

IN JESUS PRAY WE NAME
Psalm 119:105-112
(sermon idea from “Go Help Me Sod,”
Homiletics, July/August 2005)

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The late Jim Moss used to make his way through the pastor’s study on Sunday morning back to where the deacons (who are passing the plate) meet for a word of prayer before the early worship service. He came by to fill in if we needed him, and it was much appreciated. But there is one thing that he did that probably wasn’t so appreciated. More than once he came up to the deacon whose name is listed to pray on that given morning (on live television) and said, “Whatever you do, when you close your prayer don’t say, ‘In Jesus pray we name.’”

Well, the seed is planted. The pin is pulled. When the deacon goes to say the morning prayer at the offertory, it is already in his mind. “In Jesus pray we name.” Even sounds right to me – I heard Jim Moss say it so much. Some Sunday I’m going to close a prayer with “In Jesus pray we name.”

It’s easy to get our tongues twisted, our words confused, and cause great embarrassment to ourselves. Communication is one of the most difficult endeavors that human beings ever engage in. Just one slip, just one change of a letter – and “listen here” becomes “hiss and leer.”

Yes, communication is difficult.

1. There is what I say.
2. There is what you heard.
3. There is what I think you heard.
4. There is what you think I think you heard.

Humorist Bob Orben tells how his son came home from college for the holidays. He asked his son, “How are things going?”

“Good.”

Then he asked him, “How’s the food?”

“Good.”

“And the dormitory?”

“Good.”

“They’ve always had a strong football team, son,” Bob continued, trying to strike up some meaningful conversation. “How do you think they’ll do this year?”

“Good.”

“How are your studies going?”

“Good.”

“Have you decided on a major yet?” knowing that this one would yield a better answer.

“Oh, yes,” his son said.

“What is it?”

“Communications.”

(www.homileticsonline.com)

Communication is so important. First of all, I have to say it correctly. I have to say “listen here” instead of “hiss and leer.” And I have to say “In Jesus’ name we pray” instead of “In Jesus pray we name.” And even after I say it, you’ve got to hear and interpret it the right way.

Words can have multiple meanings.

A man asked his wife what she’d like for her birthday. “I’d love to be six again,” she replied.

On the morning of her birthday, he got her up bright and early and off they went to a local theme park. What a day! He put her on every ride in the park: the Death Slide, the Screaming Loop, the Wall of Fear – everything there was! Wow!

Five hours later she staggered out of the theme park, her head reeling and her stomach upside down. Right to McDonald’s they went, where her husband ordered a Big Mac for her along with extra fries and refreshing chocolate shake. Then it was off to a movie – the latest Star Wars epic, and hot dogs, popcorn, Pepsi Cola and M&Ms. What a fabulous adventure!

Finally she wobbled home with her husband and collapsed into bed.

He leaned over and lovingly asked, “Well, dear, what was it like being six again?”

One eye opened. “You idiot, I meant my dress size!” (from the Daily Dilly, www.homileticsonline.com)

The moral of this story is if a woman speaks and a man is there to hear her, he will get it wrong anyway.

It's just hard to communicate well.

"A pack of lies" can easily slip into "a lack of pies."

"It's pouring with rain" can sound like "it's roaring with pain."

And "save the whales" can turn into "wave the sails" in an instant.

And please don't ever say, "in Jesus pray we name."

But even when people speak the right words, we certainly don't always listen. **One man expressed concern about his wife to a friend. He sighed, "My wife is talking to herself a lot these days." The friend was hardly concerned. He said, "My wife has been talking to herself for years, but she doesn't realize it. She thinks I'm listening." (Positive Living, Sept/Oct 1995)**

I know that when I preach you don't always hear what I say. It happened on March 14, 2004. I preached a sermon from Acts 15 saying that Christ plus nothing equals salvation.

A man called our associate pastor and declared, "We're all up in arms in Borger because your pastor said that you must be circumcised to be saved." I said nothing of the sort. I was simply reading Acts 15:1 and quoting the Judaizers. The entirety of the rest of the sermon was spent dismantling their claim and declaring that Christ plus nothing equals salvation. But when he heard me read Acts 15:1, and I quote (and again I tell you I'm just quoting the Judaizers – it's the Bible, it's not me), "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved" – yes, I said that. I read it from Acts 15:1. It was a false assertion from the Judaizers which the Council in Jerusalem was also discounting and ended up concluding otherwise – that Christ plus nothing equals salvation. But when I did so, at least according to one man, they were all up in arms in Borger because I had said something that I, indeed, had never said. I don't really think all of our good friends in Borger were upset, only him.

Sometimes people hear what they want to hear. They will hear exactly the opposite of what you're trying to communicate. Communication is difficult.

A college football team was being routed. It's first-string and second-string quarterbacks both left the game with major injuries. The coach, with fear and trembling, sent in an unexperienced third-stringer who had never taken a snap. With the team deep inside its own territory, the coach instructed the third-string QB to call three simple running plays and then punt the ball, no matter what. He certainly didn't trust the young man to pass.

The first play, a slant to the right, gained 30 yards. The second play, a quarterback keeper to the left, gained 40. The third play, a run up the middle, pushed the team to the opponent's two-yard line. Then, according to the instructions, the quarterback dropped back and punted the ball out of the stadium.

The coach called the quarterback aside. "Son, just what in the world were you thinking out there?" he asked.

The quarterback replied, “I was thinking I had the dumbest coach in the whole world.” (story told by Charles E. Exley, Jr., chairman of NCR Corporation, as reported in the *Chicago Tribune*)

But he was just doing what the coach had asked him to do.

Communication with your spouse is important. Communication with your children is important. Communication in your professional life is important. So much of what you do – not just what I do – is based upon clear communication.

But there is no communication more important for your life than God’s communication to you.

I want to talk to you this morning about reading the Bible, but I want to talk to you really about listening to God. I want you to look at Bible reading in a new way. So often we read the Bible not to listen to God, but to find pat answers for our problems. We come to the Bible as if it’s the great reference book. And that’s certainly a legitimate way to read the Bible to some extent. If we’re having a problem with fear, we try to find a passage that will help us with our fear. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.” So, we find a passage that deals with our problem of fear.

But God’s word is so much more than a reference guide, divided by subject headings, to which we turn for our problems – though I’m afraid that’s the way most of us have been taught to read scripture. And, again, there is nothing wrong with this use of the Bible, per se, but there is another way to understand the reading of scripture, especially the listening to the reading of scripture, as engaging yourself with God. Not looking for a reference guide but, rather, deepening a relationship with Him. Bible reading is an encounter with God.

It’s a bit more risky because reading scripture this way you might really risk hearing God. Careful, or you might really listen to the voice of God.

Clifford Nash, a professor of communications at Stanford, reports that when BMW introduced their navigation system in Germany – don’t get mad at me, this is a Stanford professor, I’m just giving you an example, I didn’t make it up – they used a female voice. The voice was not accepted. Customers rejected it. What they discovered was that German drivers, at least, would not take driving directions from a woman. They had to change it to a male voice. (“Go Help Me Sod,” *Homiletics*, July 2005)

What voice are you ignoring?

When you read scripture, are you hearing the voice of God? Are you engaging in hearing the word of God?

We don’t want to use scripture that way. We want to hunt and peck and pick the passages that answer our petty problems. That’s what we want to do. That’s what we’ve been trained to do.

But to engage ourselves with the word of God and read, “Thus sayeth the Lord....,” to let it ring in our ears and shake our souls is a threatening way to read the word of God.

Barbara Brown Taylor said that to pick up the word of God and to read it through, not handpicking the passage, is like going on a blind date every time you pick up the Bible. You don’t know what you might encounter. You don’t know what might be said to you. You don’t know whether you’re going to be in a comfortable text or an uncomfortable text. You don’t know if you’re going to be prodding through parables or listening to the pounding of the prophets.

Oh, you may know generally by the title of the book, but you may discover a surprise. You may hear a new voice of God if you really read the word with open ears.

Regular Bible readers report that they are more satisfied with their lives than people who don’t read the Bible. Twelve hundred Americans were commissioned by an American Bible Society poll. It was also found that 92 percent of Americans own a Bible, but only 24 percent of them read the Bible daily.

Are you really listening to the word of God? Are you reading scripture – not cherry-picking passages, but engaging with God through some difficult texts, some hard words of God, some words that may cause you to have to change your lifestyle, to change your way of thinking, to rattle your world?

The Bible is not a “patch and fix kit.” It is a way of life. It is a relationship in which God wants to engage you – by the reading of His word.

The Bible is not really a book about obedient servants of God who make the world a better place. If you think that, you probably haven’t read it. In scripture we find people who lie and cheat and kill as often as they love and heal and give birth. On the whole, we find ourselves in the passages and the pages of the scripture. We find real people struggling with real issues, engaging themselves with God.

To really let God speak to us we have to stop mining for passages that support our prejudices. That’s what we do. Or try to find passages that make us feel safe about what we’ve already concluded. What we do then, as one scholar said, is that we collect up all the golden nuggets from scripture we can find to make our own golden heifers and say our prayers before we go to bed to the god we’ve created by cherry-picking the passages.

There is, of course, a way around this. To say, “You know, I’m going to read the gospel of John. I’m going to read the hard parts and the easy parts. When I like the story in the text, I’m going to read it. And when it makes me terribly uncomfortable, I’m going to read it, too. When it challenges the way I’m living my life and my core priorities, I’m going to read it twice. Maybe God is trying to say something to me.”

Take seriously the parts of the Bible that maybe even rebuke and exclude you – the parts that make you feel uncomfortable. We usually read scripture in regard to the lives of others. It’s so easy for me to read a passage and think about how it applies to you. But in doing so, I have not met with

God. Rather, I've consulted with somebody about your life rather than engage God in my own. When you read scripture as a whole, you may find a passage that you really like. But the next day you're moving on through that book to a passage that challenges you, that makes you squirm.

Making yourself comfortable when you read scripture is not the goal. The point is to embrace the word of God and to hear what God is trying to say to you. You should not shape scripture. Scripture should shape you.

When you read the Bible this way, God has a lot of freedom and you don't. You can't cherry-pick the passages for your problems or try to read the prophets just trying to make predictions. That's another popular way of reading scripture. See what the prophets are predicting, apply it to current events, and, well, you know...it's the same thing. It's trying to control God, trying to put Him in a box.

But how about reading the word of God and finding a God who defies your predictions and who eludes your controls, a God who is an unfathomable mystery as you engage Him. And you find out you're not really in control, but He is.

It's a scary way to read the Bible, and not many of you will do it because it's much too unpredictable. To read it this way, you've got to be willing to let God's word say what it says, whether you like it or not. I most often know I've truly understood a passage when I don't like what it says. I've probably struck the truth then. And there is no way, when you read the Bible this way, around the hard passages. It's the most honest, open way to read the word of God, rather than rewriting the word of God through your own slanted interpretations.

The world is full of so many messengers and messages these days. **We have to pick our way through a discordant, infinite-channeled auditory landscape. Like a radio stuck on permanent scan, the culture lashes us with skittering bits and bytes, each dragging its piece of historical or emotional context: a commercial overheard in traffic, a falsely urgent weather report, a burst of canned laughter, half a refrain. The cell phone interrupts lectures, sermons, second acts, and funerals. Everywhere a new song begins before the last one ends, as though to guard us against even the potential of silence. Each place we turn, a new world – synthetic, fragmented, often as not jacked into the increasingly complex grid that makes up the global communications network – encroaches on the old world of direct experience, of authentic, unadorned events with their particular, unadorned sounds.** (Mark Slouka, *Listening for Silence*, *Harper's Magazine*, April 1999, www.homileticsonline.com)

Will you stop all the noise and listen to the voice of God by reading scripture?

The Psalmist says, "God, your word is a lamp to my feet. It lights my path. I'm going to keep what I discover in your word. And even though when I keep your word my very life is at risk (v. 109), I am not going to turn away from what I know you're trying to say to me God (v. 110), for your testimonies are a great heritage forever. And when I connect with you and hear what you say (v. 111), there is rejoicing in my heart. I am going to do what you ask me to do, O God (v. 112) to the very end."

When is the last time you read God's word? When is the last time you listened, searched for the voice of your creator through the revelation He has kept for you?

Dare you listen to the reading of God's word?

Dare you engage a holy God with obedience to His word?

God spoke to the void saying, "Let there be light," and the cosmos was created.

God spoke to Noah, and a boat was built – a boat that saved.

God spoke to Abraham, and a people were chosen.

God spoke to Isaiah, and the temple shook.

God spoke/whispered to Samuel, and a king was chosen – David.

God spoke/thundered to Paul, and an apostle was fashioned.

God spoke to Lazarus, and he was raised from the dead.

God spoke to the church, and missions were made our passion.

God spoke to you, and

God spoke to First Baptist Church Amarillo, and