



Roanoke, Virginia

October 21, 2018

“Living and Active”

Hebrews 4:12-16

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We’re about to read a passage from the book of Hebrews. It’s a book in the New Testament that is included with all of the epistles, the letters, many of them from the Apostle Paul, written to various churches in the earliest Christian communities. But even though it’s included with all these letters, Hebrews is a little different. It’s actually not really a letter at all; it’s more like a sermon. We don’t know who wrote it, but what we do know is this: whoever wrote the book of Hebrews is a preacher. Eloquent and passionate, the preacher of Hebrews wants everyone who hears this word to put their trust and confidence in the word of God, the word made flesh – Jesus the Christ.

12 Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. **13** And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. **15** For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. **16** Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.



There is a Thompson family legend from back when I was very small, I believe I was in preschool. I don't remember it, but the story goes that one day, my mother walked into the kitchen and found me standing on a stool with my head hanging down and my arms outstretched. She looked at me for a second, and finally asked, "Rachel? What are you *doing*?" I looked up from my reverie and stated, matter of fact, "I'm just up here dying on the cross."

Every time I hear this story (and my mom thinks it's hilarious, so I hear this story a lot), I start to wonder, what was it about the way the story of Jesus was told to me as a child that made me think there was something wonderful, something life-giving, something good for me in the cross. What was it that I remembered – about Jesus, about sacrificial love, about resurrection – that caught hold of my imagination and made the stories of scripture come alive?

As the church today, in a world where the narrative of our faith looks increasingly different from the narratives we're presented by the rest of the world, that's an important question for us: how exactly does the word of God come alive?

Today is Preschool Sunday, which means there are representatives here from many of the families in our church preschool. And I think this question is particularly important for you all. It's certainly good for all of us as children of God of all ages, to consider how we interact with God's word. But it's especially important as we think about what it means to raise our children, your own children, grandchildren, and all the children of our church family. The formation that they're receiving now will grow into a foundation that they can rest their lives on.

So how does it happen? How does the word of God come alive?

The preacher of Hebrews would probably tell us we don't need to do much; the word of God is alive already. It's sharp, it's powerful, it gets into your soul. The preacher says the word of God is living, and active.

You might hear that and wonder what, precisely, does the preacher mean? This is a book, not a person, I bought my copy on Amazon. I understand the concept of inanimate objects, and this, my friends, certainly is one.

True.

And this passage from Hebrews actually makes some people kind of nervous, because they've seen how people have almost personified the Bible in a way that overly simplifies its very complex message.

I'm sure you've heard this before. It's the punch line, the trump card in many a debate: "Well the Bible says (whatever verse supports my opinion), so you can't argue with me."

Whenever you hear someone make an argument like this – proceed with caution. It may well be true. Perhaps the Bible does say whatever it is they say the Bible says. But the Bible says a lot of things. It's full of complexity and contradiction and grey area, which is part of what makes it so beautiful. So, we can't narrow it down to a single voice.



We can talk about the many things the Bible says. We should talk about what the Bible says. What it says is important. That's why we pastors went to seminary, that's why we study and read, that's why you study and read and go to Sunday school or midweek classes, maybe that's why you're here this morning. Our intellectual engagement with scripture, with theology, with God is vital for our ability to understand who God wants us to be, and how God wants us to live. What the word of God says is important.

But if the word of God is alive, we can't stop there. We can't just ask, "What does the word of God say?" We have to ask also, "What does the word of God do?"

When you hear the word of God, what does it stir up in your spirit?

When you hear God, in the beginning, say, "Everything I've made, it is good."

When you hear Moses say to Pharaoh, "Let my people go."

When you hear God say through the prophet Amos, "I'm not looking for lip service – what I want from you is justice, let it roll down like waters."

When you hear Paul say, "Love is patient and kind. It's not selfish or arrogant or rude. Love is the only thing that lasts."

Or when you hear Jesus say, "Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. Come to me and I will give you rest."

What does it stir up in your soul?

Do you find yourself kinder? Braver? More curious? More open? More determined to find and follow righteousness? Does it point you towards Jesus?

I hope so.

That's where our preacher in Hebrews is trying to move us. This preacher is an artist, so I'm sure that, in part, as he writes about the word of God, he has at least the Old Testament scriptures in mind. But as soon as you hear that phrase, "the word of God," automatically a bell should go off in your memory. The preacher is not just calling on the written or spoken words of God, the preacher is calling on *the* word of God, spoken most clearly to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The meanings are almost interchangeable.

For the preacher in Hebrews, it is Jesus' humanity that helps us hear the word of God most clearly. We see in the stories and life of Jesus the most vivid picture of God's character.

The word – this word – God breathed, God inspired, God wove together across time and distance, this word is alive because Jesus is alive. The word of God took on flesh and made his home with people. He's able to understand us, to sympathize with us, because he knows what it is to be alive in a body like ours with fears like ours with hopes like ours. He gets it – that we have trouble focusing on anyone but ourselves, that we are most of the time confused about God's



direction in our lives, that we are easily swayed by the thoughts and opinions of others. He gets it because he's been there, and without sin. Jesus' whole life is like the sermon we've always needed to hear.

Which I think gives us a clue about how the word of God comes alive in our world today. The word of God comes alive in people. Little by little, it comes alive in us – in lives lived with patience, generosity, and hope.

When I think of Little Rachel and how I ended up pretending to be on the cross, I know it was, in large part, because I'd heard the stories, over and over again, about Jesus, about the church. Even when I was little, I knew what the Bible said. And that was important.

But those stories came alive for me because I was surrounded by people who lived like the word of God mattered.

Our children model what they see. We all model what we see.

Every time I heard my dad apologize, even for something small; every time I watched my mom go above and beyond for her friends; every time my grandfather turned off his nightly news program to read me a bedtime story; every time someone in my family prayed with me; every time I saw my Sunday school teachers light up when I walked in the room; every time my youth leaders showed up at my basketball games; every time I watched my community pour out love and money and food for a family going through a hard time; that's how the word came alive to me. I watched it come alive.

They didn't always get it right. The church community I grew up in has gone through some truly painful seasons, and my family is messed up just like yours is, I promise.

But they did their best.

And that's what we're called to.

In every aspect of our lives, in our friendships, in our work, in our families, in our service, in our giving, in our prayers, we are called to do our best to represent the living, active word of God.

And God knows us inside and out: our thoughts, our hearts, our intentions. God knows how badly we want to understand and connect with and live out his word. How badly we want to model lives of righteousness and faith for our kids, for everyone around us. And God knows that we're never going to get all the way there.

But the grace of God is this: the word became flesh anyway, God became flesh anyway, and lived among us. He sympathizes with our weaknesses because he's been there, too. And the word of God is alive.

And so, the preacher says, "...let us hold fast to our confession... Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.



Amen.

