

Inspiration

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
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Scripture: John 14:23-27

Sermon

I've been preaching for more than thirty years. By now, I must have preached about two thousand sermons. I can't imagine doing something else. Actually, I tried doing something else for a while, back in the 90s. It was awful. But the Lord led me back to preaching. And I'm grateful for that. These days, I'm grateful for the privilege of speaking to you in the name of the Lord.

OKAY; NOW I'M GOING TO LET YOU IN on a trade secret. Shh. Sometimes a pastor preaches a sermon not because he has something to say, but because it's Sunday morning and he has to say something.

I remember one Christmas morning years ago. For days, I struggled to find something to say, because I had to say something. But I kept coming up empty. So I stayed up late on Christmas Eve. After everyone else went to bed, I sat in my study with a Bible open in front of me. But nothing happened. I prayed. But nothing happened. I tried writing. But nothing happened. So I went to bed for a few hours.

I got up very early on Christmas morning and went back down to my study. But still I had nothing. I wound up lying facedown on the floor, praying, begging for something to say. "Lord, it's Christmas morning. I have to say something!" But nothing came to me. Nothing.

WHEN THE TIME CAME FOR MY SERMON, I stood behind the pulpit. And I still had nothing. But it was Christmas morning. I had to say something. So I opened my mouth, and I started to preach. I don't remember what I said. But it was good. It was true. It was Gospel. Somehow.

It was the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit occupying my mind. The Holy Spirit shaping my thoughts. The Holy Spirit reaching into my heart. The Holy Spirit filling my mouth with words, giving me something to say.

It was a moment of inspiration. But it was only a moment. It was for that time, for that place, for that congregation, and for me. It was amazing. It was a gift, a Christmas gift from Jesus. And I've never forgotten it.

THAT'S SORT OF WHAT WE MEAN—and I say “sort of” because my experience was so momentary and so insignificant—but that's sort of what we mean when we say prophets and apostles were inspired. That's sort of what we mean when we say their words were inspired. That's sort of what we mean when we say their writings were inspired. And that's sort of what we mean when we say the people who put the books of the Bible together were inspired.

What we mean is that the Holy Spirit came to them in a big way. Jesus said, “The Holy Spirit will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” (That's John 14:26.) So the Holy Spirit came to them: to trigger their memories, to shape their thoughts, to give them words, to make them instruments of divine truth. And it's a divine truth that endures to this day. That's why the Bible is the Word of God.

My long-time-ago Christmas sermon is not sort of like that, not at all. I don't even remember that sermon, and I'm sure no one else does. But in the Bible, we still have the words of the prophets and the apostles and all the rest. Because “the Word of our God endures forever.” (That's Isaiah 40:8.)

NOW HERE'S SOMETHING IMPORTANT ABOUT INSPIRATION. Those prophets and apostles and writers and editors—they didn't disappear. The Holy Spirit didn't erase their stories or swallow up their personalities. So their minds and their hearts and their voices still come through. But what they speak and what they write and what they put together—it's the Word of God. Because God speaks through their voices, through their hearts, and through their minds.

Think about Moses. The last thing he wanted to be was God's mouthpiece. “I can't do it,” he said. “I don't have the voice for it. And I don't have the words.” But God had an answer. “Moses, Moses, who do you think makes it possible for anyone to speak? I do! So don't worry. I'll teach you what to say.” That's inspiration. (And that's Exodus 4:10-12.)

It's the sort of thing Peter says about all the prophets. He says they were “carried along by the Holy Spirit.” As a result, they were able to “speak from God.” And what they said was “completely reliable.” It was a “light shining in a dark place.” That's inspiration. (And that's 2 Peter 1:19-21.)

WHEN WE READ THE BIBLE, it's obvious that none of those prophets and apostles and writers and editors—none of them lost their own voice because of the Holy Spirit's inspiration. And none of them lost their own style. That's why Amos sounds like Amos, and Luke sounds like Luke. And that's why no one else sounds like Paul.

Tonight's lesson talked about ghost-writing. That's when a famous person writes a book, but a not-so-famous person does the real writing. A ghost-writer knows how to tell another person's story and to sound just like that person when they do it.

It's not exactly like that with inspiration. When the Holy Spirit inspires a prophet or an apostle or even an editor, that person's voice definitely comes through. And that person's story definitely is heard. But that's not all. Because, more than anything, when the Holy Spirit inspires someone, that person winds up telling God's story, part of it at least.

So Amos the shepherd from Tekoa, tells the story of God's justice. And Luke the doctor tells the story of Jesus the healer. And Paul the servant of the Law tells the story of Jesus the Fulfiller of the Law. That's why the Bible is the Word of God.

ONE LAST THING ABOUT INSPIRATION. Yes, prophets and apostles and the writers and editors of the Bible were inspired by the Holy Spirit. But there is another side to the inspiration equation. Because the Spirit doesn't work only in those who speak. The Spirit also works in those who listen.

In some ways, the miracle of Pentecost was not just a miracle of speaking. Yes; the Spirit enabled people to speak in languages they didn't know. But Pentecost was also a miracle of hearing. Because the same Spirit enabled people not just to hear someone speaking their own language, but to hear the Gospel in what they were saying. The Spirit enabled them to welcome the Gospel and to embrace Jesus in faith.

So, yes, the Bible is the Word of God, because it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. But all by itself that doesn't mean much. Because the Spirit also has to open people's ears to hear that inspired Word.

That's what happens here among us. We hear the Word, and we receive it in faith. Because the same Spirit who inspired Moses and Amos and Paul—and in a special way, Jesus himself—that same Spirit is here among us and in us.

Hallelujah!

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Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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