

THE WORD FROM OUR SPONSOR

Guest Speaker: Galen R. Work,
Retired Presbyterian pastor
Green Ridge, Newville, PA

June 6, 2010

Second Presbyterian Church

528 Garland Drive

Carlisle, PA 17013

Worship: 8 & 10:30 a.m.

(717) 243-4571

www.GrowWithSecond.org

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OLD TESTAMENT LESSON: *Isaiah 52:7-10*

The theme of the first twelve verses of the 52nd chapter of Isaiah are redemption. In this portion the image is of a king returning victoriously from doing battle with his enemies. God's salvation will be made evident to the entire world.

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON: *John 1:1-5, 9-18*

The prologue of John is one of the most beautiful and poetic portions in all of literature. The depths of its meaning can never be plumbed in one sermon. The divine savior is rejected by many, but eternal life is the gift for those who trust and/or believe in him.

On May 16 our choir sang, "This is My Word." What is a word? The 11th edition of the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines 165,000 words and that does not even include "twitter" or "texting."

In September of 2003 U.S. News & World Report published its 70th anniversary issue. The theme was "the words that define our nation." Do you remember the heyday of radio when programs were interrupted by an announcer's melodious, yet authoritative, voice, saying, "And now a word from our sponsor?" That word could be short, but just as often it was an interminably long spiel about Jell-O, coffee, cereal, cigarettes or beer. The Gospel of John introduces us to the word, "logos." In the Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary there are no less than 26 different English words whose origins are traced to logos. John's use of logos is truly an inspired legacy. The ramifications of what logos means are virtually limitless. A "logo" is a readily recognized symbol. We find logos everywhere. Smokers are haunted by the "No Smoking" logo, a circle with a line through a burning cigarette. Corporations spend thousands of dollars to develop just the right logo to promote their product. When I looked up "logarithm" in my dictionary, I said, "What?" Taking the word at face value, you might conclude that logarithms are "the language of numbers." A definition of "logic" might be "the using of a sufficient number of words to convince." We are all very logical. Only those who disagree with us are not logical. In Greek philosophy the logos, the Word, was the controlling principle in the universe. What John wrote about the Word is startling. John undoubtedly had the first chapter of Genesis in mind as he wrote about the Word. Genesis tells us that "In the beginning God created. . ." It proceeds to tell us that God created by saying, "Let there be . . . and it was so." Using this imagery John wrote that this Word existed before the creation of our world. This Word is a "he," not an "it." This Word is personal as opposed to anything inanimate or unaware of its own existence. This Word is not simply an extension of something or someone else. This Word has a life of His own. This Word is powerful and creative.

John wrote, "The Word was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."³ The climax to all that John wrote about the Logos comes in the 14th verse, which begins, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us. . ." This suggests the imagery of Alice in Wonderland. Remember Alice in Wonderland? She found many weird, peculiar and ridiculous characters. For instance, she could only see the smile of a Cheshire cat. Citizens of that kingdom appeared to be playing cards. John presents us with a

Word made flesh. What is a word? A word is a symbol. What are symbols? Symbols are windows. Picture windows. They are for looking through not at. They are for letting in light as well as for letting us see what is on the other side.

A word is also a sign. What is a sign? A sign is a concise source of information. When we are faced with people speaking a language unknown to us, it may sound like gibberish, nothing but noise. Nothing makes sense. So far as we are concerned we are not hearing words because there is nothing we can understand. There is no message. In the archives of our government is a piece of paper from World War I. It was intercepted from the Germans. On that piece of paper are some marks one might describe as chicken scratches. They are in fact a coded message, but it is a code never broken by a cryptologist. The message seems destined to remain an enigma. The late Marshall McLuhan, an authority on communication, is forever identified with the phrase, "The medium is the message." He was saying that a message is as deeply affected by how it is transmitted as by what is transmitted.

When John wrote that the Word became flesh, he was asserting in a most profound manner that the medium is indeed the message. The medium of the Word is Jesus of Nazareth. The message and the man are inseparable. One without the other is incomplete and incomprehensible. Some have tried reducing Jesus to being a plaster saint or a disembodied spirit. His temptations and trials, his appetites and emotions, are viewed as different from ours. If this were true, then his teachings would be intolerable moralisms. He would have been playing a deceptive game. John asserts that the Word that was God from the beginning became a human being, not a fake or let's pretend human being. In Jesus God took upon himself our nature and form so that no one would ever again misunderstand who He is or what is expected of us. In Jesus God is transported out of the realm of philosophical conjecture and theological dogma into flesh and blood. The simplest of folk, as well as the most erudite, can understand and know him.

Some time ago, during a Maryland State Board of Regent's examination, a professor at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore was asked if he believed in God. The professor gave 33 definitions of God. Then he asked his examiner which one he had in mind. In the midst of life as we know it Jesus defines the character and personality of God as no other. A very successful businessman once told me that he had very little to do with the church. He had given up on it a long time ago. He admitted, however, that he thought the Bible had some pretty good stuff in it. He would be more tolerant of the church, if it would stop talking so much about Jesus. As he continued to "lay it on me" he mentioned a parable. He said that that story really spoke to him. I protested, "But that story is a parable out of the Gospel of Luke. It is a story told by Jesus." For a moment he was speechless. I tried to explain how Jesus is really the key, not an obstacle, to our understanding of God and of ourselves.

What Jesus said and did cannot be separated from him as a person who lived at a particular moment in history. He forgave sin. He violated sacred traditions. He identified himself so thoroughly with God that religious leaders were outraged. They correctly asked, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Who indeed! Someone said that such a person as Jesus could never have lived. Then added, such a person as Jesus could never have been invented.

The 40th chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah is a magnificent chapter of the Bible. George Friederic Handel used much of this chapter in his memorable and moving oratorio Messiah. A number of rhetorical questions are found in this 40th chapter of Isaiah: "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has directed the spirit of the LORD, or as his counsellor has instructed him? Whom did he consult for his enlightenment, and who taught him the path of justice? Who taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding? Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales; see, he takes up the isles like fine dust. All the nations are as nothing before him; they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness. To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? Reflecting as Isaiah did upon the majesty, the creative power and wisdom of God, John began to write his story of the Gospel. He concluded that everything he knew about God, everything he ever wanted to know about God, everything he could imagine about God, was rather abstract until that moment in time when God expressed himself through Jesus as He had never done before or since. A friend of mine, an Episcopal priest, is a bona fide, card carrying, voting member of the Cherokee Indian Nation. He once worked as a chaplain in the Southeastern Correctional Institution at Lancaster, Ohio. One day a prisoner came to him demanding that he be permitted to practice the Cherokee religion, the religion of a Native American. My friend told him that the Cherokees were mostly Christians. He did not believe him. He insisted on calling the tribal headquarters in North Carolina. He asked the woman who answered the phone to send him information on the Cherokee religion. She said there was none. The prisoner was indignant. He demanded to know what religion they practiced. The woman said that most of them were Southern Baptists. The prisoner began a tirade against the white man's influence and of how whites had intimidated the Indians into accepting their religion. The woman on the other end of the line corrected him. She told him that the Cherokee were Christians because they believed that Jesus Christ was better than anything they had had before. In this age of rapid, world-wide travel and communication, we are very conscious of the plurality of cultures, languages and traditions. Many have little in common with our own. We must respect these differences, but this does not mean that differences do not matter. This does not mean that we must surrender or compromise what we believe about the Word made flesh. There is only one who reigns as Lord. His name is Jesus. He is the Word from our sponsor. That Word that was God at the dawn of creation was born as one of us so that there would be absolutely no reason for anyone to misunderstand God's expectations or intentions. Jesus is the Word that defines who God is and who we ought to be. We may search for the meaning of divine love and justice when and where we choose, but it will not be found in its fullness until we take seriously the one born in a stable and nailed on a cross. We may search for the meaning of life, what it means to be a human being. We may look in any number of places, but nowhere is what it means to be a human being revealed with greater clarity than in the one born in a stable and nailed on a cross.

Have you heard? Do you know as intimately as you should the character and personality of God? Have you embraced; have you accepted the Word which was given to us by our sponsor? To know the Word is to have life and to have it abundantly and eternally. May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Dear Friend,

I hope you have been blessed by this message. You can request a free audio-tape or CD recording of this sermon by contacting the church office. We also have a complete sermon archive (including audio-files and PDFs) on-line at www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons

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Jeff Gibelius, Pastor

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