

Do You Hear What I Hear?
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, John 1:1-14
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In the opening chapter of the Bible, God spoke. It was God's creating word that brought the world into being. God said, "Let there be light, and there was light." From that opening chapter, the word of God is heard time and again throughout the Bible story. God spoke to Abraham; God spoke to Moses; God spoke to Samuel, Saul, David and Solomon; God spoke to Elijah and Isaiah and Jeremiah. The Bible tells the stories of the many people who heard God's word and answered. God is a talker.

It is interesting to me how much emphasis the Bible places on our hearing. Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with the words, "Whoever hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like the wise man who build his house upon the rock" (Matthew 7:24). Paul in Romans writes, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). And throughout the book of Hebrews, the preacher urges the people to "pay special attention to what you have heard" (Hebrews 2:1).

The reason the Bible places such emphasis on our hearing is that what we see can be so misleading. If we judge the world only by what we see, then we conclude that the world is a pretty dark place. We see age-old conflicts between nations that seem to have no chance of ever being resolved. We read in the newspapers stories of cold-blooded killings, of child abuse, of corruption and greed. We read of people taking unfair advantage of others. We see commercialism and selfishness run amuck. We see sickness and death and grief and heartache. If all we rely on is what we see, then the world is a pretty dark place.

That is why the Bible calls us to pay closer attention to what we hear. Because it is in our hearing that we learn the deepest and most lasting truths. As we said, time and again in the Bible God speaks. The problem was that for so many years, people weren't always completely clear about what God was saying. The people wondered, "What is God saying to us? Is God a loving God or an angry, jealous God?" So God chose to speak again, this time in a way so clear that the meaning could not be misunderstood. One cold winter night, in a stable in Bethlehem, God spoke a Son. God's Word became flesh.

So what is God saying to us through his Son, God's Word made flesh? Well, in Jesus we learn two important truths: we learn the truth about God, and we learn the truth about ourselves.

So let's look at each of these truths in turn. First, in Jesus we learn the truth about God. In the scripture we read, John says that the incarnate word from God is a word of life and light, grace and truth.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." And, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." The Word that God spoke in Jesus was a word of life and light, grace and truth.

In a world where death seems to have the last word—and frankly, we have heard that word spoken too much lately—God's word to us in Jesus is a word of life. In a world in which darkness seems to prevail, this is a word of light. In a world when falsehood seems to be the accepted way, this is a word of truth. In a world in which there is so much judgment and division, this is a word of grace. In Jesus we see clearly who God is.

Some people have this idea that there was one kind of God in the Old Testament, and another kind of God revealed in the New Testament. They say that the God of the Old Testament was a bloodthirsty God of wrath and judgment. But then came the New Testament and God turned into a God of forgiveness and love. So what happened? Did God change? No, God didn't change. The God who created the world is the same God who will be standing at the end of time welcoming us home. God has not changed. It is our understanding of God that has changed. In Jesus, God's word made flesh, God has communicated once and for all that God is a God of life and light, of grace and truth.

And in light of this clear understanding of who God is, we can now go back to the Old Testament and see how all along God was speaking this word of light and life, grace and truth. For example, go back to that passage that Lee read earlier from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah looks forward to the coming of the messiah who will bring "good news to the oppressed, will bind up the broken-hearted, comfort to those who mourn." God's messiah will bring a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit." Isaiah says that "the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations."

And that promise is fulfilled in Jesus. In fact, when Jesus preached his first sermon—you can find it in Luke, chapter 4—he chose these very words from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has appointed me to bring good news to the poor."

So one thing we learned through God's word made flesh is that God was and is and always will be a God of life and light, grace and truth.

So now let's look at the other truth we learn through God's word made flesh: we learn who we truly are.

Jesus, who became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, showed how highly God values us, and loves us. By sending Jesus to live among us God validated our human existence. There are some religions which say that the physical world is sinful and bad, and only the spiritual world is good. But God, in Christ, validated this human experience by becoming one of us.

When God sent the Son to live among us as one of us, it was as if God was holding up a mirror in front of us so that we could see ourselves as we truly are. Looking in the mirror that Christ holds before us, we see that we have been made in the image of God, that fundamental to our make-up is that God has instilled in us gifts and talents that can be used for good. We see that we have the capacity to be partners with God in doing God's work in the world.

But that is not all we see when we look in that mirror. We also see that we often fail to use those gifts: that we are not the people God intends for us to be.

We are often selfish when God calls us to be generous.

We are anxious and afraid when God calls us to be faithful and trusting.

We are prejudiced when God calls us to love one another—even those with whom we disagree, even our enemies.

We are often angry when God calls us to be loving.

We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

The word of truth about us is that we are in need of God's saving grace.

Which brings us back to Jesus, the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth. The fact is that what we see when we look at the world and at ourselves is often not a very pretty sight. But Jesus came full of grace. He came to overturn the things that the world values—power, wealth, and instead he lifts up the powerless and the poor. Jesus came to us with a word of grace—to redeem us from our failings and sins.

I've told you before the story that I heard from the Scottish pastor, Murdo McDonald. During World War II, Rev. McDonald was a chaplain assigned to a British unit fighting in France. At one point his unit was captured, and they were taken to the infamous Stalag 17 prison camp. In that camp the POWs from one country were housed in one section of the camp, while those of another nation were in another part of the camp.

It was learned that there was not a chaplain with the Americans in their part of the prison camp, so Murdo McDonald was given permission to be transferred into the American sector.

Now it happens that one of the British soldiers had managed to smuggle a small crystal radio into the camp, and each night the British troops would gather around and listen to news of the war. Then one of the British soldiers would go to the fence separating the British prisoners from the other nationalities, and in a casual way, as if they were discussing the weather, would pass on what news about the progress of the war they had learned.

The problem was that the Germans understood English and the other usual languages that they might use to communicate, and if the guards overheard the prisoners talking about the war, they would immediately silence the conversation. So, as providence would have it, one of the soldiers in the British section of the prison, and Murdo McDonald—who was now with the Americans—were raised in a small town in Wales, and grew up speaking an obscure Gaelic dialect, a language which the German guards didn't speak. So that was the language they used to pass on news of the war.

On June 6, 1944—D-Day—the Welsh prisoner on the British side came to the fence and excitedly called out to Murdo McDonald two Gaelic words: "*Honig geat.*" It means, "They've come." That was the moment when those prisoners in that hopeless, dark prison camp believed that their liberation would soon happen.

So think about it: if you had been a prisoner in Stalag 17 on June 7, 1944 things would have looked the same as they had on June 5, 1944. The guards still patrolled the camp; the prison compound was still enclosed by tall fences; the food was still meager. Just by looking, nothing appeared to have changed.

But in fact everything had changed: because they had heard a word that they believed was truer than the things that they saw. It was that word that promised liberation that enabled them to see their life in a whole new way.

Well, that's the same word that God spoke to us when God's Word became flesh in Jesus—not "They've come", but "He's come." Jesus has come, and in him we have the promise that God's will shall be done. He's come, and in him we know that God's good and loving purpose for us is a sure thing.

When the Son of God came to earth, he was given the name Jesus. The name Jesus means: "he will save the people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). That's what God is saying to us—that sin and death are not the final word, but that in Jesus God has defeated sin and has won for us salvation and eternal life. God's word took human form in the person of Jesus. He's come. The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

Praise be to God.✠