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Extraordinary God, Ordinary Means

a sermon on Isaiah 55.6-11 & Romans 10.13-17

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“Let there be light!” ... And there was light. ... God *spoke* ... and the world came to be. All that is, seen and unseen, created by the power and wisdom of God. What kind of God can do such a thing – speak and worlds come to be? Only the One True and Living God, worthy of worship and praise.

This God, when he wanted to make a special people all his own, spoke again. He told an old man, “Go! Leave your country and your kindred and your father’s house, and go to a land that I will show you. I will make from you a great nation. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

Sarah laughed when God told Abraham she would have a child, but her laugh of ridicule turned to the laughter of joy when God’s word proved true. Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, and his great-grandson, Joseph, had dreams – not ordinary dreams but revelations straight from the mind of God. Moses saw the burning bush. Pharaoh went through ten plagues ordained by the Almighty to show Israel who had real power. The Exodus generation saw the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

Gideon had his fleece. Samuel heard the voice of God, calling in the night. Saul and David and later kings had the prophets. In the year the King Uzziah died, Isaiah had a vision, in which he saw the Lord high and lifted up. ... So many unusual acts of God are recorded in the pages of scripture. So many visions, miracles, and signs – that we forget these were extraordinary events, not God’s normal way of dealing. Most of the faithful, then as now, did not hear the voice or see the glory.

And then, for a long time, more than 400 years, the visions and the prophecies stopped. God’s people waited, trusted, hoped. They went on praying ... and listening. Until finally, one night, in the hills outside Bethlehem, a band of shepherds saw a heavenly light and heard the angel choir. The Son of God was born. The eternal Word of God took flesh, and was born of a woman, born under the Law; and the world had not seen anything yet. Jesus showed the world God’s glory. He spoke with an authority unknown since God spoke from Mt. Sinai. He healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead. Most remarkably, he died on a cross; then he rose again. When he ascended to the Father, he poured out his Spirit and his work has continued ever since.

We have an extraordinary God. As he says himself in our first scripture reading, “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” You can’t put God in a box. You can’t put God on a leash. You cannot control or even predict what God might do. God is free. God is sovereign. All you can do is try to listen and obey.

The amazing thing – the wonderful and comforting thing – is not that God can make himself known in thunder and lightning and plagues and visions. Rather, the really amazing thing is that God *chooses* to make himself known to you and me in very ordinary, everyday ways.

Moses saw God pass by. Meanwhile the rest of the wilderness generation only saw the smoke and heard the thunder (and that was about as much as they could stand of their holy and awesome God). Later generations did not even get that, but they did have the Law God gave Moses on the mountain. We still have it today.

Jesus knocked Paul off his horse and appeared to him in a vision. That did not happen to the other Jews and Gentiles living around the Mediterranean in the middle of the first century, but many of them did hear Paul and the other apostles preach. Some of them got letters from Paul or Peter or John. And we still have those letters today.

God can use extraordinary means to reach into a person’s life, grab his attention, and claim him as God’s own. God can use extraordinary means to call a person to faith and commission her for witness and service. God can do anything. We have an extraordinary God. But God *chooses*, far and away most of the time, to reach us using ordinary means.

What are these ordinary means? The Westminster Catechism says there are three: the Word, sacraments, and prayer.

I am not going to try to cover all of that in one sermon. This morning I want to focus on one aspect of the Word – the Word of God preached – and one of the two sacraments, the Lord’s Supper. Let’s think about preaching first.

A good sermon is hard to find. I wrote that in the newsletter. My sabbatical gave me the opportunity to visit many different churches and to hear lots of preachers. Let me say, when it comes to preaching, I hope you know how blessed you are ... having Jerry Headrick here all summer! As for me, ... well, during the first two months of sabbatical, I only heard a couple of good sermons. Some lacked substance. Some suffered from poor delivery. One or two were unforgettable, although I have been trying hard ever since, they were so bad. After a couple of months of that, I was beginning to think, “Wow! If this is what passes for preaching these days, I’m one of the best.” Then I went to Birmingham. There I heard two excellent sermons at two

different churches. Then came Pastor's School. At Pastor's School you worship every night. The music blows you away, and of course they invite the best preachers they can find in America and Scotland. After that I thought, "How can I ever get in the pulpit again? I'm a terrible preacher!" The truth, I am sure, lies somewhere in between. I want and hope to improve my preaching over time. But that's not the most important thing. Not at all. Everyone would rather hear a good sermon than a bad one, but your salvation does not depend on how articulate I am. What you get out of sermons depends far more upon your heart and especially on the Spirit of God speaking to you.

Let me share with you something I learned through that dry sermon season the first couple of months. When sermons were mediocre, even terrible, God still spoke to me through them. One of the sermons that spoke most to me the whole summer was given by a teenage girl on what turned out to be Youth Sunday at her church. It was her first sermon. She was nervous, but not without confidence. She read the whole thing. But she engaged the text, and she talked about how God had been at work in her life. And God spoke to me.

And you want to hear a story even more amazing: At Pastor's School we heard some famous preachers. Guys with degrees in preaching. Polished sermons, flawless delivery, deep theological understanding. And God spoke to me. Most of the time, when a preacher is on the listening end of a sermon, he or she stays busy analyzing rather than hearing. "Would I say it that way?" "Does the illustration really work?" That sort of thing. These guys put on a clinic in good preaching, and I was able to get past all that and hear God speaking to me.

Let me tell you what makes the difference between just listening to a sermon and hearing the Word of God proclaimed. The difference is your heart. If you love God, and you are trying to walk with him, everyday, and you trust that he is dealing with you, then you come to a sermon ready to *hear*. The preacher might help or he might get in the way, but either way your ears are tuned in to hear God's Word. If come like that, seeking God's face, longing for God as the deer pants for water, you will hear God's Word.

The event may not be spectacular. Your emotions may not be roused up. You might not *feel* different. You might not even be able to say what it was God said to you. But God will be at work. Now, am I putting God in a box? If I preach the scriptures faithfully and you listen with an open heart and mind, then God has to speak? Not at all. I know better than to put God in a box. What I am doing is trusting God to be faithful to himself and to his Word. He loves you. Christ died for you. God is calling you to faith, holy living, and ministry. God wants you to know and love him. He wants to make himself known to you. And to that end he has given you his Word. He has commanded that his Word be proclaimed. He has ordained preaching as a means to accomplish his purposes in your life. It is ordinary enough. Someone gets up, reads

a passage of scripture, then tries to explain what it means. An ordinary means, but an extraordinary God.

God said in our first scripture reading, “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” This parable not only speaks to us about the power of God’s Word. It also warns us to be patient. Rain does not fall and turn instantly into bread. It waters the earth, which allows plants to grow, which can be made into bread. Growing crops is slow, patient work. God’s work in your life is the same way. But be assured of this: When his Word soaks into your soul, God will give grace and growth. Any given sermon might leave you flat. Trust the power of God’s Word.

The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is similar. It too is a means God uses to make himself known to you and to give you grace.

I love the Presbyterian understanding of the Supper. I believe that of all the ways Christians have tried to explain what the Supper is about, ours is the best. You might laugh that off as typical preacher bravado. Of course *our* way is the best, right? But I wasn’t always a Presbyterian, and the sacraments were a big part of why I became one.

I think we are on the right track when it comes to the Lord’s Supper. Presbyterians wanted to avoid two problems. On the one hand, we believe God acts when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. God unites us with Christ and gives us grace. So we don’t want to take God’s action out of the Supper. But, on the other hand, we didn’t want to put God in a box. We have never been willing to say that if the minister says the right words and does the right things with the bread and cup that grace is automatic, because God has to do what we want him to. So how do you say the sacrament has power without saying the power comes from the sacrament? Simple, the Holy Spirit! The sacrament works because the Holy Spirit makes it work, because he is present and at work in it. It’s not the stuff we put on the Table. It’s not the pastor. It’s not even the attitude of the congregation that makes the sacrament effective. The Holy Spirit makes it effective.

Through the Holy Spirit, Christ is present and powerfully at work when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. But what if you don’t feel it? What if it leaves you flat? You have faith, yes. You know Christ died for you. You know he commanded us to “Take and eat,” so you do. But otherwise you more or less go through the motions, and it doesn’t seem to make a difference.

Again, you have to trust God's faithfulness and his power. Your question was answered in a beautiful way by the Scots Confession, which was written way back in 1560 when Scotland became Presbyterian. It says:

We affirm that the faithful, in the right use of the Lord's Table, have such union with Christ Jesus as the natural man cannot apprehend. Further we affirm that although the faithful, hindered by negligence and human weakness, do not profit as much as they ought in the actual moment of the Supper, *yet afterwards it shall bring forth fruit, being living seed sown in good ground;* for the Holy Spirit, who can never be separated from the right institution of the Lord Jesus, will not deprive the faithful of the fruit of that mystical action.

God's work in your life depends upon God's faithfulness, not how you may feel at any given moment. Trust him.

I hope you do. I hope you trust him. I hope you believe that we serve an extraordinary God who uses ordinary means to make you his own. We live in a culture that denies the former – it does not believe in the Holy and Powerful God revealed in the Bible – and I fear that many Christians today do not believe in the latter. They don't expect God to use such ordinary things as preaching and the Lord's Supper to change their hearts. They either wait for a burning bush, or worse, they make religion one small part of their lives and don't really expect much from God at all. Not you. You know, don't you? You know we serve a loving God of power and might, who can do anything, and you can never stuff him into a box. And you know that he is at work, when the Word is preached, when the sacrament is celebrated, to give you grace, to make you his own, and to send you out as his missionary into this world he loves so much. Amen.

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