The Power of God’s Word

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at Light Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore,
on Sunday, January 11, 2015.

Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Mark 1:4-11

As I reflected on the lectionary readings this past week, one of the things that struck me most is the powerful role of God’s voice in each scripture passage.

In Genesis, God’s voice has the power to create. God creates the heavens and the earth and all living things in six days. Everything is brought into being by the creative power of God’s word. "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.” "God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind . . .' And it was so." God speaks the world into being: first light and darkness; then sky; followed by earth and sea and all manners of vegetation; then the sun, moon, and stars; creatures of the sea and birds of the air; wild animals of the earth; and finally, on the sixth day, humankind. God speaks, and creation happens!

Then, in Psalm 29, almost every verse begins with “The voice of the Lord.” Indeed, that same phrase appears seven times in quick succession! The psalm describes the power of God’s voice as if it were a thunderstorm. “The God of glory thunders … over mighty waters.” “The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars.” “The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.” “The voice of the lord shakes the wilderness.” “The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare.” The psalm tells us that not only does God’s voice have the power to create, it also has the power to move in and through Creation to stir things up and shake the very foundations of our existence.

At the same time, God’s voice also has the power to bless, which we hear both at the end of Psalm 29 and at the end of the reading from the gospel of Mark. “May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!” the Psalmist writes. And in Mark, after Jesus is baptized, a voice comes from heaven saying “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” It is presumably God’s voice pronouncing his blessing upon Jesus, God’s only son.

We hear in these three passages the power of God’s voice, the power of God’s word, to create, to transform, and to bless.

I suspect that few of us have heard the voice of God as an audible voice like you’re hearing my voice now. It is something that does happen in some people’s lives. And it can be a powerful, life-changing experience.

But for the vast majority of us, the voice of God becomes accessible to us primarily through the scriptures. We encounter God’s voice as it is recorded in the Bible. That, in part, is why we call the Bible God’s word. God speaks to us through the Old and New Testaments, which were written by human beings, but inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. The Bible tells us about God and the relationship between God and God’s people.
The Bible is an important book and has been for centuries. It’s the world’s best-selling book of all time. The Bible is both important and popular, because it is our primary source for knowing about God, Jesus, and the early church. We call it “holy.” In other words, we set it apart from all other literature. We hold it in high esteem. It is a book above all other books. It is sacred scripture. It holds a special place within our faith community. That’s why, when we ordain and install elders to serve as officers of the church, which we’ll be doing later in today’s service, one of the questions we always ask has to do with the Bible. “Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s word to you?”

Reading the Bible, listening for God’s word to us, has the power to form us as people of God. It can create in us an understanding of who God is, who we are, and how we are related to God. It can deepen our faith and nurture our spirits. It can instill in us a passion for justice, peace, and creation care.

I grew up in the Presbyterian Church. My initial formation as a Christian was in Sunday School as I listened to stories from the Bible week after week and then attended worship with my parents. I learned that God loved me unconditionally, that Jesus was my friend and teacher, and that being a Christian meant following Jesus’ example, treating others as I would like to be treated. It was a simple, child’s faith.

Since then, I have grown older and gained more life experience, even studied at a theological seminary. My faith may have become more informed, more sophisticated, more nuanced, but deep down at the foundation of my Christian faith are those same core beliefs that I picked up as a child in Sunday School as I listened to stories from God’s word: God loves me; Jesus is my friend; Christians follow Jesus’ example.

Reading the Bible, listening for God’s word to us, can also be dangerous and subversive thing to do. It has the power to radically alter our perspectives, to turn our worldviews upside down. It can transform our lives and inspire us to do things we might never have dreamed.

I remember reading the Sermon on the Mount for the first time. I think I was in 7th or 8th grade. That collection of Jesus’ hard sayings from the gospel of Matthew rocked my world. To a boy growing up in an affluent Long Island suburb in the 1960s and 70s, Jesus’ words were radicalizing! If you haven’t read the Sermon on the Mount recently, I commend it to you. You’ll find it in chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Matthew’s gospel. It is a call to radical discipleship, a call to single-minded obedience to God, a call to nonviolence, justice, and peace.

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount led me to travel to the Soviet Union several times at the height of the Cold War to build bridges of mutual understanding and practice loving our enemies. It has led me to protest war and militarism and promote peace and nonviolence. It has moved me to make common cause with groups like the United Workers Association that are struggling for economic justice and an end to poverty. And it has challenged me to be more generous with the resources entrusted to my care.
Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa says: “There’s nothing more radical, nothing more revolutionary, nothing more subversive against injustice and oppression than the Bible.”

It makes me wonder whether all Bibles should come with a warning label on their covers: “Caution: Read with care. The contents of this book could change your life!”

Reading the Bible, listening for God’s word to us, can be a source of blessing as well. When we are discouraged, God’s word has the power to support and uphold us. When we are in despair, it can offer us renewed hope. When we are sick, it can give us confidence in God’s healing power. When we are confused, it can help us to find clarity. When we are feeling guilty, it can assure us of God’s unconditional love and forgiveness. When we are lonely, it can remind us of God’s abiding presence.

There is power in God’s word: power to create, power to transform, and power to bless. One way to gain access to that power is to open the Bible and begin reading, listening for God’s word to you. Many Christians read and study the Bible on a daily basis. It’s a good habit to get into. If you have a Bible at home that has been collecting dust, I encourage you to take it off the shelf, dust it off, and open it up. You may be surprised at what you find inside!

You can follow the weekly lectionary texts, which you’ll always find at the bottom of the insert in your Sunday worship bulletin. And since I usually preach on one of the weekly lectionary texts, by reading those four passages during the week, you’ll be more familiar with the scripture readings prior to hearing the sermon in worship.

There is also a link to the weekly lectionary readings on our church’s webpage (lightstreetchurch.org). At that same link, you’ll also find daily lectionary readings. If you read the daily lectionary readings, over the course of two years, you will have read through most of the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice.

And, for those of you with smart phones, there is, as they say, an app for that. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has produced a Daily Prayer app, which gives you suggestions for morning and evening prayer each day along with the designated scripture readings from the daily lectionary. It makes daily prayer and Bible reading just a little bit easier, since most of us don’t carry our Bibles around with us and we are not always in front of a computer, but we almost always have our phones with us.

I want to encourage you all to read your Bibles more often. But remember! I’ve given you fair warning. Read them with care, because the power of God’s word could very well change your life!