Samuel was churched. He was a church kid. He never missed. And this is my point, and the text clearly says this. You can’t miss this. You don’t have to look hard or squeeze anything out of the text. The story says it outright—Samuel was churched but he did not know “the word of the Lord.” Samuel was churched but he did not know God.

Three times Samuel hears the word of the Lord. Three times God tries to enlist Samuel in his work and three times Samuel mistakes God’s voice for the voice of the priest Eli. How often has that happened in your life? I mean, how many times has God tried to get through to you and you wouldn’t or you didn’t or you refused to listen? You mistook God’s voice for a human voice, a regular old ordinary voice, one you had heard a hundred times before—“Oh that’s not God calling me, that’s just my Sunday School teacher; that’s not God wanting me to put my life in order, that’s just my mother getting on my case. That’s not God telling me to get off my duff and stop making excuses for why I don’t go to church or get involved. That’s just the preacher trying to drum up business.”

Sound familiar? How does God speak? When does God speak? What is God trying to say to you right now? What great thing is God trying to get you to do or to stop doing or start doing or give up or take up? Who is God trying to get you to love that you don’t now love? Who does God want you to be reconciled with that you refuse to speak to?

There is no silence from God. God speaks all of the time. God blasts his word from heaven continually. We don’t lack for a word from God. We lack for believing it’s true—not believing in some marvelous event in some far off, far away Bible time and place—not that those stories were unimportant—God is far more concerned with the present. The point of the grace and truth of Scripture is not to say that it happened but that God is working even now.

God speaks now. The question is, “Are we listening?” We would rather argue some arcane point of Scripture than to go and be reconciled with our brother or sister or to engage in the fight for justice or to take up the great cause of God. And for that we need helpers. Samuel did. Samuel needed the old man Eli. We all need an Eli—someone tested, someone trusted, a faithful one who helps us discern “the word of the Lord.”

Of course we need to read the Bible. The Bible is terribly important. Take it up and read it, be nourished by it, let it feed your soul. And, when you do, don't put it down and walk away when it commands you to love your neighbor, when it insists that you welcome the stranger or feed the hungry or repent of your sins. We cannot ignore or neglect or deflect "the word of the Lord," not if we wish to follow Christ. God is keen on us living in the present under the rule of the living Christ. We need a helper for that. We all need an Eli.

My cousin and I were talking about the old days. She said, "None of us could believe it when you became a minister." And I said I couldn't believe it either! I did not come to that decision without help. People helped me listen. My wife helped me listen, my parents helped me listen, my friends, my Presbytery, the Session of my church. We all need helpers who are willing to sit with us and help us discern "the word of the Lord." God wants us to live under his rule. God calls us to do his will when we are at work, when we are at home, waking, sleeping, all the time.

God calls you just as he called Samuel. The question is not, "Why me?" but "Why not me?" Maybe God is calling you now through the voice of a friend who calls you to a Habitat build or to a meeting on immigration or to come and visit a Bible study or to sit still and listen to the deep issues of your life; those that keep you from obeying, those that keep you from dreaming. Take up the Bible and read. Find your Eli and listen for "the word of the Lord." You will have a living faith because God is speaking. Listen for "the word of the Lord." Thanks be to God. Amen