

Holy Habits: The Word of the Lord
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
September 25, 2022
Reverend Peter Jonker
Isaiah 55:8-13, Jeremiah 23:29

This morning we will hear the third sermon in our Holy Habit series. During this series we look at the habit of Sunday morning worship and we reflect on why we do the things we do in worship and how those things shape us. Worship is a Holy Habit and when we open ourselves up to this habit, the Holy Spirit works on us. Through worship the Spirit taps at our life and works it into a Christ-like shape. So far we've talked about the opening of our service, and the service of confession. This morning we will reflect on the preaching of the word, the sermon.

Let's start with a little bit of LaGrave history. Let's start with the building of this sanctuary, the one we are sitting right now and which we love so much. LaGrave has a unique worship space, especially for a church in the Reformed tradition. It's strange because of the windows. Most Reformed churches don't have stained glass windows. Because we come from a tradition that was suspicious of images, in most Reformed churches you might see one stained glass window at most. We went the other way. We have a whole church full of beautiful windows, which was controversial in 1960 when we built this space.

But it wasn't the most controversial feature of this new building. When we built this sanctuary there was one feature of the building that was so controversial that the editor of *The Banner* – our denomination's weekly magazine – wrote an editorial expressing dismay. Do you know what feature that was? It was this pulpit. This pulpit was so scandalous that it provoked a denomination wide controversy! Do you know why? Because it was not in the center. Because we moved it off to the side. We have what is called a divided chancel. The pulpit isn't in the middle; it's off to the side.

Why did this provoke outrage? Because in the Reformed tradition, and in most protestant traditions, the preaching of the Word, the sermon, is supposed to be central to worship. If you've grown up in our tradition you know that. The sermon comes in the middle of everything. It's the longest element of the service. And if you come to a worship service, you notice that everything else in the worship is organized around it. We choose hymns that fit the theme of the sermon. The service of confession fits the theme of the sermon. The preaching of the Word is central! That's always been a guiding principle of our worship. And the people who didn't like our pulpit thought that architecture of the church should reflect that principle. When you build a church people should be able to look at it and see that the Word is central. The pulpit should be front and center. That's where it is in just about every other Christian Reformed church! But now here comes the people of LaGrave and they put their pulpit off to the side. They put the communion table in the middle! John Calvin must be spinning in his grave.

Jake Eppinga was LaGrave's preacher when this controversial decision was made and he used to say that even though the pulpit was physically off to the side, in its worship and in its heart, the preaching of the word was still very much central here. I hope he's right about that because the centrality of the word isn't just a Christian Reformed tradition, it has deep biblical roots. In the passage we read this morning, Isaiah says that God's word has irresistible, life-changing power. When God's word

goes out, says the prophet, it's like the rain and snow falling on the earth. It cannot fail to bring forth life. It cannot fail to make the earth bud and flourish. And these words tap into a rich Biblical stream where God accomplishes his purpose through the proclamation of his word. Let me just run through a few of these texts so that you can get a sense of where we get this idea of the centrality of God's word in our worship.

It starts in the very first chapter of Genesis where God creates the whole world through speech. God's word isn't just a sound that conveys information – God's word brings things to life. In the creation story God says 'light' and the sun bursts into flame, God says 'tree' and a sapling breaks through the earth and reaches for the heavens, God says 'stream' and a spring bubbles up from the ground and runs down the mountainside. God's word creates the world.

And then throughout the Bible God moves his Kingdom forward by having people speak his word. God calls prophets who proclaim his message. These prophets speak words of warning – "Repent!" They speak words of encouragement and promise, "Do not be afraid I am with you. I have called you by name and you are mine." And when they brought their message they would say, 'This is what the Lord says.' 'Hear the word of the Lord.' The proclamation of the word is central in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament Jesus began his ministry by preaching. In Mark he goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath day and preaches and the people are all amazed by his teaching – for he spoke as one with authority and not as their teachers of the law. Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus preaches – sometimes in synagogues, sometimes on mountainsides, sometimes in parables, sometimes with words of confrontation. Preaching the word was central to Jesus' earthly ministry.

After Jesus ascends into heaven the apostles continue his work. What's at the center of that ministry? More preaching. On Pentecost Sunday when the Holy Spirit comes down, the first thing the Spirit to accomplish his work is a sermon – Peter preaches to the assembled crowds and the word is so powerful that it cuts people to the heart and hundreds turn to Jesus and join the disciples. Paul and the other missionary apostles go out into the world and everywhere they go they preach.

And of course all of those words spoken by prophets and preachers and apostles have been brought together by the Holy Spirit into the Bible. Working through human beings the Holy Spirit created this centrally important book, our guide for faith and life. Every Sunday after the Bible reading we ministers hold up this book and say, 'this is the word of the Lord,' and you say, 'Thanks be to God.' From the beginning of the church till the present day Christian worship has included preaching. Right from the beginning Christian worship has had a moment when someone gets up, reads the Bible and then uses that text to proclaim the word of the Lord.

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, says Hebrews. The prophet Jeremiah declares that God's word is like fire; like a hammer that breaks rocks to pieces. And Isaiah says it's like snow and rain that will not return empty, but will always cause new things to spring to life. The word has always been at the center of Christian worship.

Of course, I know that our experience of the word, your experience of the word, doesn't always seem to match the rhetoric of the passages I just mentioned. The actual experience of a sermon from Sunday to Sunday doesn't always feel like a hammer, or like rain that renews the earth. As I stand up here and preach, I can tell by the looks on your faces that you don't always feel like you're involved in an earth

shaking event in which the power of the God is changing the world. Sometimes, let's be honest, sermons are dull. Don't worry, you won't hurt my feelings. I know it's true. I don't think I've ever preached a sermon where there aren't at least a few people asleep. I'm not judging. I think I've mentioned before that once, while practicing on the couch I fell asleep during my own sermon. So, who am I to judge. If we are honest, we don't come out of every sermon feeling like it was a life changing event.

While I acknowledge the gap between the power of the word and the ordinariness of your Sunday morning experience, I want to remind you that the title of this sermon is *Holy Habits*. The word of the Lord certainly can bring sudden, radical change, but that's not generally how worship and preaching work. These are holy habits, and like all habits they have their effect when you practice them over a long period of time. They are routines and rituals in which the Holy Spirit *slowly* sculpts you into a new person.

Sculpting is a good image. It fits that image Jeremiah gives us – the word of God as a hammer that breaks stone. How did Michelangelo create the statue of David? How did he take this crude hunk of rock and turn it into a masterpiece? It took him three years to make it, and over those three years, Michelangelo applied millions of little chisel taps to the stone. Some of those hits were big whacks that took off a big piece of stone. Most of those hits were just small taps. Many of them were gentle and restrained, their results barely noticeable, but all of them were important. In the same way, under the power of the Holy Spirit, not one of these sermons, even the dull ones, even then mediocre ones, will fail to bring results. God uses all of them to shape you. Every one of the strokes of his hammer are sculpting you and giving you the shape he intends.

What shape is that? What is happening to us when we practice this holy habit week after week. Well when you practice this habit you will learn all sorts of things. You will learn the true character of God. You will meet a triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who loves you and who knows your name. You will learn the true story of this world – that this world was created by God in love, that he is renewing it in love, and that his love for the world is so great he sent His son to die for it – to absorb the sin and hate and give back love and life. And you will learn to love what God loves – you learn to put away pride and fear and hate, and you learn to love peace, patience, kindness, humility, grace. So practice the holy habit of the word and the Holy Spirit will teach you lots of important things – doctrine, morality, etc.

But I don't think this teaching – learning doctrines and morals - is the center of what gives the word its power. Look at what Isaiah and Jeremiah say about the power of the word. When they talk about what the word does to you, they don't talk about us learning things or figuring things out. They do not describe intellectual change. They describe rain and snow drenching the earth, they describe fire that purifies. They describe a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces. These aren't descriptions of you learning something. The earth doesn't learn the rain, the rain drenches it and fills it and transforms it from brown to green. The rock doesn't learn the hammer, the marble doesn't learn the artist's chisel, it is dashed to pieces and utterly remade.

In the preaching of the word, and this is not about me or my skill or the skill of any preacher who has ever stood in this pulpit, you are doing far more than learning things. You are meeting Jesus. See Jesus is the Word. The word made flesh. All of those words in scripture, the words of the prophets, all the stories, all the preaching in this book is pointing to him. In the preaching of the word, He comes to us and speaks

to us. His rain is soaking us, his hammer falls on us and we are changed. Somehow, in a way that has relatively little to do with the preacher, Jesus meets us in this sermon, and he works in my words or the words of whoever's up here in a way that is more than we can ask or imagine.

This is real. Every preacher has the experience of preaching what is objectively a mediocre sermon, a clunker, but after the sermon someone comes up to you and says, "that sermon meant so much to me, it was just what I needed." Or sometimes someone comes up to you and says, "when you said such and such, that was just what I needed to hear." Only you never said such and such. The person's heart *heard* such and such, but you never said it. All this shows that there is something happening in the sermon that is far bigger than the excellence of my words and the quality of your attention. Because those are tiny weak things. The excellence of my words?! The quality of your attention?! God help us if the church is built on those things! But somehow, and this is truly a mysterious, supernatural thing, in the preaching of the word Jesus comes and he takes hold of me and he takes hold of you and he the fire of His Spirit burns, his rain soaks us, his chisel taps away and we are changed. I want to ask you, 'does that make sense?' But of course it doesn't make sense. It's a holy mystery. It's a miracle of grace.

Frederich Buechner died this summer. Buechner was one of my favorite Christian authors and preachers. He had a unique way of writing about faith and its ups and downs. Buechner did not grow up with Christian faith. He was born into a stiff New England family. One that was not given to great shows of public feeling, and one that did not practice any faith. When he was 10 years old his family was turned upside down. While he was at home playing in his bedroom, Buechner's father killed himself in the garage – asphyxiating himself with the car exhaust. The event cast a shadow over his family, a shadow that they never talked about because they lacked the language and the Spiritual means to address it. Inside himself however, young Frederich began a journey of Spiritual searching.

He became a writer and wrote a book. It was a big success. But his search continued and one day during a sermon something happened to him. He was attending a church service in New York City and during the sermon the pastor said that Jesus was crucified, '*Jesus was crowned amid confession, tears and great laughter.*' Just that. According to Buechner, "*At the phrase great laughter, for reasons that I have never satisfactorily understood, the great wall of China crumbled and Atlantis rose up out of the sea, and on Madison Avenue, at 73rd Street, tears leapt from my eyes as though I had been struck across the face.*" He became a Christian, a preacher, a writer, and a lifelong follower of Jesus.

"With great laughter." Why did those words change him!? I don't think you can explain it. Buechner said that he himself couldn't explain it. It wasn't an intellectual thing, it wasn't anything he learned, anything he figured out. Frederich Buechner met the Word. Buechner met Jesus and through those words Jesus swung his hammer and knocked down the wall of his defenses. Jesus sent his rain and his world burst into green. So you should be careful. Because something like this could happen to anyone who practices this holy habit.