

The Word at Work in You

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SCRIPTURE OVERVIEW: The texts remind us that human decisions, relationships, communities must be rooted in the reality of God. In his vision recorded in Revelation, John sees all communities, all nations, shouting before God's throne that salvation comes only from God. The story of the crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 3 illustrates this principle: apart from Yahweh's grace, Israel's life could not be sustained. Paul does not deny an authority due him because of his previous relations with the Thessalonians. At the same time, he can reverse the image and speak of himself as an orphan when separated from these people (2:17). The possibility of mutuality emerges out of a clear acceptance of the authority of the gospel. The scribes and Pharisees are singled out in Matthew 23 for flaunting their positions and for engaging in pious activity so as to be praised and courted by others. Their craving of honorific titles illustrates their failure to acknowledge the empowerment of Jesus as teacher and God as Father.

QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Read Joshua 3:7-17. What miracles have you seen God perform lately in your life? in the life of a friend?
- Read Revelation 7:9-17. How do you reconcile a God of judgment with the writer's statement that "God will settle for nothing less than a standing-room-only heaven"?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13. How is the word of God at work in you?
- Read Matthew 23:1-12. When have you been humbled in being faithful to Jesus' call on your life? Is being humbled a sign of true servanthood?

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I will be with you as I was with Moses," God says to Moses' successor, Joshua. The Exodus from Egypt is ending. But now Israel faces the challenge of living in a strange new land. God promises to go with them into this new place to keep making a way when people think no way exists.

In other words, God tells Joshua, "If you thought miracles (dramatic interventions by God) are over, think again." The God who made a way by pushing back the sea in Israel's exodus now pushes aside the Jordan, making a way into the Promised Land. The miraculous, interventionist, active love of God goes with them. What God intends for God's people, Israel cannot accomplish alone. The miracles continue.

I hope you went to church yesterday and experienced God's presence. I pray that God did things *to* you and *for* you that you could not do for yourself. But as you go through your workaday Monday remember: God actively loves 24/7.

During a dormitory Bible study a student asked, "How come Jesus almost never says or does anything important to people in church?" As a clergyperson who spends lots of time at church, I found the student's statements annoying!

As you go about doing all sorts of nonsacred, nonreligious things on this mundane Monday, keep looking over your shoulder. The life you live is not your own. Your actions may not be the only action in your world. God not only speaks to you but works in you. When confronted by some seemingly insurmountable obstacle, "There is no way for me to cross that deep, dangerous river," be prepared to be proven wrong. You do not journey alone. Even though you are a modern, thinking person who remains unsure about the possibility of the miraculous, the miracles continue.

Think of a time when God made a way for you when you thought there was no way.

Halloween,” the psychologist explained, “is a creative way of dealing with our deepest fears by putting on a scary mask, a costume, and making fun of our fear that something horrible lurks in the dark.” If that’s true, Halloween is a sad trivialization of the church’s All Saints Eve, a pitiful attempt to lay aside our deepest fears merely by mocking them.

“My mother attempted to reassure me, when I would wake terrified of the night, ‘Honey, there’s nothing to fear in the dark,’” recalled a friend. “After I lost my job, endured my daughter’s terrible illness and my husband’s infidelity, I now know—Mom was wrong.”

Christians do not deny the darkness. We admit the reality of evil and pain even in this often beautiful world. We are able to be truthful about the forces that lurk because we have been let in on the last act of the play, the final chapter of the story, the outcome of the battle.

When Revelation 7 lifts the curtain on our ending, we catch a vision of the world when God at last gets what God has always wanted. In the end, when all is said and done, when the forces that cause us sometimes to suffer and weep are defeated, the once-crucified Lamb shall reign “at the center of the throne.” Every fear defeated, every tear wiped away, not because of our creative denial of the darkness but rather because of the victory of the Lamb.

We don’t have to don a happy-face mask and make fun of our fears. We have a story about where this wonderful, sometimes terrifying life is headed. At the end we do not find fearful oblivion, evil’s triumph, eternal tears. In the end, God.

Let the good news of tomorrow’s All Saints Day be your comfort today and into eternity.

*Lord Jesus, we know that you love us, and that keeps us going.
Amen.*

ALL SAINTS DAY

John gives us a vision of the triumph of God's will for humankind. What is our end, the destination toward which we are headed? Revelation sings of a well-populated, joyfully crowded eternity where "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation . . . all tribes and peoples and languages," sings, "Salvation belongs to our God!"

My church is shrinking. Our losses indicate our unfaithful limitation of the scope of God's expansive salvation. Revelation is clear: God's realm is not restricted to one age group (my church's median age: sixty), a single social or economic class (we are comfortably middle-class), one race or language (we speak English in our worship). God wants it all—a great, innumerable crowd.

My wife, Patsy, serves on the Invite and Welcome Committee of our church and therefore worries about a task that ought to consume the whole congregation. In what ways do our practices limit the boundaries of God's people? How do we unintentionally exclude some "tribes and peoples and languages" by the way we worship? The grand, inclusive, expansive vision of Revelation 7 tells us what God wants, and it's our job as the church to want what God wants.

"Sadly," a congregant told me, "my son who was brought up in the church, as an adult is not a Christian."

Thanks to Revelation 7, I, knowing of God's determination finally to have "a great multitude," replied, "You should say, 'Not yet a Christian.' You tell your son to keep looking over his shoulder as he goes into his fifties. God's got ways. Revelation 7 says that God will settle for nothing less than a standing-room-only heaven."

What can I do to spread the good news that God's family is "a great multitude"?

I teach a seminary course on “Ordained Leadership.” Among my maxims for aspiring church leaders: “Leadership is necessary for any organization that needs to move from maintenance to vitality.” “Leaders ask the right questions believing that followers will come up with the answers.”

Leadership, so rare among us, is even more challenging when leadership is attempted in the name of Jesus. Good leaders are usually known for their gifts, self-confidence, ability to use power effectively, and skill in motivating others. In Matthew 23, Jesus contrasts worldly wise leaders with the qualities of leadership in his name as if to say, “The world’s great leaders But you”

Leaders in the body of Christ are not all-knowing teachers but perpetual students; not the powerful, dominating parents but the vulnerable children; not the great masters but the humble servants.

In the light of this week’s Gospel lesson, the greatest challenge for the Christian leader comes in not getting in the way of our true leader, Jesus. It’s tempting to think that the good things that occur in my congregation are due to my astute leadership rather than to undeserved gifts of the Holy Spirit. I too easily delude myself into thinking that my sermons are heard because of my stellar speaking rather than to God’s relentless determination to be revealed to God’s people.

Thus the theologian Karl Barth said that Christian leaders ought to point beyond themselves to Christ. Christian leaders help people be more faithful to Christ rather than more attached to them. We lead in the name of the One who taught and led by using a basin and towel and washing his followers’ feet.

Jesus, keep teaching me that I may teach as I have been taught by you. Amen.

Have you ever tried to be humble? A person who brags about having achieved humility probably hasn't. Maybe that's why Jesus doesn't say to his disciples in his criticism of religious leaders, "Don't be like them. Humble yourselves." He speaks of humility as something *done to* you rather than *by* you.

Have a problem with pride? Have an exalted opinion of your abilities? Try being a leader in Jesus' name, and God will fix that. You will be humbled.

The day I was exalted as a bishop, a wise bishop told me, "This job will force you to your knees." Earlier, I had interviewed retired bishops, asking them to characterize the episcopacy. Their main response: Powerlessness.

"As a bishop, you have a front-row seat to see the problems and failures of the church, but the rules and procedures mandated by *The Book of Discipline*, competing caucuses, uncooperative clergy, and reactionary laity tie your hands," one explained.

How ironic that those to whom the church has given the most power are humbled by their impotence.

Maybe my question ought not be, "What can I do to be more successful, effective, and powerful?" Rather, "Have I been so infrequently humbled because I've attempted too little in the name of Jesus?" Or, "How have my leadership failures shown that I may be faithful to Jesus?"

Jesus promises, "Follow me; attempt to teach, to lead, or to love in my name and I promise: You will be humbled."

This is good news for those who hope to align our lives with the One who taught his followers, "The greatest among you will be your servant."

Lord, humble me by giving me tasks that remind me of my limits and my need for your grace. Amen.

Alabama's legislature passed the meanest anti-immigration law in the nation. I wrote a letter protesting the spiteful law. An immigration activist asked, "But what are you going to do? Your letter is just words. What about action?"

Paul says that in this faith, it's never "just words." Paul led fledgling churches through letters, praising the church at Thessalonica for receiving his words "not as a human word" but as "God's word" so that these words were "at work in you believers."

All God had to do to create the world was to say the word. The gospel spread like wildfire throughout the world through witness, letters, and sermons. A couple of centuries after Paul wrote these words, the church defeated the Roman Empire without firing a shot or raising a platoon, all on the basis of a bunch of words called scripture.

Why are you a Christian? Why you are reading these words? I bet that God used words to "work in you"—nonviolent, noncoercive but powerful-in-the-hands-of-God words.

Tomorrow in church, through hymns, scripture reading, prayers, and a sermon, you will hear and speak only words. Be warned: Scripture tells a story of how an active, revealing God seizes these human words to do God's work in the hearts and minds of people like you. By God's grace little words like *grace*, *love*, *go*, and *invite* burrow into your soul; they ignite, push, and prod you to do something beautiful for God. It's then that you acknowledge Paul's truth-telling: Just through words, God is "at work in you."

And by the way, that sorry law was erased without violence or mayhem, with nothing but words.

*Lord Jesus, who not only loves us but also speaks to us, who speaks to us in order to change us, go ahead, speak to me.
Amen.*

In the Sundays after the 9/11 tragedy, my church experienced a 20 percent jump in attendance. Three months later, our new attendees were gone; attendance slipped back to pre-9/11 levels.

Why? Some speculated that the new folks came to church and the boring worship, hackneyed sermons, and cold congregations reminded them why they had stopped attending in the first place! I theorized that people came to church in their distress seeking comfort, consolation, and care only to be encountered by Jesus. Sure, sometimes Jesus comes to us with healing and compassion. But often he comes with judgment, summons, critique, and command.

Take today's Gospel lesson. There had to be lots of hurting people around Jesus that day. The burdens of leadership and teaching can be heavy. But Jesus offered them stinging criticism, making sharp separation between his ways and theirs.

Sometimes we come to church and receive comfort and affirmation. But what we mainly receive is the living Christ in all of his sometimes prickly, demanding, sovereign glory.

A member of my congregation emerged one Sunday saying, "I have had a terrible week with my diagnosis and my son's continued problems. I was at the end of my rope, looking for help with my burdens."

"I hope that you received compassionate help in today's service," I said.

"No, I didn't," she replied. "I came here seeking Jesus' aid and instead Jesus had the nerve to give me an assignment!"

As you attend worship today, take care! Jesus may offer you more of himself than you asked for. He may speak a word to you that you have been avoiding all week. He may have more faith in your ability to be a faithful disciple than you have in yourself.

Lord, give me the grace to hear when you speak to me and then the courage to do your will. Amen.