

11 October 2015 (20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time)  
Lafayette Presbyterian Church  
Untitled  
Hebrews 4:12-16  
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The lectionary is a beautiful gift and yet sometimes it puzzles me. I am grateful that the revised common lectionary creates a three-year-rotation going through the Bible connecting major themes and helping congregations explore the whole canon, not just the preacher's favorite texts. However, I find myself at times, on first glance, asking "what exactly were the collaborators thinking when they selected THIS set of verses? They don't go together at all." That's a bit of what I felt about today's selection. I LOVE these verses in Hebrews. I know segments of these five verses by heart. "The Word of God is sharper than a double edged sword." "Therefore let us approach the throne of grace with confidence." But when I began to prepare for worship this morning, I found myself questioning "Why would they lump *these* verses together?"

If you have your Bible out, you might notice that there is a break between verses 13 and 14. In one of my Bibles there was even a new heading above verse 14. It seems like we're dealing with the end of one section and the beginning of another. And it seems that way... because we are. In Chapter 3, the author of Hebrews takes up a sermon on Psalm 95, specifically looking at verse 7 through verse 11. He quotes the pericope as a whole and then goes on to address it verse by verse. He closes out his sermon with this pair of verses which we come to today, that almost seem poetic. Verses 12 and 13 are the end of his sermon.

"Indeed, the word of God is living and active." Why would the author of Hebrews make this point? Finishing off the sermon from chapter 3, noting that the Word of God was alive, serves as a reminder for those listening that the scriptures are still relevant to their lives. That the texts were not some tired old story, but God was still speaking through them.

The childhood rhyme comes to mind "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words..." (will never hurt me). While the rhyme is catchy, I think we all know that they simply aren't true.



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How many times has someone said something to break your heart, make you cry, or at least hurt your feelings? That's because words have power. Most of us learned this at a very early age. Maybe it was a friend or sibling saying the very thing they knew would hurt us. Or maybe it was your parent saying that they weren't upset, they were just "disappointed." Words have power. This is why the book of James is so forceful about the tongue being a fire; "it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell."<sup>i</sup> Words have power and often they are used to hurt. But words are capable of more than just harm. They can move us and inspire us. They can call us to action and push us to be better versions of ourselves. Even though I know the words, I can listen to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a Dream" speech time and again and still be moved to want to work for equality. Again, words have power.

Even more than the words of those around us, the Word of God has power for us. "Then God said, 'Let there be light;' and there was light."<sup>ii</sup> The Psalmist tells it another way: "For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm."<sup>iii</sup> The words of God are life giving, they have the power to create. It is indeed alive and active today, just as it was when these words were written down. Scripture can motivate, offer us hope, and move us to action. I know this first hand. You see, when I heard that the Presbyterian University Center was without a campus minister, I thought, I would love that job, but the timing's not right. Thomas only has a year left of school. I shouldn't take a job knowing that I might move in a year. And what if Thomas doesn't get a teaching position and they hire me for a year while they figure out what they're looking for in a permanent minister and then we're both without a job. There's so much security in my position at Faith and I love my church. When I was in the midst of this searching, a friend spoke the words of Esther 4:14 to me "perhaps you were called for such a time as this." It began to move me, but I still had such worry about the "what's next" question. One morning, I stumbled across Matthew 6 in a devotion "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" God's voice was clear. Through the Word of God, I received the guidance and assurance I needed and I am so grateful it led me to PUC.

This active Word of God is also "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit." The Word of God can at times convict. But I don't see the piercing as a vindictive



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thing. I believe that scripture can speak into our lives and cut away that which distracts so we can experience the fullness God has for us. As Paul says “The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion.”<sup>iv</sup> The Word of God is active each time we read and hear it to do a good work in our life.

As powerful and life-giving as the Word of God is, these two verses turn quickly to focus on our word. You see ... if the Word of God is alive and active, working **in us**, then we must give an account. When you look at the Greek, these verses catch your eye because they start with *logos*, the Word of God, and end with *logos* an account. *Logos* forms an inclusio here which *should* stand out to us and signal that it is an aspect of these verses that the author wanted to highlight. One writer<sup>v</sup> compared it to our liturgy in worship. After scripture is read, the liturgist often says “The word of the Lord” and we respond “Thanks be to God.” If the Word of God is active and alive, then our life is to be the response. We are to be active, living as God calls and leads us to do through scripture. This is our account. Our life is the offering of thanks, the *amen* to God’s Word.

And then our lectionary selection completely switches gears. Like a teenager learning to drive a five-speed jumping from 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup>, we were over here focusing on God’s Word and just like that we’re talking about Christ as our high priest. Verses 14 through 16 set up Christ in the role of high priest on the Day of Atonement. Just as the high priest would pass through the veil to the Holy of Holies where God was understood to dwell, Christ “passed through the heavens” and is present with God.<sup>vi</sup> What is more, and frankly a bit surprising in this setting, Hebrews tells us, Christ is not out of touch, but understands our humanity ... that our flesh so often fails us. Christ’s being present with God and understanding our sinfulness should give us comfort. God’s forgiveness is steeped in love, understanding, even sympathy for us.<sup>vii</sup>

This segment on our high priest instructs readers to do two things. First, we are to HOLD FAST to our confessions. Our understanding of Christ as fully God and fully human is woven throughout our *Book of Confessions*, beginning with the Nicene Creed and going all the way to a Brief Statement of Faith. The Westminster Confession, for example, focuses on “Christ the Mediator,”<sup>viii</sup> while the Confession of 1967 recognizes that through Christ “God was reconciling the world to himself.”<sup>ix</sup> And in A Brief Statement of Faith we remember how Christ proclaimed



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God's reign through preaching and teaching the gospel and calling all to repentance.<sup>x</sup> In holding fast to our confessions, we are encouraged to affirm again what we know to be true about Christ, to live in a way that demonstrates who Christ is to us and what that means for our world.

The second instruction we receive is in verse 16: to “approach the throne of grace with **boldness**.” We can understand this word “approach” to be a reference to prayer. When we pray, if we are holding fast to what we know to be true about God, then we should not be hesitant to come to God in prayer. We can have confidence to come to God with our struggles, our pleas, our sorrows, joys, hopes and needs. What moving verses that we can approach God with confidence, because Christ understands where we are coming from and knows how we feel.

But it still brings me back to this question of why? What do these verses have to do with the verses that came before? As I continued to look at these two seemingly divided sections, I saw it! If you listen to the words of verses 12-13, it can be a little intimidating. The Word of God “is able to judge the thoughts and intention of the heart.” It's almost like a game of hide & seek -- “Ready or not here I come. You can't hide, I'm gonna find you.” We are told that all are laid bare before the eyes of God. These verses are meant to evoke humility before God, to draw the listener to reverence for the one who spoke us into being. Verses 14-16 are the contrast. We are to be confident! Christ knows us and loves us as we are. We CAN come before the God of grace, the one who loves us. We don't have to be shy about it, we can approach God with boldness. And when we do that, we will find the help we need.

The lectionary text may not have been the pairing we wanted, but it is the pairing we need. You see, if we had been left with just verses 12 & 13, today we would have heard a message that brought us to fear. Not a healthy reverence, which is what God wants from us. If we had only heard verses 14 through 16, we may have left feeling inflated, teetering on cocky. In this combined passage, we are reminded that our relationship with God must be balanced and that fear without boldness results in timidity and boldness without fear results in arrogance.

May we hear God speak through the LIVING Word. May we feel the reverence it brings, knowing that we are in need of the shaping and molding that comes through its guidance. May



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our lives be a resounding amen to God's Word. And, let us feel the confidence needed to approach the God of grace who is willing and able to give us what we need.

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<sup>i</sup> James 3:6

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 1:3

<sup>iii</sup> Psalm 33:9

<sup>iv</sup> Philippians 1:6

<sup>v</sup> Fred Craddock, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, *New Interpreter's Bible XII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 54.

<sup>vi</sup> Craddock, NIB, 58.

<sup>vii</sup> Craddock, NIB, 57.

<sup>viii</sup> 6.043-6.050

<sup>ix</sup> 9.07

<sup>x</sup> 10.2



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