

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power,⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

Can You See the Power in God's Word?

How do you see power? A YouTube video of a lion might show its muscles rippling under its fur. That's power, right? In 1907, President Teddy Roosevelt sent the Great White Fleet – 16 U.S. battleships – on a round the world tour to demonstrate American naval power. That's making power visible, right? How about having a million people march in Washington D.C. as an exercise in flexing political muscle? Those examples all show power of one kind or another. But is there power that isn't as obvious to the naked eye? We all have TV's in our living rooms and most of us probably watch it too much without reflecting on how many of our attitudes are shaped by what we see there. Some people think that Richard Nixon won the presidency in 1968 because he made a five second appearance on *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*, one of the most popular TV shows of its day. Power can be there, just below the surface, clothed in ordinary things. What about the power of God's Word? St. Paul dwells on that power in the verses we have before us this morning. My friends, **can you see the power in God's Word?**

I.

If it were really obvious, we wouldn't have to talk about it. If it were like a volcano erupting or the Niagara Falls, we might ooh and aah over its power. But we wouldn't need to point it out. Yet, St. Paul does that numerous times. Today he points to that power as it's used by us human preachers. **Can you see the power of God's Word? It's hidden in human frailty.**

Paul says, **“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”** When we think about powerful words or messages, what do we usually think of? Sometimes, we think of the creativity of it. Sometimes, we think powerful words are words that persuade us. The Declaration of Independence is often thought of like that. On the other hand, sometimes it's the emotional impact of the words. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is so short that it's carved on one wall of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. Yet, it's such a moving statement that it's considered to be one of the greatest speeches in American history. Sometimes, we see the power of words in terms of their beauty. Songs and poems often match beautiful words in an unforgettable way.

How much of all that applies to the Word of God? The Word of God has great beauty. Who can hear the story of the angels coming to the shepherds in Bethlehem without being moved by the simple beauty? How many psalms say things in such memorable ways that we have them planted in our brains forever? There are so many different kinds of writing in the Bible that you have to give the Holy Spirit credit for creativity. The case the Bible makes is very clear. Even a child can recite the key points: we're sinners. We deserve to die and spend eternity in hell. But God sent his Son to die on the cross and rise again. He saved us.

All that is true. But none of it is real power of the Word of God. Even the most beautiful and moving portions of that Word are only that way because God designed our minds and hearts to pay attention to things like that. So he gave us his Word in a way that we humans can hear it and read it. But its real power is the fact that the Holy Spirit works in that message. It's the power to reach inside us and convince us of the truth. That power is independent of the preacher or teacher. That's why Paul says that he resolved to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified.

You have to understand what an illogical approach that seemed to be in his day. I teach my catechism class that “Christ” is Greek for “the Anointed One.” But what did that mean to people who weren't Jewish? Pouring oil on someone's head to show that God chose them meant nothing to the people Paul was going to. They knew nothing of the Old Testament prophecies of a coming Savior, so proclaiming Jesus the Anointed

One didn't provoke the kind of reaction the Jewish people had. But even worse was proclaiming "him crucified." In the Roman world, being crucified was not an honorable death. In addition to being the most painful way the Romans could think of to get rid of people they didn't like, it was also the most shameful. To be crucified, to be hung on a cross, naked and bleeding for days, was a sign of disgrace. It meant you were a rebel or a slave – pure scum. The only people who would've gloried in following someone who was crucified were revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow the state. But that's not what Paul came to do.

Yet Christ crucified is the message God gave us. Martin Luther was fond of saying that God hid his power in something as weak as words. Words that make no sense to the human mind. It's ridiculous to think that a dead man came back to life. It's foolishness in the eyes of the world to believe that God would demand payment in blood for sin. To many people it's unthinkable that God would invent hell at all, let alone send people there. It's downright silly to imagine that God would punish someone else for sins he knows we committed. But that message is the very power of God. You and I believe it, not because we were raised in Christian families, or because we happened to be born in the United States instead of in Saudi Arabia or China. We believe because God used those Christian families and the churches that thrive here to present to us the good news of our Savior. In that message that Jesus did live and die and rise again for us, the Holy Spirit reached into our hearts and he gave us faith.

He did that in spite of all the objections that naturally arise in our sinful hearts. Every unbeliever resists the gospel completely and totally. You and I were all born unbelievers. Whether we remember it or not, when the gospel came to us, we went down kicking and screaming. Even once we're believers, our sinful hearts put forward one doubt after another. They cause us to question what we have been taught again and again. Hasn't that been your experience? It certainly has been mine.

So why do we still believe? Because God works through the gospel and he keeps us in the faith. How can we convince other people? How can we answer all the objections of an unbelieving world? The word just convinces. We know that what God has said is true because through his word God changes our hearts. While there is a place for answering objections and seeing the flaws in the attacks of unbelievers and helping each other to beat back the questions that arise, in the end, the word is only the power that preserves our faith. So when we doubt, when we question, when we're attacked and our faith is in trouble, what do we need? Jesus. We need to know that he loved us and took on human flesh for us. We need to hear that he lived and died and rose to take our sin away – even the sin of weakness and doubt. We need to know that he is with us to the very end of the age, that he only allows those struggles to come to us that he can turn to our spiritual good. We need to remember that he will answer every one of our prayers. We need to be reminded that he promises to bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom. In those wonderful, eternal, God-given words we have the very power of God to change our hearts and bring us home to heaven.

II.

We sometimes talk about "empty words." We mean someone who talks a good line, but doesn't really do anything. God's words are not empty, even though we can't see the Holy Spirit work. **Can you see the power in God's Word? It's revealed in changed hearts.**

It's my experience that congregations often look for pastors or principals to "fix their problems." Here at Peace, we've spent a year calling for a principal. We've spent a lot of time on that effort, and rightly so. It's one of the key pieces of our ministry. We want to get the best man for the job. But in the end, what is that man's job? What is my job? To proclaim the word. To get the message about Jesus out there so that the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of the people we're sharing it with. So it isn't really up to him or to me to "fix" Peace. It's up to God to change hearts. And he has given us the tool that we need for him to do that: the word.

Paul said, **"I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."** In the book of Acts, Paul does not come off as a poor preacher. Luke doesn't show us a lot of weakness and fear and trembling. But even the greatest preachers have inner doubts and fears. Paul was a sinner just like we are. He had to go to people he didn't know and preach the gospel in situations he couldn't predict. The temptation that he faced was to focus on his preaching skills and his clever arguments to persuade people. But he rightly determined to simply preach the gospel and leave the results to God.

That is exactly what God calls us to do, too. I cannot “fix” you or anybody else. I cannot comfort you I cannot strengthen you. I cannot change you. All I can do is bring Jesus to you. He will comfort and strengthen and change you. Maybe not in exactly the way you want him to. Maybe not as quickly as you would like him to. But he will work in your heart every time you hear the message.

Now, that is not an excuse for sloppy preparation. God calls me and all our teachers, God calls the principal that he will supply us, to be faithful. That means that he does call us to do our best for him. We see Paul doing that over and over again. His letters are beautifully written and carefully constructed. His use of language is both exacting and moving. And it is uniquely his own style. But through it all he is proclaiming the gospel, the good news about Jesus. So God calls me as your pastor to put my best efforts into preaching and teaching and counseling and comforting and reaching out. The power is in the word, but that’s not an excuse for me to be confusing or to put you to sleep. It doesn’t give me a license to ignore the realities of how we learn and what we pay attention to.

But the best, the clearest, the most moving presentation of the gospel will only change your heart because it is the gospel. It has God’s power because it tells you about Jesus. And God can take the most poorly written, stumbling, weak presentation of the gospel and do miracles with it – as long as the gospel of Jesus Christ is there. That is the ultimate comfort for me and for you. It means that we have God’s promise every time we use the gospel. It means we don’t have to be afraid of whether we have enough training to use it. We don’t have to be think that it all depends on us and if someone doesn’t get to heaven, it’s because I did it wrong. We don’t have to worry about whether the principal who comes will be a blessing to us or not. Because God’s power isn’t in us. It’s in the word. It’s in the gospel. And our job as pastors and teachers and members is to use that gospel. If we are faithful in doing that, God’s purpose will be accomplished here.

It’s all in his hands. His power does change hearts. That’s really the only way we see the power. The Christian Church is full of examples of great preachers who gathered personality cults around them. And it’s also full of examples of humble men and women who won’t be remembered long after they die who just loved the Lord and shared his word. And God did amazing things. The truth is, my friends, every heart that believes is an amazing thing. It’s a miracle that you and I are here today. Every one of our children who reaches heaven is a demonstration of God’s power. Every time a Christian stands up in a sinful world and does what God calls him to do, that power shows itself. Every time we come here to hear about Jesus and every time we go out there renewed in our faith and prepared to serve him, Jesus has demonstrated his power again. Jesus will do that every day until he brings us home. He will do it every day until he comes back. Trust what he is doing and do all that you can with his message. Amen.