

“Word”

Habakkuk 2:1-5; Hebrews 10:16-25;
John 3:31-36

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Once upon a time, there was a child born, and there was great joy. As the child began to grow, the child looked up to the parents, followed their movements, saw them as almost celestial beings. But then, the child kept growing. As the child kept growing, the child began to have thoughts and feelings and understanding of its own. The parents didn't seem quite so divine, didn't seem quite so special. As the child grew, and as the parents began to show some fallibility, there began to be a little conflict, a little uncertainty about how things should work. The child began to think that maybe its thoughts and needs and ways of doing things were more important than the parents' guidance.

Does this sound familiar to anybody? In some ways, it feels to me like it's the same kind of thing that we do with God. We begin to have our own sense of thought and feelings, and want our way of thinking to be the one that matters. Sometimes in our lives we may even get into a place in our lives with our parents, or our children may get in a place with us, where it doesn't matter what the parent says, it's got to be wrong and the other way is right. I don't know about you, but my experience is sometimes in my relationship with my children it seems like I don't get the full story as much as the other children in the family get the full story. Sometimes it feels to me like those other children know a lot more than I do about what happened throughout life.

It's interesting, isn't it, that one way God responds to our need is to send his son. It makes me wonder if there's something about God realizing that we can relate better to another child, just like ours do. It's interesting to me how many parallels there seem to be. In fact, it feels like we get in trouble with God. We recognize we haven't lived up to what our parent (God) wants and we can rebel about that—we're not going to change or we think we can't change because we have disappointed our parent. Then along comes this other child who says, “It's all my fault. I'll take the blame.” He takes that all away.

That's an interesting way for me to think about Jesus, coming in between us and God and saying, “No, I'll take the blame.” It's just another way of thinking about the story of Jesus coming and guiding us, inviting us to be in right relationship with God. It's the same thing Habakkuk said many years before: the righteous live by faith. We can have a right relationship with God through our trust in God. We can trust our parent God.

I know we struggle with trusting our own parents or being trustworthy parents. We're human. We have a hard time always doing things perfectly. But we have a gift given us. God has come through the son to invite us to know and trust the grace of God. God is trustworthy.

Now really, that is the story of Christianity in a little simple story, but we know that it gets a little more complicated as we move along. How do we keep understanding? We

know that Jesus is the very Word of God, that is, God's expression of God's love to us, God's forgiveness for us, God's willingness to show us new life—all of those things—but it's not always easy to continue to hear that word, partly because we don't have Jesus walking right here with us at this moment. So we have a witness, we have a guide, that we use—scripture. It's amazing that God has not only come to be among us, but given us that story to hear and to learn from and to engage with.

The interesting thing is that whenever we begin to engage with something, we have to begin to figure out how to engage with it. When we hear the witness of scripture we have to think about how we interpret it. My favorite way of interpreting it is to find those places that agree with what I believe and the ways I want to do things, and focus on those. But, I know that that's turning things around, taking control, and looking at it from my own perspective of what I want. So we're lucky that we live within a tradition that helps us think about how we understand the witness of scripture. What is the Reformed interpretation of Scripture? God has given us an opportunity, a witness to continue to think about what God has given, the story that shows us the way, the writings that undergird our faith and help us develop it. But how do we read scripture? If I want to get away from doing it in a way that fits what I want to believe and I really want to open myself to what God is going to say to me.

First, scripture interprets scripture. I can't just go find the piece I want and now say "Here's the scripture that defines everything." Why? Because there's a lot of scripture. I've got to have it fit within the scriptures. There are multiple messages in scripture. There's a Bible study called Kerygma, and one of the things they do is look at themes in scripture. One of the themes that we can see in scripture is covenant. God covenanted in the Old Testament. Every time we have communion, we talk about the New Covenant. That means that God makes an agreement to come and be with us and to walk with us and to guide us. That's one of the themes of scripture. Our interpretation has to fit into the message of scripture as a whole. If I like one scripture, that doesn't mean I can only look at that scripture. I should look at some scriptures that I don't like, as well, and try to figure out how they all work together.

There's also the Christological Principle. That is, the real Word of God is Christ. Sometimes we talk about scripture as the word, but it's the lower case word. The Word of God is Christ, God entering into our lives incarnate, willing to be among us, speaking directly to us. When we look at scripture, we have to think about it in terms of "God so loved the world that he gave his only son." We have to think about it in terms of Christ, and that scripture points to Christ. So that's another element of understanding scripture.

If we're going to look to Christ as one who helps us interpret scripture, then when Jesus says the greatest commandments are to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and your neighbor as yourself, it might be worth listening to. So there's the Law of Love. When we interpret scripture, we have to interpret it within the message of love that Jesus gives us.

Going back to the Christological Principle for a minute, that suggests to me that I should look at the stories and words of Jesus as a starting point for understanding it all.

Then there's the Rule of Faith. In our tradition, we're willing to say none of us know it all. None of us have the full experience or the only relationship with God, or the best relationship with God. We listen to one another today, but also, we listen to the historical witness. That's why we have a Book of Confessions. It gives us an historical witness. It's the Rule of Faith that we listen to those who have gone before us. We also realize that in our listening to those who have gone before us, it's still a human voice and we anticipate that within it all the Holy Spirit will be at work as well, enabling us to interpret and understand the witness of scripture and the Word of God in Christ.

Finally, we have to remember that the word is given us in a literary and historical context. Even when we read the scripture today, we bring all of who we are to what we read. And, we recognize that when it was written, it was written within a particular historical and literary context. Even to interpret the Greek words into English, the Hebrew words into English, that historical and literary context has to be taken into account, otherwise we would never understand what those words meant at all. They have to be looked at in their historical and literary context.

God, for some reason, chose to do this, to give us this incredible witness to Christ through the words and the contexts of people who have gone before us. It is as we allow ourselves to be open and interact with it in all these different ways, and allow the Holy Spirit to work with us, scripture comes alive. One reason I believe scripture comes alive is because we worship a living God. It's not just that these words were written years ago and now come down to us to give us wisdom. They do give us wisdom, but they also are a way God interacts with us today, speaks into our lives and invites us to recognize that God is at work and among us, moving in ways we don't even recognize, moving within our church and beyond our church. God is a living God, moving in our world today. Through the witness of scripture, God engages us, as it says in Hebrews, so that we might provoke one another to love and good deeds.

God is at work. Our tradition helps us think about it and engage, but it can only take us so far. It gives us some framework and some ways of thinking, but it also suggests that what we really have to do is open our hearts to God and allow God to continue to do God's work, to allow the son to take the blame and invite us into a family that will lead us into life through the witness of scripture, and most fully by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. So I invite you to think about scripture this week in new ways.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, you do have a way of speaking into our lives. We are thankful for this particular way, the witness of scripture that is the guide for life and faith. Help us again recognize and remember and go to your scriptures, and allow them to shape us, to guide us that we might be yours. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.