

July 31, 2011  
The National Presbyterian Church

## Faith Comes from What is Heard

Romans 10:8-17

Rev. Patrick Willson

“Can you hear me now?” “Can you hear me now?” Earlier this year Verizon concluded its series of “Can you hear me now?” commercials, but for nine years and for 20 to 40 commercials each year actor Paul Marcarelli asked the crucial question: “Can you hear me now?” Using a cell phone, it is important to be heard: “Can you hear me now?”

When the people of God gather in worship hearing is particularly crucial: “Can you hear me now?” Also crucial are other questions like “What are we listening for?” and “Who do we expect to hear?”

A couple of weeks ago I was bold to claim that we gather here in hope of hearing foolishness: the foolishness of God which is wiser than human wisdom and the foolishness of the cross that is nothing less than the power of God (I Cor 1:18-25). That is the **what** we hope to hear. The question this morning is: “**Who** do we expect to hear?”

At Williamsburg Presbyterian Church about every six months we received a phone call from someone insisting that we

should put the name of the preacher in the church newsletter and post that on the website. They wanted to know, “Who’s preaching Sunday?” I steadfastly refused to do that: we were not in the business of peddling preachers. That would put us back in the Corinthians’ dilemma of “I belong to Paul,” “I belong to Apollos,” “I belong to Cephas” (I Cor 1: 12). Who’s your favorite preacher? We’re getting quite a lineup here to choose from.

Some of our dearest friends at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church are a couple were formerly members of The National Presbyterian Church. They can remember when the new preacher coming to The National Presbyterian Church was a young fellow from California by the name of Edward Elson, following the retiring Albert Joseph McCartney. For more than sixty five years our friends have heard them all, all the preachers at The National Presbyterian Church. Contemplating so many years of worship, so many years of discipleship, doesn’t the question “Who’s your favorite preacher?” seem a little cheap, a bit tawdry?

**Who** do you expect to hear when you come to worship?

Our expectations are shaped by the consumer culture we live in. Coming into worship we recognize the situation immediately. The audience sits in the pews, the performers at the front. People expect to be entertained. Isn’t that what happens at Kennedy Center and Wolf Trap? We have expectations of the performance; we have expectations of the stars.

When Sir Rudolf Bing was General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera one night the world renowned soprano scheduled to sing could not go on and some patrons of the Met came to him demanding a refund on their tickets. Sir Rudolf bluntly informed them “We do not sell stars, we perform opera.”

We come here to worship. We come for the Word of God.

“Well, I certainly see no reason to come to worship unless Dr. Goldenmouth is preaching!” You think I’m kidding about that name? John Chrysostom — John Goldenmouth — was

the great preacher of Antioch in the fourth century.<sup>i</sup> A brilliant speaker, he was given that name by those who listened to him. Nothing in the record of John Chrysostom's humble life suggests that name would have been pleased him. John was about something larger, something deeper.

**Who** do you expect to hear when you come to worship?

The Scriptures and our Reformed tradition provide consistent answers to that question, but the answers collide with the expectations our consumer culture gives us. What Scripture and the Reformed tradition tell us to expect is so grand and so glorious that we are embarrassed to claim it.

In this morning's lesson from the Epistle to the Romans Paul tells us "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ." We are familiar with conventional understanding: faith comes from hearing about what God has done in Jesus Christ. We receive this information and respond in faith.

That is not, however, what Paul says. The NRSV translates, "what is heard comes through the word of Christ," and we may think that is the "the word **about** Christ." What Paul is saying is something much more challenging. Joseph Fitzmyer, our neighbor at Catholic University, translates literally as, "through the utterance of Christ," and he goes on to explain, "Thus Christ would be speaking his message through the mouths of his authorized heralds."<sup>ii</sup>

Christ may be understood not only the content of our preaching but also and first of all the initiator and speaker of the proclamation. Before Christ is preached Christ is the preacher.

We see this also as Paul preaches in Acts and announces that "by being the first to rise from the dead he [Christ] would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles" (Acts 26:23). Paul identifies Christ as the preacher of resurrection. When we gather here we do not merely receive information about the resurrection of Jesus, we hear the risen Christ preaching. Another scholar translates that what we hear comes, "in the power of the word of Christ."<sup>iii</sup>

This is how the church is formed: Christ calls people. Once he called disciples along the shore of the Sea of Galilee; now he calls disciples in the worship of his Church—but it is the same voice, the same calling, the same Christ. Faith comes in hearing this call.

John Webster of the University of Aberdeen forcefully reminds us that the church is “not first and foremost a speaking but a hearing community”<sup>iv</sup>—“the church speaks, because it has been spoken to.”<sup>v</sup>

Webster explains:

The definitive act of the church is faithful hearing of the gospel of salvation announced by the risen Christ in the Spirit’s power through the service of Holy Scripture. As the *creatura verbi divini*, the creature of the divine Word, the church is the hearing church...

The church exists in the space which is made by the Word.... The church exists and continues because God is communicatively present; it is brought into being and carried by the Word.<sup>vi</sup>

We quite rationally resist this notion because it is so counterintuitive. What we can see with our eyes explains everything quite satisfactorily: a person stands at the front of the room and addresses people seated in rows. It could be presidential press conference, a coach challenging the players before a game, a teacher lecturing a class, but we recognize the transaction, we have seen this before. Paul insists, however, that what we can see is incomplete and misleading. What is really happening is not available to our eyes but can only be heard. Seeing is not believing: “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” There is more going on here than we can see.

The Scriptures understand that we do not want to hear. Moses hears God speaking from the burning bush and politely suggests God find someone else; Jeremiah is told to quit preaching and when he won’t he is thrown down a well; Jesus we crucified. We do not want to hear because to hear is to be

addressed and come to know that we are not alone and that there is One we are summoned to answer; hearing calls into question our negotiations and tawdry alliances with a society that believes everything has a price tag; to hear a voice calling is to know that my life is not my own, and I so much wanted it to be my own, and in silence I can pretend it is my own, but when a voice calls me by name, I know that is not so. "Remember," C. S. Lewis said, "I had always wanted, above all things, not to be 'interfered with.'" <sup>vii</sup> "Faith comes from what is heard."

Psychotherapy speaks of resistance: it is that phenomenon in which a person comes in for treatment and pays a therapist more than \$200 an hour and refuses to listen to the very things that would bring healing and wholeness.

This is such a grand gothic building. It only lacks one thing: gargoyles. No matter: I brought my own with me. He's a reproduction of a gargoyle on the National Cathedral and he sits on a shelf over my desk glowering down at me while I write sermons. He has bat wings, a face like a pit bull, his tongue sticks out and his fingers are tightly stuck in his ears. This gargoyle is titled "Evil Refusing to Hear the Word of God." It is the very nature of evil to refuse to hear the Word of God that would so happily bless us.

The Word of God: that is what is at stake. That is what we expect to hear, or rather: that is **who** we expect to hear: God. God's Word is Jesus Christ; God's Word comes to us through Jesus Christ. "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ."

The churches of the Reformation understood that the Word of God comes through the preaching of the Word. The Second Helvetic Confession, written in 1561, says as boldly as possible:

*THE PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WORD OF GOD. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be*

*invented nor is to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good.*

God chooses to speak to God's people through the agency of human words and human preaching.

You don't have to believe me; you don't have to believe the Reformed tradition. On Youth Sunday this year Miss Della Romano stood in front of you and told you how while listening to a sermon I preached during Lent on Psalm 121 she had heard God calling her to give up a baseball scholarship at one college and go instead to the University of North Carolina. Listening in the pew I was stunned. I could only imagine how pleased her parents might be at the effects of my preaching. I was pretty sure the psalmist had not said anything about either baseball or the University of North Carolina, but knowing how many lawyers worship her at The National Presbyterian Church, I checked my sermon manuscript. Sure enough: not a word about baseball or North Carolina.

What happened? We can come up with a thin, cynical psychological explanation that a teenage girl, faced with the enormous pressures of college choices, heard in the sermon permission to do what she wanted to do and chose to interpret that as God's will. Or we can pay attention to what we actually **heard**: a poised, confident young woman stood in this pulpit and told us that Christ spoke to her in the sermon assuring her that God would be her Keeper in all her coming and going her whole life long.

The Scriptures assure us such speaking is precisely what happens in preaching and the Reformed Tradition invites us to hear that Word and trust it.

"What is heard comes through the word of Christ."

Martin Luther wrote: *For if you ask a Christian what the work is by which he becomes worthy of the name "Christian," he will be able to give absolutely no other answer than that it is the hearing of the Word*

*of God, that is, faith. Therefore the ears alone are the organs of a Christian....*<sup>viii</sup>

**Who** do you expect to hear when you come to worship?

Expect nothing less than the Word of Christ spoken in the preaching of the Word. I have never preached on this text before and I have never preached on this theological claim before because it is such an outrageous statement and because it can so easily be misunderstood as a self-advertisement for a preacher and preachers need no magnification of their self-importance. As I near the conclusion of my preaching ministry at The National Presbyterian Church with your new pastor soon to occupy this pulpit it seemed reasonable and indeed, charitable, to let you know what is really going on in the preaching of the Word.

**Who** do you expect to hear when you come to worship?

So many people have wondered in my hearing if National expects too much of its pastors. I don't know, but I suspect that like most congregations it does not expect enough of its hearing on Sunday mornings. Expect the Word of God! Expect nothing less than the Word of Christ!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught his students at little Finkenwalde seminary, "the proclaimed word is the incarnate Christ himself," and told them that in preaching, "It is Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word."<sup>ix</sup>

Christ walks among as the Word is preached. We have difficulty believing it because we cannot see it, but something is going on here more wonderful than anything we can see: "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ."

Christ walks among us. Can you hear him now?

*Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.*

**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
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- <sup>i</sup> Lest anyone think I am dealing in utter trivia, one of our elders informs me that John Chrysostom is memorialized in a stained glass window at the National Cathedral a few blocks away.
- <sup>ii</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S. J., *Romans*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 598.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 293.
- <sup>iv</sup> John Webster, “The Visible Attests the Invisible,” in Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, editors, *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 111.
- <sup>v</sup> Webster, “The Visible Attests the Invisible,” p. 109.
- <sup>vi</sup> John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 44.
- <sup>vii</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Years* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955), p. 208.
- <sup>viii</sup> Quoted in Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2008), p. 47.
- <sup>ix</sup> Quoted in Frits de Lange, *Waiting for the Word: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Speaking about God*, trans. by Martin N. Walton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 92.