

Paul writes to the Thessalonians, "...our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction...for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known..."

One of my favorite things is to go searching for treasures in used bookstores. I especially like bookstores in older buildings that were not originally built to be bookstores. That way, you get circuitous passages, cubbyholes, and nooks & crannies. Bell's Books here in Palo Alto is wonderful, as is Feldman's in Menlo Park.

In Feldman's, there's a place in the theology/philosophy section where you can stand and be completely surrounded by books. No matter which way you turn, you see books and only books. You can't see out into the street. You can't see any other part of the store. You can't see the proprietor – only books. I personally find that experience to be absolutely exhilarating! It thrills me to think that I am surrounded by hundreds of thousands – or maybe even millions – of letters and numbers, in various languages, and all of these letters going together to form words, which in turn go together to form sentences, paragraphs, chapters! Think of all the thoughts, the arguments, insights, opinions, analyses and formulae in all those books – all of them encrypted in those tiny symbols that we call letters and numbers, which we can then read!

Wayne likes to tell the story of when he discovered reading. Once, when he was about four or five years old, he was paging through the Golden Book Encyclopedia, and he came upon some pictures of dinosaurs. He had never seen or heard of dinosaurs before, but seeing those pictures began what was to be a lifelong love of dinosaurs. He ran to his mother and asked, "Mama, what are these?" His mother explained that they were dinosaurs and suggested that they sit down and read about them. So, with Wayne on her lap, she read to him about dinosaurs, using her finger to follow along on the page. And it was at that point that Wayne made the connection in his mind. He understood that the words she was speaking, the information that she was communicating, was coming from those funny signs and symbols on that page. Of course, Wayne didn't understand the meaning of the word at that point, but he understood deep down that reading was a way of "unencrypting," so to speak, the words on the page and uncovering the meaning. Wayne says he knew at that point that, if he could learn how to read, he could learn anything.

Reading, of course, is not the only way to uncover encrypted meaning. Mathematicians and scientists do it in different ways every day. In fact, as a math dinosaur, I must confess that I'm a little jealous of those of you who work in the areas of science, mathematics, and technology. How exciting it must be to try to detect the patterns whereby the very structure of creation is encrypted, to crack that hard shell and find the meat of reality inside.

Twentieth-century theologian Peter Brunner has suggested, in effect, that the Word of God is “encrypted,” as well, encrypted in the letters and words of the Bible. He does not just mean that the simple meanings of the Bible's words are encrypted in the letters, just like the meanings of any other words. Brunner is suggesting that the divine power, and the life-giving force, of the Word of God itself are closed up, locked up, in the text of the Bible. Jesus, he infers, is entombed in the words of the Bible just as surely as he was closed up in the rock-hewn tomb on Good Friday. Jesus Christ is “encrypted” in the words of the Bible. The apostolic witness to Jesus Christ is buried in the crypt of the biblical word. Peter Brunner makes us want to put the CRYPT back in enCRYPTion!

What this means, says Brunner, is that every time the Word of God is spoken, every time it is preached or taught, interpreted, shared, or read (silently or aloud), it is an act of resurrection. Whenever the gospel is proclaimed, Jesus Christ is “unencrypted” for us, so to speak, all over again. The power of the Word breaks out from the place of death, bringing life, creating life, raising the dead to life, once again.

This makes me think of the Great-O-Antiphon appointed for December 20, which I think is my favorite Great-O-Antiphon. It goes, “O Key of David and scepter of the house of Israel, you open and no one can close, you close and no one can open: Come and rescue the prisoners who are in darkness and the shadow of death.”

This brings to our attention the fact that Christ himself is, of course, the Key to the mysteries of faith and life. As the Word Incarnate, he alone can open up for us (or unencrypt for us) the true meaning of God. He alone can perform the true work of God – bringing life into death, light into darkness, and liberation to those who are oppressed in any way.

The text for this sermon is the lesson from 1 Thessalonians, although you can probably tell by now that the sermon is not an exposition of that text as such. Part of what Paul is doing in this first chapter is holding up the Thessalonians as an example of the amazing power of the Word of the gospel, and that's what I want to do in this sermon, as well. When Paul first preached the Christian gospel to them, the Thessalonians were well

established, if not happy, in their little world. But the power of this new Word about Jesus turned their world upside down and they became believers in Jesus, and followers of the Christian Way. Their neighbors, who remained un-persuaded, were not happy about this, and persecuted the Thessalonian Christians. But these new Christians were holding their ground against such persecution, and even thriving, and so Paul is writing to encourage them.

God offers the Word of the gospel to us for the same reason it was offered to the Thessalonians, to turn our lives upside down, to show us how passionately God loves us, and to show us how graciously God has mercy upon us, no matter how badly we may screw up our lives.

The Word of God is not a dry set of theological propositions, a well-reasoned argument from God that God hopes we will decide to accept. Instead, as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, "...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. And before [that word] no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account." (Hebrews 4:12-13)

As the people of God, we are created by this Word in Holy Baptism. We are sustained by the Word in the Eucharist and when we hear the gospel proclaimed. And, we are sent by the Word into the world. It should encourage us to remember that the Word that sustains us is the same Word of God that burst forth from the crypt at Easter, the same Word that drove Paul and the other apostles to wander far and suffer much in order to bring the message to the world, the same Word that captured the hearts of the Thessalonians and so many others, down through the centuries.

When we are going about our various ministries, sharing the Word of God – in worship and proclamation, in teaching, in welcoming, in helping the needy, and even in fellowship, it's good to remember that, because we are sharing God's Word, each one of these activities is an act of resurrection.

We say "Word of God," and by that we mean not only that we're talking about God, but that, finally, it's God who's doing the talking. Our ministries are God's ministries, and that gives both satisfaction and great joy. AMEN.