

Taking Refuge in the Living Word of God

Psalm 19 *The heavens are telling the glory of God....*

John 1:14 *And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory as of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth.*

Last week I spoke of the first “jewel” of Christianity in which we can take refuge. In Buddhism one can say, I take refuge in the Buddha. As Christians we can say, I take refuge in God through Jesus Christ. Today I want to talk about the second “jewel” of Christianity. In Buddhism, the second refuge is this: I take refuge in the Dharma, or the way, the teachings, or the truth. As Christians we can say: I take refuge in the living Word of God. Taking refuge means coming back to what gives us life. It is grounding our lives in that which nourishes us. Taking refuge is not running away or hiding. It is touching the realities that are at the foundation of our faith. When we lose our bearings or feel overcome by the circumstances of life, when we become lost to ourselves, we take refuge so that we can be reoriented and re-rooted in ourselves, in God, in life. The most important way in which we take refuge is the time we give daily to our inward journey—prayer, self-examination, study, and simply being still so that our inner life becomes quiet, open, and receptive to God. How can we “hear” God’s living Word if we do not cultivate our inner sensitivity, our capacity for awareness?

It is important to say the living Word of God. The Word of God in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures is something dynamic and alive. The Hebrew word used in our Old Testament is *dabar*. To understand it we have to let go of our verbal and literal view of the word “Word.” God’s *dabar* spoke the world into being. God’s *dabar* came to the prophets, giving them a message for their day and circumstances. God’s *dabar* also is a kind of cosmic wisdom that is beyond human comprehension and yet gives us practical insights for living fruitfully. God’s *dabar* is perceived in nature, the creation, as it gives praise to God, its creator. God’s *dabar* creates events in human life that reveal God’s purposes for us, of compassion, mercy, justice, and peace.

So, the living Word of God in which we take refuge is much deeper and more dynamic than what we have been taught. And we need to develop the capacity God has given us to receive and respond to that Word. We need to cultivate open, attentive, and aware spirits. This living Word of God is all around us if we only, as Jesus taught, have eyes to see and ears to hear.

God’ Word in and through Scripture

Scripture is NOT the Word of God, but the response of the Hebrew and Christian communities to God’s living Word. Or we could say that scripture is the written word in and through which we can hear God’s living Word. Not all of scripture is equally transparent to God’s living Word, but studied thoughtfully and prayerfully, the scriptures can open our hearts and minds to God’s living Word to us today in our time and circumstances. For instance, it is difficult for me to hear God’s living Word in the stories of the Israel’s first invasions and slaughterings in Canaanite, or we might say, Palestinian lands, under God’s orders. I have learned to not get hung up on that but to find those other places where something more authentic shines through—Jesus’ teachings on compassion and forgiveness, for instance, or those places in the prophets that speak of God’s desire for a peaceful and just community of God’s people.

The fact that scripture does not uniformly reveal to us God’s authentic living Word does not mean that we give up reading the Bible. That is all the more reason to make scripture reading a part of our daily practice of the inward journey. Over time, we gain a broad sense of scripture and discover those “thin places” in scripture where we touch most clearly God’s living Word for us in our day and time and circumstances. So, daily, regular reading of scripture is part of our taking refuge in God’s living Word.

God’s Word in and through Creation: The Wordless Word

God’s Word is also proclaimed through the creation. Many of the psalms speak of the creation bearing witness to God’s living Word. The first creation story of Genesis 1 tells of God who “speaks” the world into being. It is connected to God as its creator. Psalm 19, a portion of which we read, describes the creation telling us of God’s glory. It is a speaking without words, a voiceless voice to which we listen with our whole being.

When we are out in creation, the natural world, for long enough to let our “pulp” settle—remember the story of Than Tui from last week—we have no problem understanding this business of the voiceless voice of creation. Many people find their spirituality coming alive more in nature than anywhere else. We can hardly describe it, but we know what it is as we are renewed and refreshed by awareness of our lives within the fabric of the whole creation. God’s Word in and through the creation speaks to us of our belonging to and interconnectedness with all that God has made.

Jesus was sensitive to this as he used examples from nature to teach what it means to live in harmony with God’s order of life, God’s kingdom. The birds of the air. The flowers of the field. The mustard seed. The farmer planting the seed and watching it grow, waiting for the harvest. To be open to God’s living Word means that we need to cultivate in ourselves a sensitivity to the world around us. We need to open our senses, our minds, and our hearts to what God is speaking to us through the wind in the trees, the deer grazing in the twilight of evening, the symphony of

frogs and cicadas, the life cycle of the tree. God's creation not only renews us in joy and a sense of belonging, but also teaches us, if we are aware and attentive to even the smallest of God's creatures. God's living Word in and through the creation, as our awareness of it deepens, will make clear also why it is so urgent that we cease living in ways that destroy that very creation. We are not only destroying our own home, but also the sacred source of our spiritual nourishment.

God's Word in Our Lives

There is also God's "speaking" to us a personal Word. This is the attunement of our hearts and minds to God's living Word to us. It is how God speaks to us, revealing our uniqueness and preciousness as persons. It is God's call to live our lives for the sake of the world out of that uniqueness. This is what we mean when we talk about God calling us to some ministry within our faith community or in the world around us. It is that "nudging" or lure that we feel in ourselves to give our lives in a particular way, to a particular need. It has to do with coming to awareness of the gifts God has given each of us to share for the enrichment of life around us.

Our inward journey is where and how we discover and come to affirm those callings and gifts. This, too, is part of taking refuge in God's living Word, the particular way that Word speaks within us and awakens us to our true selves.

God's Word Embodied in Jesus

God's living Word is fully embodied in Jesus Christ. Scripture actually does not speak of the incarnation of God in Jesus, but of the Word becoming flesh, being embodied in Jesus. The Incarnation is a symbolic way of speaking about the presence of God in the life of Jesus. In him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. Jesus reveals what we can be also. The Word of God can be embodied in our lives, too. Jesus shows us how, teaches us how, empowers us in this direction so that we all become the children of God we truly are made to be (John 1:12). This eliminates the needless problem created by the literalistic imposition of the Doctrine of the Incarnation, that Jesus was uniquely different from us because he was God incarnate. This is not scriptural and it puts a permanent barrier between us and Jesus. Scripture, on the other hand, says that Jesus fully embodied God's living Word, was full of the Word, and this embodiment and fullness is shared with us as we join our lives with his through faith and discipleship. In Jesus we see and receive our true humanity, the way we are all made and meant to live as God's daughters and sons.

God's living Word is all around us—in scripture, in the creation, in Jesus Christ, in our own and other's lives. All we need is to cultivate our awareness of it, which is the work of our inward journey.

Let me share a story of what I'm talking about, and to answer the question, What is that bench doing sitting in the middle of our chapel?

This week an intergenerational group from Christian Temple Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Baltimore was here working for us. On Monday morning I led some of them downtown to the Lynchburg High Apartments where they were to paint apartments for Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship and to the Festival Center where they were to build benches for the porch that overlooks the garden.

After lunch, I went back to the Festival Center to see how they were progressing. They were just completing the first bench, and there were four more to go! I felt a twinge of disappointment and anxiousness. Would they get them all built? But then I checked myself and just watched what was going on. Laurie, the group leader, an accomplished carpenter but even more accomplished as a human being, was teaching the children everything about how to build a bench, from measuring and cutting to drilling and painting. The children were really doing the work with the adults, which meant things were going to go more slowly. Laurie also told me she needed me to pick up some more drill bits. The children's learning process had resulted in a few casualties! This was a small price to pay, she quickly added.

What a beautiful thing to see! The adults and children truly were "doing it together." The integrity and gifts of children were being deeply honored. The adults were providing the guidance and know-how, and yet benefiting from the energy, enthusiasm, and unfettered concentration of the children. I smiled within myself. I had come with blinders on—my expectations, my plans, my way of seeing reality. I had to junk all of that so that I could really see what was going on. We have to do that, you know, let go of all that stuff that keeps us from really seeing what is going on. This was an experience of the living Word of God. At the center of it were Laurie and the other adults who embodied the wisdom, patience, and love of God's living Word, enabling such a community and the fruit of its labor to happen. So, this bench, too, speaks to us God's living Word.

Once we begin opening ourselves to this living Word of God, we have no trouble with the notion that God speaks to us. We begin to hear God speaking everywhere. We discover that we can at any time take refuge in the living Word of God. We don't even have to go to a special place. All we have to do is have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. The more we take refuge in and listen for God's living Word, the more that Word is able to become embodied in our own lives. We become what we take refuge in.