

Word of Life: The Spiritual Practice of Reading Scripture

Hebrews 1: 1-4, 4:12-13

October 14, 2012—20th Sunday after Pentecost

CCUMC

Melanie Dobson Hughes

Introduction (before scripture)

Today I begin a sermon series on spiritual practices. All of the texts in this sermon series from now until just before Advent come from the book of Hebrews. Where in the world is the book of Hebrews? (tucked in front of James and after Philemon—which you might not of heard of either) What is the book of Hebrews? It starts off as an oration (sermon) and ends as a letter. It expositis Jewish scriptures, exhorts, offers moral instruction, and uses a host of literary devices. Hebrews has the best Greek of any New Testament writer—and the most complicated, too! The first four verses, for example, are all just one sentence. It is also the most elaborate Christian reading of the Old Testament—which brings us to the audience. For Whom is the book of Hebrews? It is for Greek Jews and Gentiles. The book assumes that the audience is familiar enough with the Old Testament to make detailed references to OT texts convincing, and swift allusions powerful. The author echoes the language of Greek Judaism with use of Word, Wisdom, and Torah—which would resonate with his Jewish newly Christian audience.¹ The name itself indicates that this book has an ethnic audience in mind—the Hebrew (or Israelite) people. The congregation to whom the author (who isn't Paul, by the way—we don't know who the author is) is writing seems to be a congregation in crisis. Perhaps because of persecution by Jews, perhaps because of the delayed return of Christ, perhaps because of public ridicule for being Christian, commitment in the church is waning. Why Hebrews? Most preachers don't touch it, don't preach upon it. I seem to be drawn to difficult challenges, and so felt led by God to

¹ Fred Craddock, "Hebrews" *NIBC*.

preach upon this oft-ignored book of the New Testament. Clement of Alexandria, an early church father, once said, “the bible does not yield its hard-won truths to causal passerby.” Hebrews demands its reader to delve deeply in order to unearth its riches. While at the monastery on retreat doing sermon planning, I felt confirmed in the desire to do a “deep dig” into this book---and unearthed clear examples of spiritual practices in each of the texts from Hebrews. So let’s dive in now to this finely written book, and learn what it might teach us about the practice of reading Scripture. We’ll begin with the first sentence (which goes on for four verses) and then move to the two verses in chapter four, which are their own complete unit.

God’s Word in Hebrews

From the very first words of Hebrews, we learn that God speaks, both in the past and in the near present. The first verse says, “God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets, and in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.” God’s self-revelation in speech, in word, is the cornerstone of both Judaism and Christianity. If God didn’t speak to us, we would be left with this gnawing, unsatisfied hunger to know who God is.

The God who spoke to the prophets and through Christ still speaks to us through God’s scripture—what we call the Bible. Our text today in chapter four calls God’s word living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. With the sword reference, the author is hearkening back to Isaiah 49:2—his Jewish audience would have most likely picked up on that reference (we, probably not so much). In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah describes his mouth as a sword, that is to cut into the people of Israel and call them to repentance. With this reference, the author of Hebrews may be trying to remind his jaded, complacent audience that God’s word is calling them to repentance, to renew their commitment to their faith. The author is trying to remind them that God’s word is still alive,

still cutting through them in their midst, to call them to be laid bare to God's eyes, and called to account. The Logos, the word of God, is still discerning among God's people. God's word is incisive, revealing what is hidden and exposing its listeners before God. The author of Hebrews is trying to remind his people that God's word is still alive and speaking to them.

God's Word in the Practice of Lectio Divina

Such a reminder serves our ears to hear as well. Hebrews is trying to teach us that God's word isn't a thing of the past, nor is it just ancient ink on the pages of the Bible. God's word *STILL* is alive and speaks to us—through the prophets, through Christ, and through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Right now, this act of preaching that we are doing, is a way God attempts to speak to us. In preaching, the book of the Bible and the community of faith are brought face-to-face with each other, in the hope that the people will hear God's voice speaking to them. It's always amazing to me to hear from you how God's word speaks to your hearts—in ways different to each hearer. God's word stays active and alive even now as we worship.

The problem for us as Western Christians is that we've been taught to use reason to intellectualize scripture; the Bible becomes something we have to study. God's word has come to mean indecipherable words in a holy book that, frankly, intimidates most of us. Many of us approach it feeling like we aren't educated enough, we don't understand how it is put together, etc. The emphasis on reason, which came out of the Enlightenment, robs us of the ability to read the bible as a spiritual practice. Many approach God's word as a text with fear and trembling. We forget that God's word is alive.

Fortunately, out of the reforms of Vatican II and a contemporary desire to reclaim ancient spiritual practices, a devotional practice for reading scripture has once again come into practice. This ancient practice comes to us from the monastic life, specifically from the

Rule of St. Benedict from the sixth century. Called “lectio divina” which literally means “holy reading” in Latin, this practice calls us to engage scripture with our hearts, not just with our heads. *Lectio Divina* involves a four-fold reading of a short amount of text orally. It provides us with a discipline, developed and handed down by our ancestors, for the scripture to come alive in our hearts. *Lectio* enables us, as 21st century Christians, to encounter God’s word still cutting through to our hearts—as it did for those hearing the author of Hebrews.

Lectio Divina consists of four elements: *lectio* (we read the text), *meditatio* (we meditate the text), *oratio* (we pray the text) and *contemplation* (we live the text)² Guigo the Second, a European monk, codified the practice in the twelfth century—after it had already been in practice for a thousand years. Guigo writes. “reading, as it were, puts the solid food into our mouths, meditation chews it and breaks it down, prayer obtains the flavor of it, and contemplation is the very sweetness which makes us glad and refreshes us.”³ *Lectio* refreshes because it really is a deep prayer; it is an inner encounter with God’s word as alive and breathing fresh newness into our own lives.⁴ *Lectio* isn’t about knowledge acquisition or scholarly biblical reading or mastery; it is a practice of surrender to God’s voice speaking to us through God’s word. It is a spiritual practice that allows us to experience God’s word as an instrument of transformation in our lives.

Congregational Practice of Lectio

Doesn’t *lectio* just sound marvelous? Are any of you wanting to experience it? Wonderful!! We are going to do just that. To encounter God’s word as living, to have it cut to our hearts as a sword—this is what we are going to do now. In your bulletin there is an

² Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A conversation on the art of spiritual reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 90-91.

³ Simon Tugwell, *OP Ways of Imperfection* (Springfield, Ill: Templegate, 1985), 94.

⁴ Norvene Vest, *Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scripture in Small Groups* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996), 13.

insert that describes the practice of *lectio*, along with some resources for further reading. For now though, I invite you to relax, and open to *lectio* as a prayer practice now for your life. I will guide you gently through each step; you will not be left alone. In fact, I encourage you now to group with two or three (no more than that) people sitting you, who will be your *lectio* group. You will do some brief sharing together about the passage we are about to encounter. Get comfortable in your seat. Place your hands open on your lap in reception. I will be reading a short passage of scripture (Matt 11:28-30) to you four times, describing with each reading how you might be receptive to the word. Silence will follow each reading. (go to insert) Close eyes—this is an oral/verbal practice. Center with breath.

Amen