

Ps 119:105-112

13 February 2011

(this was previously preached)

“Words Written, Words Living”

I’m about to make a confession that I consider to be dangerous. The confession is this: I love the Bible. I love reading and studying the Bible. When I came to faith in Christ some twenty plus years ago, each day I read three chapters from the Old Testament, two from the New Testament, and a psalm.

I didn’t understand my fellow Christians who rarely, if ever, read the Bible—and these weren’t people with learning disabilities. I didn’t understand why they would voluntarily deprive themselves of this rich treasure.

Over the years, I gradually slowed down my pace. For a long time now, I’ve read a psalm in the morning and a chapter from the rest of the Bible at night. I no longer feel the “need for speed” as I go through the scriptures.

Why do I say that this is a dangerous confession? Professing my love of the Bible is dangerous because it can be dangerous for me; it can be dangerous for anyone. I’m not sure if it’s **more** or **less** dangerous if I don’t say anything about it. The danger can come in a number of ways. Reading of scripture can decline into a source of spiritual pride. It can be a delusion that suggests that we know more than we really do—or more than we can.

Another possibility is that the scriptures, the written word, can become an idol. There’s even a name for worshipping the Bible: bibliolatry. During the life of Jesus, we see that in action with some of the scribes and Pharisees. And bibliolatry is alive and well in our world today. I think it’s especially clear in those who angrily assert that **their** reading of the scriptures is the only legitimate one. And in extreme cases, they might even toss a bomb at you!

Nonetheless, understanding the ever-present possibility of self-deception, I hasten to add that it’s easier to see that stuff in others than in oneself!

Even though I love the Bible, to be honest, there are some scriptures that I find detestable. For example, I’m thinking of places that promote the abuse of women, not to mention places where genocide is advocated. But there is a way to help us guard ourselves, so that we don’t turn the Bible into a weapon. We can keep the life-giving word of God from becoming an instrument of death.

“Yes, but how can we do that?” That’s a good question! I’ll explore that in a few moments, but for right now, I’ll say this much: it involves Jesus. He can keep us from twisting the scriptures into something grotesque.

I began by claiming that I love the Bible. In our Old Testament reading from the Psalms, we find someone who is **truly in love** with the word of God. Psalm 119 is a celebration of God’s word. The author has gone to a great deal of trouble to construct this elaborate song of praise.

Still, there is more than adoration. There are also moments of despair, when all hope seems to have died. But the psalmist somehow regains strength in the promise of his God.

Even a casual glance at this longest of the psalms reveals something. We see that it's arranged into twenty-two stanzas. Some Bibles list at the heading of the stanzas the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The psalmist has composed an acrostic. That means the verses in each of the stanzas begin with the respective letters of the alphabet. Our psalm reading, verses 105 to 112, is the stanza for the letter *nun*. The equivalent in English would be the letter "n."

Our psalmist is also quite a poet. For each eight-verse stanza, with minor exceptions, he uses the same eight Hebrew words as synonyms for the word of God. Now **this** is a guy who really loves the scriptures!

What's the source of this deep devotion? What has inspired this undying dedication? It seems that our friend sees God's word, God's law, as life itself. He declares, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (v. 105). In the confusing path that **is** life, our psalmist has found a way to illuminate the darkness.

It also seems pretty clear that he has gone—and is still going through—some trying times. "I am severely afflicted," he cries, "give me life, O Lord, according to your word" (v. 107).

I wonder, is it possible to detect some of that bad attitude I mentioned earlier, which sometimes dogs those who are committed to the scriptures? It may not be so obvious in today's stanza. But consider this little jewel from earlier in the psalm: "Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, those who forsake your law" (v. 53). In the New Jerusalem Bible, we hear of how "[f]ury grips me when I see the wicked who abandon your Law."

At this point, I should make something clear. I'm not suggesting that the psalmist is plotting some kind of payback. I'm not saying that, based on what we have, we can psychoanalyze the guy and conclude that he's about to wreak some mighty vengeance on somebody's head!

Still, how is it that words that are meant to provide light often get used to stir up a lot of heat?

Again, think of the example of Jesus. In John 5, he's talking to some boys who are planning to put the hurt on him. We're told straight out that they "were seeking all the more to kill him" (v. 18). Jesus says, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf" (v. 39).

These guys have been scouring through the written word, believing that it gives them a reason to do away with the one standing before them. They've been searching the written word, but they can't recognize the living Word. They're convinced that they have no choice; they are compelled to be dealers of death.

They search the scriptures, because they think that in them, they have eternal life. Then Jesus says something that only **highlights** how bizarre the situation is. "Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (v. 40).

This brings us back to what I said earlier, about not using the Bible as a weapon—and how that involves Jesus. The written word has to be read through the eyes of the living Word. Otherwise, the written word has the life sucked out of it. It degenerates into slogans; it becomes sales pitches.

I also mentioned how I no longer felt the "need for speed" when reading the Bible. There are plenty of ways to read the Bible. It can be explored for the various forms of literature that appear in it. It can be studied to see how certain words are used.

There are numerous ways that can increase one's understanding. But ultimately, to hear the living Word in the written word, it is necessary to slow down. To hear that voice, it is necessary to be silent. Closely related to hearing that voice in the written word is hearing that voice in our lives.

There's a book by Barbara Brown Taylor called *When God is Silent*. As the title suggests, she speaks about not hearing the voice of God, the voice of the living Word.

She states, "Most people I ask say we are to blame, that if we cannot hear God's voice it is because we are not listening."¹ I'll admit that I've said that myself, from time to time. It seems to be a fairly common idea—a rather reasonable hypothesis.

She continues, "But even if that is true most of the time, it is not true all of the time. The death of Jesus taught us that. From the moment he came down from the mount of the Transfiguration, the memory of God's voice was all he had left. He prayed to hear it again in the garden of Gethsemane, but the only voice he heard there was his own.

He was arrested, tried, and convicted without so much as a sigh from heaven. From the cross, he pleaded for a word, any word, from the God he could no longer hear. He asked for bread and got a stone. Finally, in the most profound silence of his life, he died, believing himself forsaken by God."²

Some would say that, with those comments about Jesus, she's pushing her case a little **too** far. To be honest, I'm not really sure **how** I feel about it. Still, I can see how **her** reading of the scriptures would lead her to this conclusion. And I can say that I do appreciate the way she wraps this up.

"Will anyone suggest," she asks, "that he simply was not listening? I do not think so. In the silence surrounding his death, Jesus became the best possible companion for those whose prayers are not answered, who would give anything just to hear God call them by name. Him too. He wanted that too, and he did not get it. What he got, instead, was a fathomless silence in which to cry out. Forever after, everyone who has heard him bellow into it has had to wonder: Is that the voice of God?"³

Jesus dies with this on his lips: "God, why have you forsaken me?"

For some insane reason, I find that strangely comforting. I must be really disturbed! But I think that speaks volumes more than the bland and trivial responses we sometimes give those who ask, "Does God hear my prayer? Why can't I hear God?"

I do believe that we have to turn down the noise in our lives to hear God's voice, to hear the living Word. Still, to say that that's **all there is to it** suggests that, at the end of the day, **we're** really the ones in control.

I want to include one last quote from our friend Barbara. "Only an idol always answers. [I hadn't really thought of it like that before!] The God who keeps silence, even when God's own flesh and blood is begging for a word, is the God beyond anyone's control.

An answer will come, but not until the silence is complete. And even then, the answer will be given in silence. With the cross and the empty tomb, God has provided

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998), 77.

² Taylor, 77-78.

³ Taylor, 78.

us with two events that defy all our efforts to domesticate them. Before them, and before the God who is present in them, our most eloquent words turn to dust.”⁴

I began my sermon with the “dangerous” confession that I love the Bible. It is the written word which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. But the written word can also serve the powers of death, not life. It can become a weapon. To prevent that, we need the living Word.

A seminary professor of ours, Tom McDaniel, noted how the Bible includes examples of “God’s will and ways,” which should be followed, as well as “case studies of bad behavior and bad religion,” which should be rejected. Here are some helpful words in knowing the difference:⁵

“Whatever *blossoms* in the light of the Cross is the word of God about the divine will and the divine way...whatever *withers* in the light of the Cross is the word of God about our human condition. Christ, the *Living Word*, clarified the [uncertainties] in the two parts of the divinely inspired *Written Word*.

Anyone having difficulty distinguishing between our human [weakness] and God’s will and saving acts must simply come closer to the Cross. The Cross demonstrated the difference between the [healing and] therapeutic ‘loving enough to die’ in contrast to the human [sickness and] pathology of ‘loving enough to kill.’”

A great example of this is the incident I mentioned in John 5. Jesus is confronted by those with a pathological reading of the written word; their reading of the Bible is sick! They think they find in it eternal life. But they need only come to the living Word, and they will have life. Their sick approach to the word will be healed.

We, too, often have sick approaches to the written word. We feel compelled to do all kinds of harm: to keep certain groups of people in their place, to wage war, to keep our eyes firmly closed. If we come first to the living Word, our sick approaches to the written word will also be healed. We can join the psalmist and sing, “give me life, O Lord, according to your word” (v. 107).

⁴ Taylor, 80.

⁵ daniel.eastern.edu/seminary/tmcdaniel/hermeneutical%20key.html