

Sermon Feb 6, 2022
Redeemer, Ramsey
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Grace mercy peace from God our Creator and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Did you know that our faith is based on hearsay?

Contrary to what many Christians would like to believe about the Bible and the testimony of the Apostles, what we have to go on is just their testimony.

Many Christians, particularly in the modern age, since the 18th century or so, have insisted on the Bible being the Word of God, unfiltered, unmarked, straight from God via the Holy Spirit to the many writers who put God's words down on paper. I will call this a hard revelation, an objective truth that comes down from outside of Human experience and lands in our midst. Christians who subscribe to this view of scripture are not interested in the many schools and traditions of literary and historical criticism that have analyzed the text of the Bible. They are simply interested in preserving the authority of the Bible in the eyes of the rest of the world.

But The testimony of Jesus, about Jesus, and which contains Jesus' teaching, has the characteristic of something more tenuous and fragile than we like to admit.

If we look at other religions and the basis of the authority of their traditions, we see many examples of what I mean by a hard revelation.

Take the example of our Muslim brothers and sisters. The testimony that comes from God to them in their holy book, the Qur'an, is they believe, delivered straight from the mind of God through the angel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad. Yes, this is the very same arch angel Gabriel that we have in the beginning of the Gospel of Luke telling Mary that she will conceive a son by the Holy Spirit.

It is a point of doctrinal belief in Islam that the Qur'an has the character of a direct revelation from God, as if delivered in a holy transmission directly from God to the prophet Muhammad. In a sense, the prophet only transcribed what he received, nothing else. This belief is what lends great authority to the Qur'an in the minds of faithful Muslims. Their testimony about it is unapologetic; that book and every word in it, IS God's word, and represents the thoughts of God in a very concrete way.

Likewise, in the tradition of the Mormon church, the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the book of Mormon was also relayed directly to several prophets, the last one named Moroni, and written on golden plates in a language that Smith called "reformed Egyptian". These golden plates were found by Joseph Smith in 1823 and translated by him and published in 1830. Smith had to have the assistance of a special magical stones in order to translate the text, but after he did that translation, this text has become the defining testament to the Mormon version of

Christianity. Again, the testimony that relays God's intention and teaching is word for word a direct revelation. It represents for Mormons the thoughts of God in a very concrete way.

Apostolic Christianity on the other hand, rests on the testimony of people who witnessed Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and who testified to this knowledge, but who did not claim to possess in some physical form the definitive record of that revelation. They simply had a loose record of Jesus' teachings, which eventually become extrapolated, expanded upon and collected in the remaining historical writings that we have in our New Testament.

St. Paul's testimony in our second lesson today verses 3-8, is very important for us. It gives us a record of the tradition of testimony and it gives us a picture of how tenuous that tradition was.

³For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

It was all verbal witness passed from one individual to another, and from one group of disciples to another. There is no angel's dictation, not golden tablets falling to earth, nothing concrete except for the general parallels and agreements between different eye-witness accounts.

St. Paul's example is very instructive to us, since he is not an eyewitness himself to the resurrection. What Paul does admit to is an experience of the risen Christ, but in spirit. Paul is not with the first apostles in seeing a resurrected Jesus standing bodily before him. Paul takes his own experience and lets it be reformed and shaped by the testimony of the other apostles, who are the real eye-witnesses to the resurrection.

Nevertheless, it is their word that we take at face-value. At this point, it is not far off the mark to say that Christianity, of the apostolic kind, is based on hear-say. What confirms the authority of this tradition of testimony is the work of the Holy Spirit, when we have our own experiences of the holy, when we have our own moments of spiritual resonance with the world around us. These are the experiences that we might say are the Holy Spirit working in us, and for us, to confirm the teaching of Jesus that the apostle's testimony relays to us down the ages.

Some people will immediately find this description of our tradition to be not robust enough. Many people will ask how can the tradition stand up to modern doubt and historical literary and moral scrutiny, if it is all just hearsay?

But I repeat what I've said above. It is hearsay that is confirmed by the holy Spirit working in our lives. Give this story today in the gospel of Luke to a random group of 15 people, and you will find those who can't relate to it, or can't see anything in it to move their hearts. And you may find a few people who take that story away with them and over the next days months or years,

suddenly have an uncanny experience of the holy, and then they come to believe that it is Jesus showing them God's abundant provision for them, and Christian discipleship is ignited.

Christians are tempted to try to treat the Bible like the Qur'an or the Book of Mormon. We are tempted to say that the texts in the bible are the word of God in the same way that Muslims think the Qur'an is the word of God, or that Mormons think the Book of Mormon is the word of God. We are tempted to say that our Bible is the concrete revelation from God, as sure as angels breath and heavenly tablets. From this temptation comes a host of problems, including overly literal, self-righteousness, and judgmental interpretations, which can lead to aggressive or even violent evangelism, and spiritual pride. Theologians call this problem "Biblicism", the temptation to treat the Bible like a law that only a special few people have access to and can interpret.

Don't misunderstand me. I do not wish to denigrate the Qur'an or the Book of Mormon. I believe that Christians owe members of other faiths intense respect because, like us, they are testifying to what they believe God is up to in the world. And I believe God only gives to Christians a record of testimonies such as Paul writes about, so that the real authority that we lean on is not something we can hold in our hands, but simply the testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that opens up the teachings of Jesus and the testimonies of the writers of the Bible to our minds.

In the end, to non-Christian believers and the rest of the world, we can only say about the bible that it is a collection of written stories, testimonies, and remembrances about what earlier believers thought God was doing in their midst. And indeed, on face value, that's what it seems to be. But we confess in our tradition that these texts relay or convey God's Word to us because of our experiences of God's presence that confirm the words of the texts themselves. Luther's dictum, Scripture alone, always needs to have the Holy Spirit added to it.

After we've had some aha moments, some holy uncanny experiences of God, some spiritual confirmation, some voice inside our hearts saying, "who else can we go to, Lord Jesus, You have the words of eternal life," then we too can believe that we find in these texts the witness of the Word of God, pointing to Jesus and confirmed by the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

You may have found this interpretation unsettling, but look what kind of posture it forces us to take in relation to other people. We are forced to affirm the truth of the Bible not in any scientific or objective way, but we are forced to testify verbally and through our actions that we believe what Cephas, and the twelve, and to James, and the other apostles, and then Paul have said in their own confessions of faith, namely that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. You see the role of the scriptures in Paul's own words, but the Holy Spirit must confirm it. Paul was himself a pharisee, and knew the Hebrew scriptures well. It was the holy Spirit and the spirit of Jesus that turned them into a revelation for faith in Jesus Christ.

And faith--doled out by the Spirit, sometimes faintly, like manna in the wilderness, or sometimes in a flood of truth, like a thousand fish breaking your nets, and sometimes just when you need it, like a sudden glass of perfect wine at a random wedding party, that faith is enough to go on, enough to sustain our hearts, and keeps us ever dependent on God's abundant provision above all else.

May this vision of our Lord's testimony sustain us in these days, and may the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus amen.