

3rd Sunday after Epiphany – January 21, 2018

Mark 1:14-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Last week I talked in some detail about the fall-out of the Christmas story. What does it mean for us that the Word of God became flesh in Jesus Christ? One thing it means is that because God became an actual human being our physical bodies are holy ground, and just as important to God as our spirit and souls. This week I want to continue to talk about the Word of God and how it works. Is God's Word just words, or can we expect something to happen when God speaks?

You've heard people say things like, "put your money where your mouth is," "Easier said than done," or "If you talk the talk, you need to walk the walk!" We're wary of people who are all talk and no action, or who say one thing and do another, aren't we? Today, I want to challenge you to think about how that applies to what we do here on Sunday mornings. A lot of words get spoken and sung here in the course of an hour. Are these just words? Is there any practical result from them? Does anything actually get *done* here week in and week out?

Among the words we've been through already this morning are today's readings from Jonah and Mark. In both of these stories, there were words AND ACTION. They got results. In the reading from Jonah, God says to Jonah "Get up and go to Nineveh ... and proclaim the message that I tell you." The very next sentence has Jonah setting out for Nineveh "according to the WORD / of the Lord." A little further on Jonah shares God's WORD: "In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown!" In the very next sentence, ACTION. The people believed God, put on sackcloth, and repented. The word is spoken and it gets immediate results. Similarly, in our Gospel reading from the first chapter of Mark, Jesus says to Simon and Andrew, "follow me" And then "BAM" – ACTION! Mark says "immediately they left their nets and followed him."

Once again, concrete action follows words without any pause for thought. If you are a parent, don't you wish that it worked that way with your children? If only "clean your room" or "finish your homework" were followed by "BAM" – Action! Most of the time we get an "OK Mom" or "Ok Dad", which may or may not turn out to be empty words. How many of us are in a position that makes us responsible for the work other people do. As teachers / managers / supervisors / how nice would it be if our instructions were followed with "BAM" – Action!?" And if you're a kid, wouldn't it be great if, when you asked for something from your parents they would say "absolutely, your wish is my command," and then that was followed by "BAM – Action!?"

Things can seem so much easier in the Bible. We read stories about how God speaks and things happen. But how did those stories look to the people in them? Did it really work that way? Now, what I recounted a moment ago was the short version of the story of Jonah.: God calls Jonah to announce the destruction of Nineveh. Jonah goes, and the people repent. But I hope that at least some of you are already thinking "wait a minute, isn't the Jonah story a little more complicated than that?" And indeed it is. The only hint we get of that today, aside from the fact that we're already in the third chapter of the book, is the statement that this is the *second* time that God told Jonah to go to Nineveh. Those of us who remember the whole story know that the first time around God's word didn't quite get the intended reaction. When God called Jonah to go to Nineveh the first time, he set off in the opposite direction to ESCAPE from God and the mission he didn't want to carry out.

Between the first time God speaks to Jonah and the point at which Jonah acts "according to God's word," a lot of other action occurs, and a lot of time passes. Jonah ships out for the far west; then there's the storm at sea; the crew panics; they draw lots; they throw Jonah overboard at his own request; then the fish comes and swallows him up; and 3 days later, it spits him out on dry land. If all that could happen with Jonah, it makes me wonder...when Jesus called the disciples in Mark's account, was it really more complicated than it appears? Of course we don't have any direct evidence for this, but then there's a lot the Bible doesn't tell us when it's not the point of the story. If I had been

one of those fishermen in the boat called by Jesus, I think I would have wanted some more information before leaving the family business to follow some guy around the countryside. “Who ARE you?” “Where are we going?” and “what are we going to eat?”

Maybe Jesus had already had a meal with his future disciples, as he does in so many other instances, and he gave them some idea of who he was / and what he was up to. Maybe that played a part in convincing them to follow him. Or maybe they’d been in those crowds described earlier in this chapter/ when Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news / so that they already knew who he was when he walked by. The details aren’t important, but I think we can safely assume that there was more to the disciples’ calling than Mark records. What IS important to Mark is that Jesus called them to follow him, and that they responded. Jesus’ words make something happen. Fishermen are transformed into disciples. If the story here compresses the timeline a little, the effect is to emphasize the connection between Jesus’ words and the effect it has on the disciples.

This reminds me of Genesis. God speaks/ and the world is created. But again, the details are missing. Today, scientists tell us that the universe as we know it came into being over the course of almost fourteen billion years, through a big bang that led to a complex series of events that slowly created life on our planet. Scientists are still searching out the details today, but just like in the stories we just looked at, the details are secondary. Regardless of the intricate details about how things actually happened, what’s important to us – and to the writers of Genesis – is that God, by God’s word, created the world and everything in it, and that what God created was GOOD! The point is, God’s word results in action, and the action has a good outcome.

OK, so that’s the way it works in the Bible. But what about all of the words spoken here on Sunday morning – we’re about 1,200 words into my sermon right now, by the way. What about our week-in, week-out words-on-top-of-words, spoken, chanted, sung, and read? Is there any relation between them and the action-producing word of God that we read about in the biblical texts? What effect should they have on us and the way we live our lives?

If all our words here really are disconnected from reality, nothing more than linguistic calisthenics, then we are all wasting our breath. We could spend our energy doing all sorts of other useful things.

But the claim the gospel makes, and the claim I am making to you today is that there *is* a connection between our words and the word of God. At the heart of Christian worship is the conviction that in the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, in words spoken and sung, repeated and internalized, God the Father is at work through God the Holy Spirit to draw us into relationship with God the Son, calling us to follow him just as the first disciples were called. That may not be a simple process. It may be a process filled with resistance, indifference, and doubt. It may be a process that lacks the glamour and excitement that we expect ought to accompany a true encounter with the creator and author of the universe. It may be a process that takes a lot longer than we would like. But it is a process, we believe, that will achieve its results, because when God speaks, things happen. And this process is already underway. In our baptism God has already spoken, claiming us as God’s own children, binding us to the death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ and birthing us into new, authentic, and everlasting life in the presence of God. Just as it was with the creation of the world, so it is with each of our lives. All our words, spoken, sung, read, and proclaimed here each week, are meant to serve that purpose. You may not feel the full force of those words every time we gather, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can trust that they are at work. Because when God speaks into our lives, things happen, and the result is all sorts of action that bears witness to our faith and serves the needs of our neighbors.

So may we be faithful to our task of speaking God’s creative and redeeming word here in Christian worship and fellowship, and may the peace of God, spoken down the centuries by the followers of Jesus, keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.