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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Transfiguration, Series A
Saturday, February 25th, 2017
Sunday, February 26th, 2017

Sermon: A More Sure Word

Text: 2 Peter 1:16-21

Focus: God's written Word is reliable and true.

Function: That they would read and listen to the Bible.

Structure: Problem-Solution

Locus: "We should fear and love God so that we do despise preaching and God's Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it" (SC, 3rd Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Do you ever wish that God would speak to you, that out of the blue you would hear his voice and know what to do, that he would grant you some kind of vision to know that you're not alone, that all of a sudden you would have an epiphany and your path would be clear? Of course, I know that you do. For many of you have asked me, "Pastor, why doesn't God *speak* to me?"

It might surprise you to discover that often I have desired the same thing. Many of you assume that, just because I am a pastor, I must have some kind of running conversation going with God all the time—a direct line!—as if he were whispering in my ear at all hours of the day or

whenever I pray. I wish that were true, but that's not how it works for me. It never has.

I grew up in a Christian tradition known as Pentecostalism, which asserts that God is speaking all the time. If only you believe hard enough and lead a holy enough life, then you will become God's instrument and mouthpiece, uttering his divine revelation in various tongues and prophecies. But I could not speak in tongues and did not hear God speak. As a boy, I would lay in bed at night, praying and begging God to grant me the gift. I even tried swirling my tongue around and babbling gobbledygook in case I had to "prime the pump," so to speak—do your best and God will do the rest—that sort of thing.

I yearned to hear God calling my name in the night, like the boy Samuel wakened in the night by God's voice. "Samuel! Samuel!" I was ready to perk up and exclaim, "Speak, Lord, for your servant listens!" (cp. 1 Sam. 3:10). I strained to hear the "still, small voice" that beckoned Elijah from the cave in the wilderness and asked him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:12-13). But no voice ever came. God never spoke *to* me or *through* me, and so, based on the

teaching of my Assembly of God church, I was not a good Christian—unworthy to receive the Holy Spirit and his gifts.

Now, let me tell you: that will do a number on your faith! For most of my teenaged years, I struggled against the darkness, wrestling with my anguished heart (*Anfechtung*) and dark night of the soul. I felt distant from the silent God who would not enfold me in his love or speak to me. I kept praying and reading my Bible, looking for a loophole and some hope to be saved, but I assumed most days that I was damned and destined for the fires of hell.

All of that changed during my senior year of high school when I finally visited a Lutheran church. It was a large Lutheran megachurch with a huge sanctuary and dynamic music ministry. But none of that impressed me. What caught me off guard was the Gospel preaching of Pastor Jim Thelen, one of the associate pastors. For what I heard surprised me. God loved me and accepted me not because of who I was or how good I was, but simply and solely because of who God is and because of what Jesus did for me on the cross. I heard about free grace and the forgiveness of sins. And I discovered that God didn't ordinarily

speak through wondrous means like tongues or visions. Instead, God works through the plain and simple means of grace: his Word and Sacraments.

I spent most of my young life waiting for God to speak to me. The Lutheran Church taught me that God was already speaking—and never stopped speaking—through his Holy Word: the Bible. Most of the time, when people wonder why God is silent, it is because they are not listening. They disregard the Bible gathering dust on their nightstand or forgotten in their glovebox. Or they despise the preaching of God’s Word in public worship, choosing to sleep in on Sunday or pursue other activities instead of hearing God speak in the Scriptures. Or they listen, but they don’t like what they hear in God’s Word, so they look for another church or preacher who tells them what they want to hear or stop going to church and reading their Bible altogether. Well would we heed the warning of Psalm 95: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...” (Ps. 95:7b-8a).

The Bible is God’s Word. The Bible may not be very appealing or exciting if you are obsessed with hearing voices and seeing visions. But

the Bible has a distinct advantage over those other means of speaking: it's reliable, true, and time-tested. I do not want to put God in a box and say that he *can't* speak through dreams and visions, but God has not *promised* to speak in those ways. What he *has* promised is to speak in his Word, the Holy Scriptures. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." (Heb. 1:1-2a). From Genesis to Revelation, from cover to cover, your Bible contains the voice of God *for you*. It is the voice of Jesus, the Son of God, whose words give you eternal life.

That's what the apostle Peter writes about in our epistle lesson today. Peter was an eyewitness—and *earwitness*—of Jesus' glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. Peter saw Jesus shining in glory and his clothing flashing white like lightning. He saw Moses and Elijah on the mountain, conversing with Jesus. He even *interrupted* the conversation, butting in with his foolish offer to build three tabernacles on the mountain, one each for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, as if Jesus were just another Old Testament prophet and not on a totally different level

altogether. Peter heard the voice from heaven that declared, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; *listen* to him!” (Matt. 17:5; cp. 2 Pet. 1:17-18). *Listen* to him! Listen to *Jesus*!

And then Peter tells us where and how to listen to Jesus. Not in dreams, not in visions, not by speaking in tongues, but in the *Bible*, in God’s *written* Word:

“And we have something *more sure*, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place..., knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:19-21).

Peter assures us that we have a *more sure Word* than the voice he heard on the Mount of Transfiguration! Astounding! Just think about that for a minute. Your *Bible*, the Holy Scriptures, the *written* Word of God, is a more sure Word than if you heard God’s voice booming from the clouds or whispering in your ear.

Because of my negative experiences growing up in Pentecostalism, I am automatically suspicious whenever I hear someone claim that God spoke to them. I am even perhaps *overly* cautious of any supposed

“words from the Lord.” Talk is cheap, and people can make up all kinds of things. They can mistake their imagination or mental illness for God’s voice (schizophrenia comes to mind). Alcohol, indigestion, and anti-depressives can all lead to particularly vivid dreams that may be mistaken for divine visions. But how are we to tell the difference between a sign from God and the devil’s deceptions? Even Satan can masquerade as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). No wonder, then, that the Bible adjures us to test the spirits. “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

How do we know if a supposed word from the Lord is really true? By going back to the Bible! Check if the words of someone’s supposed epiphany line up with God’s Word. We must search the Scriptures, like the noble Jews of Berea, who tried to see if the things spoken by Paul were true or not (Acts 17:10-11). Remember: the *written* Word of God, the *Scriptures*, are a “more sure” Word than any voice or vision you may hear (2 Pet. 1:19-20).

Why doesn't God speak to you? He *does* speak to you. He is speaking to you *right now!* Yet outside of reading my Bible or listening to a good, doctrinal sermon, God has only spoken to me twice in my life. I will never forget it because all of a sudden, clear as a bell, God's voice cut through the distractions and interrupted my thoughts. How do I know it was God speaking? Because both times were quotations from Scripture. The first time was during my senior year of high school, when I was wondering what to do with my life. Where was I going to go to school? What was I going to major in? What was my answer to the perennial question, "What do you want to *be* when you grow up?" (*Aside: I recognize, of course, that some of you are in your 70's and still trying to figure out the answer to that question!*) It was a source of real anxiety for me.

Then "*Follow me!*" came God's voice, repeating the same words spoken by Jesus to the disciples as they mended their nets by the Sea of Galilee. "Follow me!" And I knew that as long as I tried to follow the Lord's ways in my life, the rest would all work out. There was an incredible amount of freedom in that command.

The other time I heard God's voice was in 2011 when I was going through a difficult time in ministry. Several people at my former congregation were attacking me and telling lies about my preaching, wrongly claiming that I was a false teacher. They even talked of cutting my salary in half and withheld their offerings, openly boasting to people that they were going to starve me out of the ministry.

One Sunday, I was particularly worried about a Voters meeting after church. I knew I was going to be subject to another round of attacks and that they might even call for a vote to remove me from my office. I worried about what to say and how to defend myself against their false claims. Then on my drive to church, a voice said quite clearly in my head, **“In quietness and rest you will be saved.”** The words stunned me. I understood this to mean that I should remain silent and say nothing in my own defense—like Jesus at his trial before the Jewish religious leaders. Instead I would let others defend me. And they did. Later that day, I did a concordance search in my Bible and discovered Isaiah 30:15: “For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, ‘In

returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength' But you were unwilling" (Isa. 30:15).

You may be surprised by what I am telling you. But here is the wonderful miracle: after years of prayer and Bible reading, God used the very words written in Scripture to comfort me and give me hope in the midst of difficult times. He did not grant me any kind of new revelation. He spoke a "more sure" Word to me, the written Word that he had already written on my heart. Rather than straining our ears to the silence of the night, let us pay attention to the more sure Word of Holy Scripture, which is like a lamp shining in a dark place. His Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. In his Holy Word, God will speak to us, and in his Word, he will show you the way. God is speaking. Are we listening? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.