

“When the Word Comes Near”

March 6, 2022

Scripture: Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

What does Paul mean when he tells the believers in Rome that “the word is near you, on your lips and in your heart?” This is a quote from Deuteronomy, toward the very end of the Torah, when Moses is giving his final instructions to the people. He’s gone over a wide array of rules and ethics that they’re expected to follow and he imagines they must be a little overwhelmed. He assures them following this path won’t be hard for them because it doesn’t require someone going across the sea to retrieve it or to the heavens to bring it down to them. The word, he says, is near them; in their mouth and in their heart. We’re left with the impression that the “word” Moses is talking about is something beyond all the instructions he’s been teaching them.

Torah is more than a set of rules or laws. Torah is the path to the presence of God. I think Moses is saying the word, or Torah, is God within them. They need only trust the Divine presence within them to be their guide. If they ignore that presence and try to go their own way, things won’t go well for them; but if they listen to the word within them they will prosper. It’s a choice, he says, of life or death.

Paul sees the same choice being offered to the believers in Rome. Salvation is for anyone who calls on the name of the Lord, anyone who puts their trust in the Christ who is as near to them as their own hearts. In other words, it’s within them to live in the presence of God, no matter what their background, Jew or Greek. We don’t know if that distinction was a problem for the community in Rome, but for Paul it was always a topic of concern. And it was probably an issue for many of these new communities who were trying to create something new within Roman society.

Paul didn’t have anything to do with forming the Roman church, but all of these Christian communities were crossing boundaries of class and ethnicity and religion. There were bound to be conflicts. For Paul what mattered most holding fast to their belief that Jesus is Lord—a risky claim in a world where Caesar was considered a god. The pressure to renounce their belief in Christ must have been immense. Paul tells them to take refuge in God’s word that lives within them.

Taking refuge in the word is how Jesus confronts temptation, we’re told. The devil comes to tempt him in three ways: self-sufficiency, worldly power, and invincibility. Each time Jesus quotes scripture, literally taking refuge in words. But I think the deeper reality is Jesus refuses to move away from reliance on God. There’s never a moment when he considers his immediate needs could displace him from his home in God. He’s prepared to begin his ministry, fortified in God’s word, God’s presence within him.

Both the believers in Rome and Jesus are under tremendous pressure. They live in a world where their presence isn't valued or even wanted. I don't know if you and I are really in that category in our society. But there are challenges for us; and maybe some of them are even more dangerous because they're less obvious.

In our adult education class in the Library today we've begun a study of theologian James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. He writes about the Black experience in America of abuse and terror after emancipation during what he calls "the lynching era" from around 1880 to 1940. In those years nearly 5,000 Black people were lynched all over the country, not just a few states in the South. He writes, "In that era, the lynching tree joined the cross as the most emotionally charged symbols in the African American community—symbols that represented both death and the promise of redemption, judgment and the offer of mercy, suffering and the power of hope."

That's a hard reality for many of us here to relate to. Most of us have no connection to that history at all. So, the temptation for us is to dismiss it. Or, when we hear those stories we're tempted to be defensive. But if we want to be open to the word coming near us, we need to listen to those stories and really hear the persisting hurt those memories cause. And instead of asking, "Why is this still an issue?" we might ask, "How do we find healing for this?" Where do we go for refuge in the word?

For Cone that refuge is found in the blues. He shows how Black people in America have used the blues as a way of expressing their anger and terror and their defiance in the face of danger. He writes, "On the one hand African Americans spoke of how they 'cried and moaned,' about 'feelin' like nothing, something throwed away.' Yet in the next line they balanced despair with hope: 'Then I get my guitar and play the blues all day.'" He comments, "As long as African Americans can sing and play the blues, they had some hope that one day their humanity would be acknowledged." The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.

Holding onto an awareness of God's presence in times of struggle and fear is the challenge we always face. While we may not share the traumatic history of our African American sisters and brothers, we all carry some kind of trauma in our lives. We do all struggle at times to hold on to our trust in God's goodness. Some of us may find the images from Ukraine and our helplessness to stop the destruction overwhelming our sense of God's presence. We may find hope in their defiance, a defiance born in the knowledge that they're not alone in this struggle; they're not forgotten. We can't allow our own discomfort cause us to turn away. The people of Ukraine need our attention right now. When the word comes near we feel their heartache and our hearts break for them.

We can't change what's happening to the people of Ukraine any more than we can change the sufferings of the past. But we can insist on keeping our trust in God to use us for the work of healing. We can remain defiant in the face of despair by expressing our hope through

acts of solidarity and compassion, by refusing to stay passive and standing alongside brothers and sisters in pain.

Our journey of Lent starts this year where steadfast love and faithfulness meet, where righteousness and peace kiss each other so that hope can live in us and we can live for the world. For the word, the word that brings life, is near us, on our lips and in our hearts, so God's presence will be revealed through us.

Amen