



Standing on the Promises

TEXT
Nehemiah 8:1–8
Isaiah 40:1–8

January 31, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I got a call from my daughter this week — not a text or Facebook message, but a real call. She was having car trouble. That’s the call I get. I know nothing about cars, but she doesn’t know that. So she calls, and I am grateful. She will also call when she has questions about how you use a staple gun or something. Now she will occasionally call with a question about a sermon she is working on.

But sometimes, and these are the best times, she just calls to talk. All those calls are carried by love, but the calls just to say “hi” ... that’s when love is the clearest.

This is God’s house and our home. One of the gifts of this room is the pulpit. When the preacher stands up here, it helps us see each other. That helps the communication. But that’s not why a sanctuary has a pulpit. We need a pulpit because God wants to talk to us.

The pulpit reminds us of one of the boldest claims of our faith. The bold claim is not just that God exists, but that God would choose to speak to us. Let me make sure I’m not causing confusion. I have never experienced God speaking to me in the same fashion that we speak

to each other. I don’t hear God’s voice. My prayers are often just silent. When I offer testimony that God speaks, my own experience is that the Creator’s voice is always mixed up with the voices of creation, of the creature ... of people. That does not make it less God’s word, but it does mean humility is an important posture when we are claiming to know what God has said.

But more importantly, God chooses to speak not simply to inform us, not simply to instruct us, but rather God speaks because God wants to talk to us. We need a pulpit because love is spoken.

The pulpit has a long history. We read this story from Nehemiah. This story begins with the craving of the people. *Read to us the scriptures. Read to us from the book of Moses. Read to us words — words that can soar to the heavens and return to us as holy words.* And Ezra, the scribe, took the Torah and read from morning to midday. As he read, there were those who interpreted the reading. One scholar says this is when the “sermon” is born.¹ The scripture was read and interpreted that the people might have understanding. And when they understood the words read to them, they wept, and they

laughed, and they feasted — for they had heard a word that stands forever. They had heard a promise they could stand on; or better yet, a promise they could stand under.

There’s one interesting detail — a detail that no doubt could have been left out, and we wouldn’t have missed it. But it says that Ezra stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. It was a pulpit. I’m not saying that’s what they called it; I’m saying we would know it now as a pulpit.

Pulpits come in all shapes and sizes. In our day, for some at least, pulpits are going out of style. Some see them as creating a barrier between the speaker and the hearer, and that’s never good. The whole purpose of preaching is that the ancient word might be understood for us in this very moment. We preach that these ancient words might become holy words for us, promises that we stand on and promises we stand under.

But the pulpit needs some explanation today. The whole enterprise of preaching may need some explanation.

She said to me, “I just don’t want it to be ‘preachy.’” We were meeting to discuss the memorial service for her father. He had

been a part of this church family for decades. She hadn't been here since the days of Dr. Bob and didn't know me from Adam's house cat, as they say. And she was a little anxious about me speaking at her father's service. I told her that her father and I were not strangers; indeed, we were friends. And she said, "That's good, but I just don't want it to be preachy." It's an interesting thing to say to a preacher. But I get it.

There is too much judgment today.

There is too much condemnation today.

There is too much speech that only tears down and fails to build up.

There is too much talk that implies the speaker knows everything; those who don't agree know nothing.

We have been hearing a lot of that kind of talk lately. And too much of that talk is associated with church, with pulpits. That's why I say the pulpit needs some interpretation today.

She said, "I just don't want it to be too preachy. Do you understand?"

I said, "Yes, I do. I really do."

I'll tell you something about a pulpit. I don't know if you have ever stood in one, but it's humbling. It is impossible to stand in a pulpit without remembering the long line of preachers who have preached before you. I know that technically this pulpit is only six weeks old, but pulpits are connected. It isn't the platform that matters; it is the function.

This pulpit is connected back through the ages, all the way to Ezra and that wooden platform

made for the purpose. So to stand in one makes you think of all those who have gone before. Of course many of you are thinking of Dr. Bob. I bet if you took a moment, you might remember a sermon he preached that you still hold on to — a sermon that gave you a promise you could stand on, or stand under. There was Dr. Bohl. Many of you have told me of his gift to preach as if he were speaking just to you.

There are countless others who have gone before, and even more who will come.

My point is that the pulpit reminds us that the speaker of the moment is only a single note in a symphony that reaches through the ages. A single word in a Gospel narrative that begins thousands of years ago and will continue until this planet has taken her last breath. It's humbling. This is no doubt why Isaiah said, "The grass withers, and the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever." The preacher is the withering grass — the fading flower.

The word of our God is always bigger than any preacher.

But a pulpit is a bit like a judge's bench. (I hesitate to use this analogy because the pulpit has nothing to do with deciding guilt or innocence. The pulpit has nothing to do with judging.) But stick with me; this is what I mean. When justice is spoken from the bench, it is always spoken by a particular judge. It is spoken with that judge's chosen vocabulary and given accent. That judge will have experience and perspective that colors how justice is spoken there.

But justice is always bigger than any particular judge. The judge is speaking something bigger than herself, always. But here's the important thing. That big idea of justice is never spoken in abstract. We only hear it through the voice of a particular judge. Am I making sense here?

The word preached from the pulpit is Gospel. Gospel is bigger than any preacher. The preacher is grass, but the word stands forever. But that big gospel word is never spoken apart from a particular preacher with a spiritual journey and experience and accent.

What I am saying is that in a pulpit, we hear ordinary, human words that at their best are fading flowers. But at times those human words are honest enough that the Spirit of God can whisper through them, and we hear a word that stands forever; a promise we can stand on; a promise we can stand under.

So how does a word that is like the withering grass become a word that stands forever? That's where the pulpit and the pew work together. It is up to the Spirit for our ordinary, human words to become holy and speak a word that will stand forever. But it also requires something of you. You are not spectators in worship. You bring your hearts and your minds, and you open them to the word that God might speak to you.

And you will know when it is holy. You will know when it happens. You will know when these ordinary words become God's word for you: because the word will change you.

Years ago I read *A Year of Living Biblically*, by A. J. Jacobs. Jacobs is not a man of faith, but he admits to a spiritual hunger. He is a writer, and as a project, he commits himself for one year to follow the Bible as literally as possible. He finds Leviticus 19:27, which makes it clear he can no longer shave his beard. As a result, he is mistaken for Lincoln or even ZZ Top.

Reading the Bible changes his wardrobe. He first consults a shatnez to determine if his clothing is made from two different fibers (forbidden in Leviticus 19:19). And then, after reading Ecclesiastes 9:8, he simply wears all white.

Now I must say Jacobs does not approach scripture in the same fashion that I do. He believes that these writings are to be lived literally. I am an advocate of reading the scriptures seriously, but not literally. These are not the same, and they should not be confused.

Nevertheless, I was intrigued by Jacob's journey to live the Bible. Jacobs finds himself changing. He begins to value things he had not valued, to long for things he had previously ignored. He reads "Keep your tongue from evil" (Psalm 34:13) and discovers "that refraining from speaking negative thoughts results in having fewer negative thoughts."²

"A lot of my friends," he writes, "expect me to speak like a walking King James Bible. They want me ... to spout words like *thou* and *woe unto* and *whosoever shall*. ... I get a lot of emails that start 'Give ear, O Jacobs,'

and phone calls that begin, 'Verily, I ask thee, would you like to meet us for pizza?' ... I play along, 'Yea, I shall rejoice in a feast of pizza.'"

But then he says, "Speaking biblically requires a far more radical change than raising my diction a few notches. It requires a total switch in the content of my conversation; no lying, no complaining, no gossip."³

There is a pulpit in this room because I think we are like those people of long ago. We may not have thought of it in those terms; but like them, we, too, crave the scripture. We long for a word that will stand forever.

Like them, we plead: Bring us a word we can trust.

Bring us a word that will stand forever.

Bring us a word that will light our path.

Bring us a word that will push back the darkness.

Bring us a word that will heal our brokenness, lift our burdens and raise the dead.

Sometimes in our ordinary, human, withering, fading testimony, the whisper of God's promise ... a promise you can bet your life on ... it can be heard — not because we need to learn something; not because we need to hear something; not only because of our need, whatever it is, but because God wants to talk. Love often does.

¹James D. Newsome, et al., **Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary, Based on the NRSV: Year C** (1994), p. 114

²A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically* (2007), p. 157

³*Ibid.*, p. 99

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.