

October 14, 2018 (Journey worship)

TEXT: Hebrews 4:12–16

TITLE: Swords and Words

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

We don't know exactly who wrote the book of Hebrews, but it's a good one. It has 13 chapters and is basically a long sermon about faith. It has lots of excellent quotations in it: *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen* (Hebrews 11). *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever* (Hebrews 13). And the passage we heard from Hebrews 4 has two phrases often highlighted by preachers—how the word of God is like a two-edged sword and the invitation to approach God's throne of grace with boldness to receive mercy and help in time of need. At first glance, those phrases seem to describe conflicting images: the word of God as a sharp sword or weapon vs. this invitation to come close to God to receive healing for our wounds. But what holds the two phrases together are the verses in-between—this description of Jesus Christ as the word made flesh, the great high priest, the sinless one who sympathizes with us in our weakness.

Let's start with the first phrase: the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. Words do have tremendous power. Think about the power found in phrases like "I love you," "I hate you," "I'm truly sorry." A few short words can have a huge impact. For the early Christian church, the most profound profession of faith was only three words long: *Jesus is Lord*. This type of verbal efficiency is part of why the author of Hebrews compared the word of God to a sword—something able to pierce to the heart of the matter like a sharp knife.

Different people understand this image in different ways. Martin Luther, back in the Reformation, insisted this passage was mostly about judgment—how God is able to penetrate our souls and expose all that is sinful, flawed or unworthy. That may well be true, but it is only part of the story. The emphasis here is not on a violent God, anxious to uncover all our dark secrets. The punitive God of religious fundamentalism is not one to whom we can comfortably, even boldly approach to receive grace and mercy and help in times of need.

The word of God, as revealed in scripture, is able to separate what really matters from what is superficial. It is like a sword or a scalpel, purifying, cleansing, cutting away bad inclinations and false motives. It is able to uncover what's inside us, including our flaws and secrets, our fears and inner wounds. But the big difference here is this sword of God's word doesn't pierce and expose in order to beat us down. Its goal is to free us from real and imagined chains so we can be lifted up and made whole at last. A different Reformer, John Calvin, said that scripture is like spectacles for our weak eyes. Without God's word, we see a world that appears chaotic, arbitrary, blurry and out of focus. With God's word as a lens and guide, we can see God's saving work in Christ Jesus with a crystal clarity. We see transforming love, empowering justice, good overcoming evil and life that is stronger than death. A sharp word for sharpened sight and new life.

Now onto the latter phrase in Hebrews 4—the one about approaching the throne of grace with boldness. Baptist churches and others are prone to say those words as a preamble to prayer—“let us bring our petitions before the throne of grace.” It’s a helpful image. Real prayer is never impersonal or perfunctory. It is not meant to be something done, like checking off a “to do” list or formally completed with neither sincerity nor inner conviction. Nor is it wordy self-conscious pleading: “Lord, I just want to ask this and I just need you to do this just this once...” Prayer is about an honest word spoken to one who hears—less a secret whispered confession and more of a loving kitchen table conversation.

Roberta Bondi, a professor at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, gave an interview about learning how to pray. She said one of the goals of prayer is to grow in friendship and trust with God. That may seem superficial, but it is closely analogous with our experiences here on earth. Friends speak their minds to each other. In fact, when friends withhold things from one another, it undermines, perhaps even destroys the friendship. You don’t always get what you want from your friend—nor does your friend automatically agree with you. But you still need to come before your friend with honesty, humility and authenticity—which is also true when we come before God. A second point is that it is not duplicating efforts when we pray for those things that we know God already wants. Friends routinely both want the same things. God wants peace in the Middle East—for hurricane victims to be safe and cared for—so do we. We pray for those goals out of a shared perspective that is compassionate and just, knowing that we pray with God even as we pray to God.

Another interesting part of praying to God, besides honest sharing, is to be silent for part of your prayer. The Hebrews passage says to approach the throne of grace with boldness to receive mercy and help; it doesn’t say to approach the throne talking a mile a minute. Sitting in God’s presence without saying anything is part of being in a loving, mutual relationship. Prayer shouldn’t be a formal act, something that is done out of rote or timed routines. Prayer is a posture—a quieting down—a break in the everyday routine to speak to God and yes, to listen to God, or at least know that God is near.

At the risk of seeing too much through my parental eyes, when Ian was a toddler, one of our bedtime rituals involved reading some books together—and then we’d gather up his favorite toys, his blanket, his cup of water, and sit outside on the porch swing looking for fireflies and listening to the nighttime noises. Since this was Wisconsin, for much of the year this was a chilly ritual, with Ian burrowed down into a nest on the swing and soon falling asleep. At that point, I would gather up the toys, cup, blanket, and sleeping child, somehow get the screen door, and carry the boy up to his bed.

When Hebrews talks about coming before God’s throne of grace, what image comes to mind? Do you picture a huge throne that overwhelms and intimidates you to fall on your knees? Do you imagine a place where you are waiting your turn to make your case, to speak forth your petitions to a sympathetic yet legalistic judge? Do you worry that you’d not be worthy to approach this throne—given our human frailties, sins, muddled ideas and selfish needs? Part of me imagines that prayer before Jesus, the great high priest,

the one who has been tested in every way as we are and yet who is without sin, is sort of—vaguely like that nighttime ritual on the porch swing. We come before God who knows us completely. We talk—read books—see the world—wonder and wish and offer our prayers. And then at some point we stop; we doze off—and God takes all of us up in God’s arms: toys, cups, blankets, sins, imperfections, crazy ideas, hopeful dreams, and carefully carries us close to God’s chest—to rest for a while, to know mercy and forgiveness and acceptance, and to receive the grace and help for our time of need, whatever that might be.

The word of God is how we talk about scripture. It is also how we talk about Jesus, the word made flesh. This word is sharp, piercing—discerning right from wrong, light from shadow, real from pretense. And this word—this high priest who looks both to God the Creator and looks to us the created ones—is the one who shows us the way forward. Jesus takes our ordinary days and transforms them into times of renewal, of rededication, and of lasting hope. We are renewed because we aren’t alone at all; someone else knows us and our needs completely and lovingly. We are rededicated, because praying as if to a friend and savior, we can see what is most important—what must be done—or at least the direction of the next steps we are to take. And at this throne of grace, we are filled with a lasting hope—a horizon defined by the image of an empty cross—a stone rolled away from a formerly occupied tomb—an Easter resurrection that foreshadows all resurrections, all new beginnings, that light which no darkness can overcome.

I’ll share this story in my sermon for the 11:00 service, but it’s too good to only say once today. During the days of South African apartheid, a protest rally was cancelled; so Desmond Tutu led a worship service in St. George’s cathedral. The walls were lined with riot police carrying guns and bayonets, ready to shut it down. Bishop Tutu spoke strongly against the evils of apartheid—how the authorities who propped it up were doomed to fail. He pointed at the police who were there to record his words: “You may be powerful—very powerful—but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost.” Then, in a moment of unbearable tension, Tutu seemed to soften. Coming out from behind the pulpit, he flashed that radiant smile of his and began to bounce up and down with glee. “Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side.” The crowd roared, the police melted away, and the people began to dance.

There is no denying the sharpness of the word of God. Neither is there any denial of the amazing grace coming from the throne of God as mercy and help in times of need. Both aspects come together in Christ—the high priest of the word, the giver of all grace. So hold fast to your confession and pray, profess, and dance to the Lord now and always!