



June 26, 2016

Larry DeLong

God Speaks Through Scripture - 2 Timothy 3:15-17

Karl Barth was one of the 20th century's greatest theologians. His masterwork, the "Church Dogmatics," is, in English, nine large volumes of small print and dense language. Did I mention he was Swiss, and a theologian?

In 1962, during a lecture tour of the US, Barth was asked to summarize his theology: basically, what he thought about God. His answer is famous: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Nine volumes condensed into twelve words: that he knows that Jesus loves him because that's what the Bible told him.

Where would we be without the Bible? It's our common ground. And it's much more than that. The Bible is our witness to what God has done; our guide for understanding who God is; and by the Spirit, how God speaks to us. Not just as individuals, but as groups and as a whole people.

The Bible is the story of God and humankind. Not the whole story, since that is still being told in the lives of the faithful. The Bible is, as Ben Campbell Johnson once wrote, “a people’s experience of [God] told and retold in narrative form, inspired by the Spirit, preserved in a tradition, and made available to us in a text that still speaks today.” The Bible is truly a living document, not least because God speaks into to us in this moment through this wonderful resource whose most recent entry is nearly two thousand years old.

God has spoken directly to people, the Bible itself tells us that. To Noah. Abraham. God spoke to Moses in the burning bush. And to many others, of course – God speaking in an audible voice. God can do that. God is God, after all. So, like the fellow on our bulletin today, why shouldn’t we expect those words spoken the same way?

Well, we don’t know the answer to that for certain. But one possibility is that we have something that those people didn’t – we have the Bible, and God can speak to us through that.

We’re talking about God’s words on paper – but at least as much about the Holy Spirit, because it is through the work of the Spirit that we hear God speak through those words on paper. The Spirit is how we hear God in the Bible. God gives each of us a unique, personal lens to read the Bible - through the Holy Spirit.

God's speech in the blessing of the Bible isn't quite the same as God chatting with you over a cup of coffee. God in the Holy Spirit brings us God's speech through Scripture.

The Spirit is the key.

Through the Spirit, a message for another time and place and people becomes a personal word in your own time and place. In a powerful way, words written for others also connect with *you*, making the ancient words fresh and personal.

And the Spirit not only brings the words on the page together with your situation, it makes them speak truth to you. Read with an ear for the Spirit's whispers, the Bible seems sometimes to know us better than we know ourselves. Ever read a passage only to discover what you're reading is reading you? "Oh, these words about David are about me, too..." That's hearing God's voice in the text, or beyond the text, speaking to you, personally.

God is in the words on the page, the words we speak, God is in the way we hear them, God plants them in our hearts – through the Spirit. God acts on the words, speaking to us when we listen to Scripture. God speaks to us when we speak about Scripture, when we try to interpret or explain it. God inspired the events, inspired the writers, inspires the reader and hearer.

Of course, you do have to read or hear it. The Bible is a book, and it fits nicely on a shelf. Where it stays. I have had the chance to handle lots of old Bibles, and far too many of them are stiff enough that they crack when you open them. There are lots of uses for Bible-sized objects, too. We used to get cases of little Gideon's New Testaments in the military, and a lot of guys picked up two – one for each chest pocket. Holy "body armor!"

And we can hear what we want to hear sometimes, when we go to Scripture – that's part of our humanness. We can lead ourselves off the path, catch only a piece of the message, misunderstand. Here's a favorite Bible from my collection. It was in a case of Bibles donated to the troops; you probably can't see it, but there is print on only one page. That one page just happens to be Genesis 3, the story of the fall. Some people, when they hear God in the Bible, only hear one message: Some hear nothing but judgement. Some hear nothing but a call to social action. Some only hear Jesus walking in the garden with them. It's not hard to get stuck on one point! But we do have to acknowledge that only God can speak for God, and people of faith will always disagree about what God is saying.

So while there *is* one overriding message to Scripture, the message of salvation – which can be as simple as Karl Barth's one sentence answer - God has many things to say to each one of us. God hasn't stopped speaking. Just the plain words on the page aren't all God has to

say. Sometimes one passage resonates with what God's doing in the world today, sometimes another. God, as the Spirit, is at work in all this.

But the Spirit doesn't work on demand. A preacher once decided to rely completely on the Spirit for his sermon, instead of the hours of study he usually did. He wanted to let the Spirit speak directly. So when he got up to the pulpit on Sunday morning, he read the Bible passage he'd chosen, and then listened, waiting for the words to come. Nothing.

He tried it at the Wednesday evening service, too. Same thing.

But he had faith that God would come through, so tried one last time the next Sunday – and this time, it worked! The message was loud and clear: “Study harder!”

So the process of listening to God speak through the Spirit in Scripture isn't some formula: God works the way God works. Still, if that Bible never gets opened, there's no way for the message to be communicated.

Our passage this morning gives us an important piece for our own personal practice of listening to God through the Bible. Peterson, in his unique way, translates 2 Timothy 3:16 as “Every part of Scripture is God-breathed...” The Bible is the breath of God.

Why this is important is that the words the original languages used for Spirit are the same words they used for wind or breath. So God's breath, God's Spirit (same word), hovered over the waters at creation, fills the Bible, and is at work in us today. Not just the people's experiences of God, not just the people who wrote these words down, not just the translators who put it into words we know, but in *you* as you read, the words as they are spoken, as they are heard, as they are lived. God breathes Scripture, and breathes it into our souls.

The words on the page are like a body in a tomb until they have life breathed into them by the Spirit when we read and hear them. That is what makes them inspired – inspired meaning given by the Spirit. Like a golf ball driven by the wind, the Spirit takes these words whether read or heard or remembered or spoken and blows them in the direction God wants – for each of us, all of us. You could say that a closed Bible is like God holding his breath!

So you've opened your Bible and in those words heard something you've not heard before – an insight, some comfort, a new perspective. How do you check what you've heard? The tools have been with us for centuries. The most basic is, let Scripture itself help. What is unclear - troubling, even - in one place may be better understood in the context of other places, or Scripture as a whole. And the more Scripture we expose ourselves to, the more the Spirit can act through it and on us. Does what I heard agree with what is said in other places?

The second check is one we talked about last week – taking the message you’ve heard, the insight you’ve been given, and sharing it with another trusted person or a pastor. Part of our tradition is the belief that God speaks louder, more clearly, and more reliably through groups than individuals when we seek to be faithful and open to God’s leading together. That’s part of the beauty of Bible studies – God working through all the students.

Let me quote from one of our statements of faith, the Confession of 67: “The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel ...by which...faith and obedience are nourished and regulated.”

Or, as Paul wrote to Timothy: “Through the Word, [God speaks to us, and] we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.” May it be so.