

January 23, 2011

Matthew 4:1-11

Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Worship: Centered in the Word

Introduction to Scripture

Our scripture reading this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew. It is Matthew's retelling of the beginning of Jesus' ministry – how after Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist in the waters of the Jordan River – how after the Spirit of God descends like a dove upon Jesus – how after the voice of God declares (before God and everybody) that this Jesus is 'my Son – the Beloved' – how after all these things – Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he is tempted.

There are many ways to look at this passage. We could begin by looking at what it says about Jesus. About his integrity – about how he doesn't give into the temptations he faces. About being able to recognize a little more fully that this Jesus is truly the Son of God and what that might look like.

We could look at this passage and the temptations that are faced by Jesus. We could talk about how in the temptation to turn stones to loaves of bread Jesus is faced with the temptation of not trusting in God's providence – trusting instead in himself.

We could talk about how in the temptation to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple Jesus trusting that God will provide angels to save him – how in this temptation we see the temptation of celebrity and spectacle for the sake of fame – so everyone will know our name.

We could look at the 3rd temptation and talk about the temptation of position – of power and possession. We could talk about all these things and talk about how we face many of those same temptations.

But we are looking at this text through the eyes of worship – trying to understand what worship is – and why we do what we do in worship. So maybe as we look at this text this morning we will pay attention to the ways that we are tempted to serve other gods. Remember that worship is service. Maybe as we hear this scripture and wrestle with it we will pay attention to those things in quotes – Jesus and even the devil himself quoting scripture.

Pray.

We have been talking about worship – what it is and why we do what we do. We have been reminded that worship is our **response** to what God has done – it our response to God's mighty acts. We have been reminded that worship is indeed our **service** of God – worship is worship when it is **God focused** not me focused. We have been reminded that worship is **verb** that calls us to act – to act in our singing and our praying – our sharing and our silence – our remembering and our declaring. We have been reminded that **worship also forms us** – indirectly – as disciples of Jesus – followers of Jesus – because as we serve our Servant Lord – we learn how it is Jesus calls us to live.

Last week we talked about the **opening movements of worship**. How we come into worship carrying with us the reality of the lives we have been given by God. We were reminded how God is just as much in the midst of our ordinary and everyday lives as God is in the midst of our worship lives. We remembered how those opening movements of worship begin to help us move our attention and our **focus** from ourselves and direct it toward the God who is 'holy' – this is to say (Holiness is both about a God whose power and might are incomprehensible to us and it is about purity - about a God who always does the right thing.)

I asked you last week to think about a God who is **holy** and what that might look like for you. Can we find a balanced approach in our understanding of God where God is both approachable (Friend and Helper) and at the same time God's power and might gives us pause. Can we find this place of awe in approaching God?

Anne Dillard is not a Biblical scholar or a theologian – she is an ordinary person who finds her way to the pew of some church each and every week. Annie is a writer and she wonders:

- Why do people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." (*Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Harper & Row, 1982)

Drawn into the presence of the Holy God through our gathering ritual – we are made aware of our own unholy-ness – our own imperfection – of our sin.

Sin is what separates us from God – so our **confession of sin** – there as we conclude the gather rituals – is timely – and by our confession we are draw closer to the living God.

We all know how this works. We let our pride in get the way – we say things we shouldn't have said – to our spouse – to one of our children – to a friend – and the next thing we know is that we aren't speaking. The healing of these relationships take place when we (being truly sorrow) go to that person and ask their forgiveness. Next thing we know – not only is our relationship back on track – but it is better than it was – because we now know a little more about ourselves and there is a stronger bond of trust.

No wonder Jesus speaks so much about forgiveness.

It is after we make our confession of sin – when our relationship with the God we know most fully in Jesus Christ is reconciled – that we are most ready – to **hear God speak** to us anew.

This 'speaking' of God – has a central place and important place in our worship. It is located normally in the center of our worship with everything before leading to it and everything after in response to it. We see the centrality of the Word – or in this case Scripture in Jesus' own life – as he is tempted in the wilderness – he is able to respond to his temptations – to the devil – by quoting scripture.

This proclamation of the Word begins with the children's chat, it may include an Anthem that points to the word, there is the reading of the scripture lesson and the proclamation or preaching of that word.

Hearing the Word of God – has a very unique meaning to us as Reformed / as Presbyterian people. First we understand 'Word' as those ways in which God reveals himself to us – makes Himself known to us – and shows us how we should live.

Secondly – the Word of God has a four-fold meaning for us. We understand 'Word of God' to be revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, through the scriptures, in the preaching of the Word and through the observance of the sacraments.

Let me unpack this. The Word of God is *Jesus Christ*. John begins his gospel by telling us that ‘*in the beginning was the Word – and the Word was with God – and the Word was God --- and the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*’ See in the person of Jesus Christ – God becomes most fully known to us – for in Christ God puts on our skin so that we can somewhat comprehend – who this God is and how it is that we are to live in response to God.

Secondly, the Word of God is found in *scripture*. Paul writes to the young pastor Timothy that ‘*all scripture is God breathed*’ (2Tim 3:16). The scriptures reveal to us the Triune God – Father, Son and Spirit – the Creator, Redeemer and Life giver even as they show us how it is we are to live.

Thirdly, the Word of God is found in the *proclamation* of the person of Jesus Christ and the scriptures. This proclamation takes place through the preaching of the Word – through the singing of things like Canticles and Anthems, through dramatic interpretations and art.

Now let me stop here to make a very – very – very important point – that point is that the proclamation of the Word – is made with the understanding that it is the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit giving witness to the truth of God – that gives it status as the Word of God. In other Words – it is about what God does by the power of the Holy Spirit – not about what I do coming up with some clever sermon – not about what the choir does hitting every note just right – but it is what the Holy Spirit does – that gives the Word meaning and authority in our lives.

This is why when we come to the section of our worship entitled The People of God Hear the Word – we begin with a prayer asking God to illumine – to give meaning to the Word that will be read and spoken.

Last but not least in our list of how we understand the Word of God – it through the *Sacraments* of Baptism and Holy Communion. The sacraments are the Word of God enacted or if you will, proclaimed in physical ways – water poured out – bread that is broken. The sacraments are the Word of God in that they reveal to us Jesus Christ and the promises that are ours in him.

For us as Reformed believers – as Presbyterians – the Word of God takes center place in our Worship – everything we do in our worship (and hopefully in our lives) brings us to the place of hearing the Word of God proclaimed – and upon hearing that Word – brings us to respond to the Word.

Clearly we can see that as we talk about the Word of God – this is God acting – acting by revealing to us who he is and how we are to live. So the question for us is – if worship is our response to God’s mighty acts – if it is our service of God – how do we respond?

Let me suggest three ways: 1) that we prepare ourselves to hear the word of God, 2) that we listen actively, and 3) that we ruminate – we chew – we commit ourselves to continue listening even after the moment is over.

1) Preparation is an important part of listening actively. Preparation implies that we are thinking about what God might have to say to us – even before he speaks – and that we are taking steps to get ourselves ready to listen.

We prepare to hear God's Word – by thinking about it, by praying about it (God I don't know what it is that you have to say – but open me up to hear it.). We prepare by getting physically ready – getting the rest we need and exercise we need so that we can be alert. We prepare by being in God's Word – if we are reading and studying scripture regularly – it is not as foreign to us.

It might this look like? One of the elders recently told how each week after receiving my weekly email – he takes and reads the scripture that I have listed for the coming week. He finds that as he reads the passage he needs to read around the passage – before and after – in order to understand it.

Others prepare by coming to the Wednesday morning Bible Study where we discuss the passage for the coming week.

2) We respond by actively listening. This is what I invite you to do as I read scripture. “Hear now the word of God.” Actively listening means engaging with the words that are being spoken. ‘Wow that’s a weird thing.’ ‘I wonder why he said that?’ ‘That makes sense.’ ‘I don’t know if I believe that.’

Some of us are helped to listen by taking notes. Others are helped by drawing pictures. Some of us are blessed enough that we can just make mental notes.

Active listening is added according to the “Presbyterian Handbook” by good posture, by listening for the ‘law’ – God’s command to us (we are to listen for God’s Word to us) – and by listening for the ‘grace’ – the evidence of God’s love to us (our listening and understanding will never be perfect – but we have the gift of God’s Holy Spirit who opens to us his Word.) And it says by concentrating on points that are outlined in the sermon. (Like first we need to prepare ourselves to hear God’s word. Secondly, we need to actively listen, third we need to ruminate – chew on that word.)

3) That we commit ourselves to chewing on – to ruminating – to thinking about the scripture – the proclamation – the sacrament. I think many of us give up on the proclamation of the Word pretty quickly – it overwhelms us and we think why bother. What we need to do is listen to things that resonate within us – things that make us say, ‘yeah’ – and then we need to hold on to those things and keep them before us in prayer – we need to explore them with others – and keep listening to see how God might connect our initial thought with other thoughts.

I know one lady who found a particular biblical phrase odd ‘alien residents’. As she began to listen for it she became more and more aware of it in scripture – and one day she realized that as a child of God – she – herself – is one of those ‘alien residents’ as her true home is with God.

Our Order of Worship helps us to meet the living God – to see and hear God speak to us so that we might respond to God’s holiness – by serving Him – by giving God all that we are and all that we aren’t.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.