

The Living Word

Hebrews 4:12-16
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First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

It was in the winter of 1820 when Thomas Jefferson took a knife to the Scriptures, cutting out all the parts about Jesus' divinity, his miracles and signs, and his resurrection. The resulting publication has been called the Jefferson Bible, but its actual title is "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth," with a subtitle that reads, "Extracted textually from the Gospels."

Jefferson had extracted or removed from the Bible any sign of miraculous or supernatural events, leaving just the life and teachings of Jesus. Thus, Jefferson claimed to have shown himself to be, quote, a "real Christian, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus," unquote.

Now, I don't know how much doctrine you'll find in the Jefferson Bible, but I can say you won't find Jesus there, at least not in his fullness and glory. Furthermore, I'm guessing that Jefferson would have had trouble with Hebrews where it says, "Indeed, the word of God is living and active..." But do we find that statement troubling? Should we? Probably, we should.

I mean, think about. When you hear Hebrews saying the living word of God is "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow," and that "it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart," how does that make you feel?

What does it mean to you that the Living Word of God is so directed at your life? That's what we'll explore during our sermon time today.

Hebrews was written to Christian believers whose faith was faltering because of their stuck way of being, their ties to the Jewish faith and tradition. For them, all the practices and teachings of their society continued to be a deep-seated and powerful influence, making it hard for them to rise to the calling of Christianity.

The calling of Christianity is amazing, isn't it? To think of what we're called to do and to be for the sake of Jesus Christ, on behalf of the faith we cling to, for the church we love – it just blows the mind. There's always another level to reach, another temptation to resist, another need to meet. How do we do it! How does anyone do it!

Well, those of us who try know that rising to the calling of Christianity takes self-sacrifice, a firm belief in something greater than ourselves – that is, in the Lord God Almighty – and it takes truly superhuman perseverance and endurance.

We know that, and so does God. That's why God sent Jesus into the world as the Living Word of God, actively shaping who we are, meeting us in our need.

The first thing to know about the Living Word of God is that it is not merely scripture found on the pages of the Bible. The Living Word is the word made flesh in Jesus Christ, whose Spirit lives and works in our lives and in our world.

For this reason, Hebrews says regarding the Word of God, "... Before him, no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account."

Being naked and laid bare, with no where to hide – that's a pretty vulnerable place to be. We like to think we can hide our deficiencies and cover up our failings, but before God that's just not true. We can hide from the world, but we can't hide from God.

Take for instance Eliza Loftus, the marketing director and chief fundraiser at Be Well Stay Well, a charity in England focused on fighting alcoholism. Sadly and ironically, Eliza was found to be three times over the legal blood-alcohol limit when she crashed her car into a tree, and then proceeded to hide in nearby shrubbery, as they say in England.

When a police officer arrived, a bystander told him Eliza was hiding in a bush. The officer approached the bush and shouted, "Police; come out," at which point Eliza emerged from the bush, saying, "I'm sorry."

Of course, "I'm sorry" is not enough when it comes to accounting for our actions – or inactions – here on earth. The court banned Eliza from driving for three years and ordered her to do 100 hours of community service. But the really miraculous thing is Eliza herself turned to her own charity for help with her drinking problem.

There's no way of knowing for sure what if any role God had in putting an alcoholic like Eliza to work at a sobriety charity. But what is clear is that Eliza could not hide from her problem any better than she could hide from the police.

And neither can we. We can't hide from our problems, our deficiencies, or our shortcomings. Oh, we can hide them from others, maybe even hide them from ourselves for awhile – deny we have a problem – but we can't hide them from God. And what's more, God has a way of revealing them to us, one way or another.

Regardless of how you feel about it, the Living Word of God is sharper than any sword, cutting through all our defenses. It's piercing, able to reach the depths of our soul, our very being. God's word can lay us bare, open for all to see, revealing our thoughts and intentions to God, if not also to others.

Hearing this, the faltering Christians at the time of Hebrews knew they could not hide behind their old ways of being, not if they expected it to go unnoticed by God. No, they had to come to terms with their faith in Jesus Christ and their desire to follow his teachings and his way, over and above their society's teachings and traditions.

"Let us hold fast to our confession," says Hebrews, let us hold fast to our knowledge and faith that Jesus is the Son of God, the Lord and Savior of the world. For it is only in that confession, in that knowledge and belief, that we have any hope of meeting God's blessing and receiving God's help.

Confessing that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior means turning to Christ for direction in our lives and care and compassion in our suffering. Hebrews assures us that we can count on Jesus for guidance and rely on him for mercy and grace.

As it says, Jesus "has (not only) passed through the heavens" in all their glory, but he is able to "sympathize with our weaknesses," having been "tested as we are, yet without sin."

Therefore, says Hebrews, we can "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

How do we go about approaching the throne of grace? How do we open ourselves up to the Living Word of God? These are important questions. The struggles that we face, the burdens we carry, the suffering we endure – God's greatest desire is to meet us in our need and show us the way forward.

But for that to happen – for God to really impact our lives – we have to open ourselves up to his Word, his Truth, and his Life. And the way we do that is in direct and honest conversation with God, whether that's through pray, through study, or through the godly counsel and advice of others.

The problem comes when we try to hide from God, try to hide from our problems. Thomas Jefferson even tried to hide behind the teachings of Jesus, for Christ's sake! Not really for Christ's sake. He did it for Jefferson's own sake and to Jefferson's spiritual jeopardy. Jefferson hid from the fullness of God's word at the expense of missing out on knowing something of the fullness of Jesus.

The teachings of Jesus lay in the Bible for all to read. But the person of Jesus lives among us as the Living Word of God, able to meet us in our need and shape us to God's will, God's vision of who we can be – who you can be – as you place all that you are before the Living Word of God, trusting God to bless you and shape you. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Redeemer, we give you thanks and praise for the gift of your word and for its power to encourage, comfort, convict and transform.

We hear the word and are keenly aware of our inability to follow it in either letter or spirit. We need a merciful high priest who sees us as we are, not as we often portray ourselves to be, and you have given him to us in the person of your Son, Jesus.

We thank you that he understands our weakness, sympathizes with the brokenness of our human condition, and reaches out to us in love, compassion and grace. It is because of Jesus' life – lived without sin – and his work on the cross that we come to you with confidence, knowing that you welcome us home and hear us with tenderness and concern.

We ask your Spirit of tender care and comfort be upon those who grieve. We ask your Spirit of healing and wholeness for those facing surgery and other treatments. Bring comfort and strength to those dealing with longterm medical conditions. Continue to provide for the needs of those impacted by the recent hurricanes down south, and comfort them in their loss.

We pray all this in the name that is above all names, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.