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God Gave a Message to his People

Have you seen those AT&T commercials where the actor appears twice? One version of him or says, “Hi. I’m whoever’s phone.” But the person who owns the phone doesn’t have any bars, so something terrible is happening. In one ad, a teenage girl is wearing a shirt that says “Phelps Phan” but she’s missing the call telling her that Michael Phelps is at the mall letting people take pictures with him and telling funny stories about eating Chinese food. In another one, a family is checking in to a seedy motel in Paris, but they’re not getting the message that a room in a five star hotel just opened up. These commercials are funny. And they make a point. You need to hear your messages. If that’s true in the world of sports or vacations what about in our spiritual lives? My friends, Moses reminds us this morning that **God gave a message to his people.**

I.

Exactly three months after the Israelites left slavery in Egypt, they came to the Desert of Sinai. Then they entered that desert and they came to Mt. Sinai itself, the place where God gave them his covenant. Most of the time, we think of that covenant in terms of the pages and pages of laws God gave in the Old Testament. But before he gave those laws, **God gave a message that focused on his grace.**

God said to Moses, **“This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel.”** Now, at first blush, those might seem like “throw away” words, right? How many times does God tell his prophets, “This is what you are to say”? But that does not make these words unimportant. Just the opposite, God is underlining the fact that the message Moses will bring is really his message.

But why didn’t God give that message himself? He most certainly could have, if he had wanted to. In fact, in the very next chapter, when God gave the Ten Commandments the first time, he spoke them out loud so that the entire people of Israel heard them. But you know that’s not God’s usual way of working. When we come here on Sunday morning, we don’t expect to see the ceiling open up and or to hear the voice of the Lord from heaven. God chooses to work through spokesmen. Down through history, he’s called prophets and apostles and pastors and teachers and he’s put his words in their mouths – into our mouths.

Why does he do that? I don’t know. As the guy called to stand up here and speak that message, I can hardly believe that God has entrusted your spiritual well-being to a sinner like me. But God knows better than I do or you do. He always does what’s best for his people. Hard as it is for us to understand, it’s better for us to have God speak to us through his servants than to have God speak to us directly. It’s better for us to hear his word from pastors and teachers teaching from the Bible, than to have angels preach to us or even to listen to prophets to whom God spoke directly, like he did in the time when Moses and Isaiah and Bartholomew and Paul walked this earth. It’s better for us to trust in simple words that come from the Bible, than to focus on how impressive or likeable or smart the messenger seems to be.

God hides himself behind ordinary things. He hides himself behind your jobs, behind your doctors and health care plans, behind farmers and grocery stores. Through those things, God takes care of your physical needs. And God hides himself behind the ministry, behind pastors and teachers who struggle with our sinful nature and who always could do a better job. God hides himself behind us when we proclaim his word and administer his sacraments. The sinful weakness of us ministers demonstrates that all the success we ever have comes from God. That makes today a special day for us here at Peace because this morning we’re installing two teachers. Above all else, God has called them to teach our children the gospel of Jesus Christ, to prepare

them to live in a world that challenges their trust in their Savior. God will stand behind the ministry of those women to build up the faith of our children so that they may have eternal life.

God told Moses to tell the Israelites, **“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”** They had witnessed the ten plagues on Egypt. They had followed the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. They had marched through the Red Sea. While danger stormed all around, God carried them above it all. And the people had whined and complained about what God was doing. When the Egyptian army was bearing down on them, they asked Moses, “Were there no graves in Egypt?” When they had no water or food, they grumbled against God’s chosen servant, Moses. They wanted to go back to Egypt, back to the land of slavery. But God provided for them again and again. And he brought them to himself. God reached across the sin that contaminated their hearts and he brought them to Mt. Sinai where he claimed them as his own. He did the impossible: he gave weak and rebellious sinners faith in him. Before he gave them even one command, he reminded them of his love.

God did that because you don’t become a part of God’s people by choosing to believe. God chooses you. God reaches across the sin that you were born with, the sin that contaminates everything that you say and do, and God brings you to him. He does that through the gospel. He does that in baptism, as we saw this morning. Just like he did for that child, God reached into our hearts with the message of his love and he claimed us as his own.

What wondrous love! Yet, how many times have we taken God’s love for granted? How many times have we treated coming to church like a burden? How many times have we complained and even gossiped about that teacher in our school or about the pastor – about the servants God called for us? Like the children of Israel, we have sinful hearts. So it’s easy for us to abuse his grace. It’s easy for us to think we know better than God does who should serve us and how they should do it and even what they should preach. It’s easy for us to show that we deserve death and hell.

But God’s grace is greater than our sin. God has reached across our whining and complaining and brought us here to his sanctuary to hear of his love and his forgiveness. God has taken our sinful hearts that never stop complaining and the unbelief that we were born with and that still lurks in our hearts, and he has washed it all away with the blood of Christ. God the Son came down from heaven and became one of us, to bring us to God. Jesus lived and died in our place, to pay for the sin that separates us from God. God has brought each and every one of us to him in baptism, where he gave us faith. He brings us to him in the word that we hear, and in communion, and in the forgiveness proclaimed to us and to our children in the liturgy and in our pastor’s office and in our hospital beds and in our classrooms.

Finally, God will bring us to him when we die. At that moment, we will enter eternal life, where we will be perfect in mind and heart. God will bring us to him when Jesus returns and he calls our bodies out of the grave and he gives us a perfect world to live in, a world where we will be with him forever.

II.

Does all that sound like practical Christianity to you? I hope so, even though I haven’t said one word yet about how you’re supposed to live or what you’re supposed to do. God does care about how you live and he makes that very clear in the verses before us this morning. But our life in Christ is based on Christ. We love because he first loved us. So at Mt. Sinai, at the place where God gave the Ten Commandments, God began by speaking about his love and his grace. Then **God gave a message that promised a blessing.**

God said to Israel, **“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”** It’s easy to misunderstand what God is saying here. We naturally think that when we do good, we earn a reward from God. God did tell his people that if they obeyed him, they would be his chosen nation. But their obedience did not earn that reward. The reward was still a gift from God’s grace, a gift they didn’t deserve. You see, no human – except for Jesus – can obey God perfectly. Our hearts are full of rebellion and weakness. It’s impossible for us to earn a reward from God. The only things we can earn are death and hell. But when we obey God because we trust in Jesus and his promises, God chooses to see our obedience as if it were Christ’s obedience. Then he rewards us as if we were Jesus, his perfect son.

If Israel trusted him and obeyed his covenant, God offered to make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. In reality, both of these statements mean the same thing. God offered to share the holiness of Jesus with

them. God offered to set them apart from a world that doesn't believe and give them special access to him. God offered to make them the vehicle through which he proclaimed his love to the world. But Israel rejected that offer. Oh, they said the right things at Mt. Sinai, and many individuals did believe. But again and again, the nation chose false gods instead of the true God. They loved the way the nations around them worshipped and they ignored the promises God had given them and the Savior who was coming to them. Finally, when Jesus did come to them, they rejected him outright.

Today, Israel is no longer the chosen people. Now, certainly, individual Jewish people who come to faith in Christ are saved. But the people of God is no longer the physical nation of Israel, or as St. Paul puts it, "Not all Israel are Israel." Today, the true spiritual Israel of God, the true people of God, is the Christian Church. God has taken people from every tribe and nation and people and language and he has welded us together into one spiritual nation.

Now, we are a kingdom of priests. We are a holy nation. We are set apart from the unbelieving world around us. We have access to God. We are his chosen vehicle to share the gospel with the world. That is a wonderful blessing. But like Israel, we can turn our backs on God's blessings. There will always be a New Testament church, just as there will always be a true Israel of God. But will we always be a part of it? Or will we, like the physical nation of Israel, reject God's grace? When we treat the word of God like something unimportant, when we teach our children that what our pastor says in church is OK for him, but real life is different, when we put God and his word in last place in our lives and we let the world around us tell us how to live and what's important, then my friends, we are acting like unbelievers. People who live like unbelievers eventually become unbelievers.

But God's mercy is new every morning. God reaches out to Israel every day. He longs for them to repent and to trust in him. God reaches out to you and to me every day, too. Because of Jesus, God erases yesterday's sins. And today's. Then he gives us his Spirit so we can live for him. He promises us blessings, too. When we put Jesus first in our lives, when we turn away from sin and the attitudes of this sinful world, God does reward us. Again, it's not a reward we earn. It's a reward that comes from God's grace. But God's love dwells on us in sickness and in health, in pain and in happiness, in poverty and in prosperity. And the more we hear his word and learn to know his love, the more content we are in that love. And the more we look forward to living with him forever.

All that is God's message to us. Going back to those commercials, it's important to get your messages. Sometimes, you miss out because you don't have enough bars on your cell phone. Some of us may have to admit that we don't often check our messages or our e-mail. Maybe some of us aren't even sure how. But not one of the messages of this life matters in comparison to God's message to you. God has come to you in his word and in his sacraments with a message of forgiveness and love and life. Hear that message and rejoice in it. Amen.

In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. ² After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. ³ Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴ ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.” (Exodus 19:1-6)

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