

The Word that Lays us Bare

A sermon on Hebrews 4:12-16 by Nathan Nettleton, 14 October 2018

© LaughingBird.net

Message

When God is seeking to communicate with us, we usually need the prayerful support of others to help ensure that we remain open to hearing what God is calling us to.

Sermon

I'm going to break some preaching rules here tonight. As a rule, I usually try to be solidly biblical in my preaching, in that the main thing driving the sermon is a careful consideration of the message of one of the Bible readings we have heard read. But tonight I am just going to use one of the images from that text as a bit of an excuse to tell you a story that I'm wanting to tell you anyway. I hope that my story will give you some insights into the Biblical text, but the truth is that that's not really why I'm telling it.

I'm going to break a major story telling rule too. As a rule, good story telling involves an element of suspense. You don't tell your listeners how the story ends until you get there. You generate a sense of anticipation that keeps everyone intrigued to find out where the story is going to go and how it is going to end. But I'm a little bit worried that this particular story might stress some people out if I did that, so I'm going to give you the one line summary of the whole story complete with a fully fledged spoiler.

So here we go. Over the last few months, I began to believe that my time as pastor here at SYCBaps was coming to an end and that God was calling me to get out of the way because you needed a new pastor, but – Spoiler alert! – I have now come to believe that I was wrong about that and that although God is calling me to change, that change does not involve leaving. So with apologies to any of you who were hoping I would leave soon, and who now know that this story is going to have a disappointing ending, let me tell you the story.

But let me first try to at least pretend to make some connections to one of our Bible readings.

The reading that we heard from the Letter to the Hebrews opened with a very well known image that is a favourite of many many Christians. "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." And then it goes on to say that before God, "no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account."

This image of the word of God being able to cut through our defences and surgically open us up and lay us bare is a startling and very evocative image, but some of the reasons why it is so often a favourite are a bit ugly. A lot of it is tangled up with the connotations of swords. The paraphrase we heard tonight rendered it as a surgeon's scalpel, but the original is a sword and the people who get excited about wielding sharp swords are often a dangerous bunch.

The Church has a long and sorry history of weaponising the word of God. We've been pretty bad at wielding actual swords too, but these days in our part of the world, the most aggressive and dangerous Christians are those who wield the word of God like a sword to wound and to judge and to cut down those who they disapprove of or disagree with. Some of us spent some

time at the [Connecting Stories conference](#) this weekend and heard some harrowing stories from LGBT+ Christians about the crippling emotional and spiritual damage done by aggressive Christians wielding the word like a sword.

If there is one thing that this image, in its context in the letter to the Hebrews, is absolutely not about, it is us wielding the word of God like a sword to cut down or defeat anyone else. The biblical image is, as the surgeon's knife paraphrase intended to remind us, about us facing the knife ourselves. It is about the word of God doing its work on us. And so it is calling us, not to aggression of any kind, but to submit ourselves to the incisive precision of God's word as God seeks to open us up and lay us bare.

And so I hope my story will illustrate something of what that means and how to go about intentionally laying yourself open before the word of God.

But just before I get there, and for the sake of clarifying this connection to my story, another question about this text. Who or what is the word of God in this biblical image? As evangelicals, most of us instinctively answer 'The Bible.' The word of God refers to the Bible. But the letter to the Hebrews obviously wasn't yet in the Bible when it was being written, was it? And neither was a lot of the rest of what we now call the New Testament. So even if the writer was thinking of the Bible, it wasn't yet the same thing that we know as the Bible.

If we turned to the gospel according to John, we would realise that when he starts by saying, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, ... and the Word became flesh and lived among us," he is referring to Jesus. The Word of God refers to Jesus.

And if we look for our clues right here in the letter to the Hebrews, you may remember the opening verses that we heard last week: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." There's no single answer. God speaks to us in many and varied ways, including through the prophets, at least some of whom we now hear through the Bible. But more recently and most importantly, God has spoken to us through the living Word, Jesus himself, God's own son.

So, to my story, which I hope will serve as an illustration of what it means to lay yourself open before the word of God which speaks to us in many and various ways.

For along time, whenever people have asked me how long I thought I would continue as pastor here, I have said that having been called here by God and by you, I was here until you all asked me to leave, or it became clear that God was calling me to leave. That is still my commitment, but over the last few months, for the first time in more than twenty years I really began to think that God was calling me to move on.

I didn't have any sense that there was something else beckoning for me, but I began to think that this congregation needs something new in their pastor, something that I probably can't provide. As I have said, it is possible that the creative tension of two pastors working together could provide what is needed, but I was increasingly unsure, and I was beginning to imagine that perhaps I needed to get out of the way so that God could do new things among you and new things for me too.

One of the things that can happen with such thoughts is that they can become a runaway train. Once you start giving them serious attention, they begin to preoccupy you, and because the thoughts seem to be in your head all the time, they feel more and more important and so it is easy to mistake them for an increasingly clear call. But the word of God is not a blunt instrument. It is sharper than a surgeon's knife, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

So sometimes, it is important to get off the train, book in for surgery, and lay yourself open to God's word. So here's what I did. I contacted a number of people from outside this congregation, people whose wisdom and experience in spiritual discernment I trust and admire. And from those people, I was able to put together a little group of three who were willing and able to meet with me for a number of sessions to help me block out the static and lay myself open to God's word until clarity emerged.

We met three times over the space of a month, for at least two hours each time. I feel very privileged to have had three wonderfully gifted people, who have lives and ministries of their own, give up so much of their time to focus just on me and on what God might be trying to say to me. Part of their commitment at the outset was to avoid telling me what they thought. Instead, they would listen to me, and just ask open questions, questions that would push me to explore things more fully and perhaps from angles that I hadn't adequately considered.

I can truly say that they worked like skilled surgeons, that they were channels for the word of God, gently but determinedly opening me up and laying bare the thoughts and intentions of my heart.

The crucial turning point in our discernment process came towards the end of the second session. With wise questions they were pushing me to disentangle the questions of what God might have in mind for me and what God might have in mind for this congregation. They urged me to focus for a while at least on the question that I was actually more responsible for, the question of what God wanted for me. As I did that, it was clear that God is calling me to some significant internal changes.

Looking back over my life, I can see that there have been few major turning points where God has sliced through my defences and something significant has shifted in who I am and how I operate. It became clear that I am arriving at another one of those points. I have no idea what that is going to mean yet. I have only the vaguest sense of what it might look like. But I have a clearer sense of what it will take for me to open myself to that new journey and to go where God wants me to go.

And as that became clear, one of my three trusted guides asked a very simple question, "Where would be the best place to do that? Could you do it best at SYCBaps, or somewhere else?" To my surprise, it was the easiest question of all to answer. It was suddenly very obvious to me that being here among you would be the best place to undertake this journey, whatever it turns out to be. It was as though the surgeon's knife had reached its target at that point, and the conversation shifted. The truth was laid bare and everything was so much clearer from there on.

As one of my guides said (possibly in breach of the rule about sticking to questions!), it was clear that God was not calling me to stay here at SYCBaps and just continue unchanged,

being the same as I am now. The call is to something new, but not somewhere new. I still have little or no idea what that will mean, and one of the things that emerged later was that it may be necessary for me to do a long retreat somewhere, like a forty day retreat or something, to enable the word of God to clear my head and my heart and enable the new call to emerge in more clarity. And it is probably true that I need to be as open as possible to all possibilities in that, including the possibility that I am supposed to move on after all, but at present it seems pretty clear that that is not what's emerging.

I sensed God confirming that to me the following Sunday. For a few months, everything I did here had had a question hanging over it, "Is this the last time?" Is this my last church camp, etc? But that Sunday, just a couple of weeks back, as we stood in the circle at the Eucharist and raised our glasses, I looked around the circle and thought, "Yes! These are my people. This is where I belong." And I thank you all for that. You are a precious gift.

So that's my story. It seems that most of it is yet to be written, so watch this space.

Let me finish up by trying to draw a conclusion or two of relevance to our scripture reading. Communication is not an exact science. You all know how often misunderstandings occur, even between two people who speak the same language and know each other well. The word of God may well be sharper than a two-edged sword or a surgeon's knife, but if you thrash around and struggle against the surgeon's knife, it doesn't go well. Mistakes are easily made. Only perfect people can reliably hear right what God is saying every time, and even the last one of those, Jesus, found himself wanting to resist sometimes; "Father, if it be possible, take this cup away without making me drink it."

So for God's sake, don't think that you should be able to do the work of discerning what God is saying accurately all by yourself. Jesus has called us to follow him into a life that is lived in community with one another, and so the community of disciples around you is a crucial resource that you can and should turn to when needing clarity on what God is calling you to. God's word is able to lay us open, but it almost never comes to us in a vacuum. God's word comes to us embodied in the words of scripture, in the person of Jesus, and in the body of Christ, our sisters and brothers gathered around us prayerfully to safeguard us and help us walk in the ways of truth and openness.

That kind of support from others is a normal part of how God speaks to us and guides us. I can testify to it from my own recent story, and I can't recommend it highly enough. May God's word lay us all open and reconstruct us for the life of love and mercy that we walk together with one another in Jesus.