

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, September 22, 2024

Friends, we've come to worship God this day. As we prepare our hearts and minds to receive the reading and proclamation of God's word, I invite you to join me in a time of prayer.

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving Spirit, fall fresh upon us in this time. Fall fresh and quiet us. Fall fresh and comfort us. Fall fresh and challenge us. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

So we continue in our four-week long sermon series, entitled Behind the Bulletin. This is an opportunity for us to just dive a little bit deeper into what Reformed worship looks like and, particularly, the four kind-of main movements of our worship service. So we began last Sunday. If you didn't get the chance to be here in the sanctuary or in our Chapel service, we invite you to go onto YouTube, and you can see that sermon, that whole worship service, in fact. We began with the first movement of worship, which is Gathering in God's Name. We Gather in God's Name every week. This week we will focus on the second really important movement of worship, and that is Proclaim God's Word. We're focusing on the proclamation of God's word. We are doing, as we noted last week, the work of the people as we worship God together. That's what liturgy is translated from in the Greek. It is the work of the people. So what we are doing this morning is we are engaging in thoughtful and really intentional work. One thing I didn't note last week about that work and that I think is critically important for this sermon series is that every time we gather—Mary shared this with us before—every time we gather, we are practicing how we are to live in the world. You might not have known it, but this morning you didn't just come to worship. You came to a rehearsal. Every single Sunday we are rehearsing together how we move through the world. Right? So the first movement, what we practiced last week, is the gift of others, the gift of people, the gift of community; and what we hope you carried out into the world from that practice was that everyone you meet as you go through your week is in one way or another a gift to you. People are indeed a gift. This morning, as we hear about the reading and the proclamation of God's word, we are rehearsing, we are practicing how it is we are to also proclaim the good news of the Gospel out in the world. What's interesting for us about the proclamation of God's word is not that it happens in one moment that we might call the preaching moment in our worship service. It is that we receive it here, but we also carry it, so that it happens over and over and over again in our lives. We practice here receiving God's word so we might be able to proclaim it out in the world. The text that will center us this morning is 2 Timothy 4: 1-5, so I invite you to turn in your pew Bible there or in your own Bible, and let us listen together for God's word to each of us and to the church.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, be sober in everything, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

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The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So we Presbyterians, we believe that the proclamation of God's word is central to who we are and the work that we do together. And we believe it is central both literally in our worship service. If you'll notice, in our worship service, this 20 minute chunk takes up the middle third of our service, usually starts around 20 minutes after the hour, usually ends around 20 or a quarter til the hour, right? We quite literally center the proclamation of God's word in our order of worship every single week because we believe that the word of God is our spiritual center. It is the thing around which all other things move and work. We, like the author of Second Timothy, believe that the word of God is centered. What's interesting is if you've been in the Presbyterian Church long enough, or maybe in some other traditions, the word is not always quite literally centered in a worship service. In fact, for a long time many Presbyterian churches in the southern string of Presbyterian churches—they moved the sermon, the reading and the proclamation of God's word, to the end of the worship service. Did anybody grow up in a tradition like that in a Presbyterian Church? Yeah, yeah. The belief in that need, the necessity of making that move, was that the word was the climax of the service, and after that everyone stops paying attention. Okay. So if you wanted to hold people's attention for the whole service, you needed to put it at the end. We actually can see this if we follow the analytics of our live streaming or YouTube Live, okay. We see um...First of all, thank y'all for being here with us this morning, okay. What we see is that folks, some folks, are on a few minutes before the hour, right, but many more come in around the confessional sequence, right? And we see engagement all the way up until the sermon, and the second that preacher comes...draws the sermon to an end, viewership falls off of a cliff, okay? So there was something to that idea that we need to be strategic about where we place the sermon. And that is actually why I would tell you there has been a movement, as we have in our church, to center it, because we believe it is critically important. It is central to what we do. We also believe that in our practicing, in our rehearsing, we have to have the opportunity to do some things in response to hearing God's word. We'll get to those in the next couple of weeks.

We believe that the word is central, and when we talk about the word, we mean that in at least three ways. We mean the word read; we mean the word proclaimed; and what we mean by the word is not simply that which is read and proclaimed but that which the Gospel of John's author describes to us. Maybe y'all remember this—the first chapter of the Gospel according to John. The word is described as having existed from all eternity and in particular time. That word took on flesh in the person of... Oh, goodness, we're going to practice again. This is rehearsal. The word became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus. Absolutely. This was the true word of God to us. So when we wrestle with the proclamation of the word, we wrestle with the words that we read in scripture. We wrestle together with the word that we hear proclaimed from this pulpit or in the chapel or wherever it is you are watching worship. We wrestle with those words, and we take all of them, and we believe that they are all held together in the word revealed in the flesh—Jesus, the Christ. So Christ for some theologians—they say Christ becomes the lens through which we view scripture. For others it is the...Christ is the filter through which all word is filtered, so that only that which continues to reflect Jesus in its fullness can survive.

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When we talk about the word being central, we are making a claim about who we believe ourselves to be and how we believe God has revealed God's self amongst us. The author of this letter to Timothy urges the people, urges Timothy and his teaching and his leadership, but also the people that will gather and hear him, to keep the word central, to keep the word of God central. And that means the stories that have been shared over millennia, and it means holding up the example and the ministry of Jesus Christ. I love the way that Paul puts it. This in verse two. Actually, I'll start in verse one. "And the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is the judge of the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you, proclaim the message." Proclaim the message. What does that mean? If we go back a couple of chapters to chapter 2, we get a little bit of a glimpse of what the author of second Timothy is speaking to. In verse 8 of chapter 2 of 2nd Timothy, the author says, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel." When the author is urging the people, urging solemnly, urging them to proclaim the message, what the author is saying is that we need to proclaim and keep center our belief that indeed in due time God's spirit took on flesh amongst us in the person of Jesus, and in that life Jesus fed and healed and challenged. Jesus was murdered. And Jesus was raised by the spirit of God from the dead. And in that the message was that darkness does not win, death does not have the final word, division is not...is not our end, but that light will overcome darkness, life overcome death, and unity overcome estrangement. That's what you need to keep central in your life together, but it's going to be hard to keep it central, the author says. There are going to be divisions amongst you and, especially, in the world around you. There will be times when it is easy to speak a word of unity because everyone in your community is going to feel great. It's going to feel like you're just kind of adding on to sunshine and rainbows that already exist, right; but there will be other times, unfavorable times, the author says, when division is happening all around you, when people will be vying for your attention and your loyalty. It is in both of those times that you must continue to preach and share the message, regardless of the condition, be persistent. But why is that important? Why is it important that the word of God ought to remain essential and central to us? The author seems to describe also the function that the word has for the people and in the world. Second Timothy offers that the word is intended—and you can follow along in scripture here—to convince, rebuke, and encourage, that the example of Jesus is meant to convince, to rebuke, and to encourage. I don't know about you, I just want to skip the first two, and we'll get to the encourage. When I get the opportunity just to listen to a sermon, I just...I want to be encouraged, right. But Paul tells Timothy that's not its only function. That is part of its function, the word of God that is, but it's not the only function. We like to be encouraged. We don't so much like to be rebuked. We can rebuke others, but if the word of God is truly centered in our lives and in our community, then we too also have to hear a word of correction. There's a famous quote first authored by Chicago Evening Post journalist and humorist, Finley Peter Dunn. It's probably one that you've heard before. Pastors grabbed hold of it during the last century. But he actually wrote it about the media. He was a newspaper man, so he wrote this about what the media is to do. "It is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Have y'all heard that before? Okay, so it's new to some. You've heard it before. Others have some time. Not too long ago a pastor said, "I think that's what the word of God is supposed to do as well. Supposed to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." The word of God is

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supposed to accomplish amongst us, depending on where we are on a given Sunday morning, it's either supposed to rebuke us or encourage us, or it's supposed to do both at the same exact time. I heard from—this is 22 years ago—a book was published on leadership, perhaps y'all are familiar with it. It says the definition of leadership is “disappointing people at a rate they can absorb.” Y'all heard that? It feels like that sometimes up here. Y'all, I gotta be honest. I think about it as...I think about the parallel though with the word of God “rebuking us, convincing us, encouraging us at a rate we can absorb.” We need all of those functions of God's word, because as Paul noted in Second Timothy, the threat is real. The threat of a different message becoming central is very, very real. In verse three, “For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.” It has always been the temptation of God's people to fashion God, to proclaim God even, in their own image. A professor of theology from Colombia Seminary described it as the pursuit of God, as looking down a well. We believe we see God at the bottom of the well in the water, but what we really see is a faint reflection of ourselves, fashioning God in our own image rather than in the image of Jesus Christ. Anne Lamott in *Traveling Mercies*—it's a book I hope y'all are familiar with—she quotes a friend, a priest named Tom. She quotes him as saying, “You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” You can safely assume you have centered something else in your community when you no longer reflect the truth and the grace and the love of Jesus Christ, the word made flesh. It is the great temptation to center all sorts of other things in our community than in the enfleshed spirit of God that we know in Christ.

Just at the beginning of this letter to Timothy, the second letter, the author urges Timothy and the community. He says, “Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” I love this next verse. This is verse 14, the first chapter of 2 Timothy. “Guard the good deposit entrusted to you with the help of the Holy Spirit living in you.” Paul is serious about centering the living word of God in community, about proclaiming the message of a crucified and risen Lord, because the author believes that the word of God actually has the power to change people's lives. It actually has the power to comfort those who are distressed. It actually has the power to distress those who are far too comfortable. It has the power to be a balm for those who need healing. It has the power to convict those whose hearts need to be changed. It has the power to change everything. And so he says to these people, “As for you, you need to be sober in everything, even endure suffering. You have work to do, so do the work of the Evangelist. Carry out your ministry fully.” The author doesn't just invite the community to center God's word for the community's own edification. He invites them to center Jesus Christ, the living word, because he knows that the world into which they will move after they have gathered together is in need of a word of hope, a word of healing, a word of conviction, a word of truth. When we gather together centering ourselves in God's word, we are rehearsing what it will look like for us to go into the world and to speak words of life against death, to speak words of love against hate, to speak words of unity against division, to speak words of hope against despair. We center God's word here so it might be centered within us out there.

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Here's the hard part. If we are to remain centered in God's word, it can't be from five verses in one letter that we hear for 20 to 25 minutes on a Sunday morning. If we are to truly be centered as we are called in Jesus Christ, this has to become a regular practice for us—the reading and reflecting of the word together and and personally. So hear the urging of the epistle writer as an urging to you. Hear the words of Paul to Timothy. “Proclaim the message. Convince, rebuke, encourage.” Whether the times are favorable or unfavorable, trust in the living word of Christ and its power to change you and the whole world. That is the good news. That is the message that is the Gospel.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.