

The Word is Very Near You

A Children's Talk by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

Bryn Athyn Church Community Worship Service - October 29, 2023

- We're talking today about the Word.
 - Can you see a copy of the Word anywhere?
 - It's right at the front so that we can all see it and look to the Lord in His Word together.

- We are very lucky to have lots of copies of the Word available to us.
 - There's the one on the altar but there are also lots in the pews.
 - How many of you have your own copy of the Word?

- There have been a number of times in history when the Word was rare (e.g. 1 Samuel 3:1), when people couldn't easily read or hear the Word of God.
- The Lord would raise up prophets and leaders to tell people what He wanted them to know.
- One of those leaders was Moses.
 - He led the children of Israel for a long time and they would ask him to tell them what the Lord said about this thing or that thing (Exodus 18:15,16; 20:19).
 - One time Moses went away from them for a long time.
 - He had led the people out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness to a mountain called Mt. Sinai.
 - It was a holy mountain and the Lord came down on the mountain with clouds, fire, and lightning.
 - And then Moses, the people's leader, went up the mountain – he walked into the cloud that covered the mountain and then they couldn't see him.
 - A day passed.
 - A week passed.
 - 5 weeks passed and Moses still hadn't come back down.
 - The people started to worry that he was never coming back.
- But after 40 days and 40 nights Moses came back and he was carrying the tablets of stone with the 10 Commandments written on them.

- Then, many years later, Moses was going to go away again.
 - This time he was a very old man and it was his time to die.
 - How were the people going to know what the Word of God was without Moses?
 - At the end of his life he gave lots of speeches in which he reminded the people of all the things they needed to know and he also wrote it all down so that they could read it and we can even read it today.

- In one of those speeches Moses said something very important and I want you to do some hand motions with me to help you understand what he's saying.
- Moses said,
 - Deuteronomy 30:11-14
 - ¹¹ "For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. ¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" ¹³ Nor is it across the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" ¹⁴ But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.
 - Even without Moses the people could still remember the Lord's commandments and obey them.
- The Word of God can sometimes feel far from us and hard to understand but I want to show you something about the Word that feels far from you.
 - What's in the Word on the altar is the same as what's in your copy of the Word at home or at school.
- Can you tell me any of the stories you know from the Lord's Word?
 - See the Lord's Word is already in your mouth and in your heart!
 - That's why we come to church, and learn recitations, and talk about stories from the Lord's Word at school and at home, is so that the Word of God can be in our mouths and in our hearts.
- The Word is not meant to just be a book that sits on a shelf or on an altar.
 - When you see it up on the altar in church, or in your classroom, or on a shelf, you can remember that the whole point is so that you can know the Word of God and live according to it.
 - "The word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it."
- *Amen.*

Prayer

- Lord, thank You for giving us Your Word. Please help us to remember to treasure it, to learn what you teach, and work hard to do what you tell us to do. *Amen.*

The Word of God

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Introduction

- Sometimes the point of coming to church is not to learn something new: sometimes it's just to be reminded of things that you already know but maybe had kind of forgotten about.
- Today, in our efforts to "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy," we're going to be reminding ourselves about how powerful the Word of God is and how lucky we are to have it in our lives and community.

The Power of the Word of God

- You might be wondering why I'm using the phrase "the Word of God."
 - You might be more used to phrases like "the Word of the Lord" or just "The Word" or "The Bible."
- The phrase "the Word of God" reminds us that these books that we are lucky enough to have on our shelves miraculously contain the words of God, the Creator of the Universe (see *True Christianity* 224).
- These stories and teachings that we read are from the same God who said, "Let there be light," and there was light (Genesis 1:3).
- Psalm 33 puts it this way:
 - Psalm 33:6,9
 - 6 By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.
 -
 - 9 For He spoke, and it was done;
He commanded, and it stood fast.
- This means that there is real power in the Word of God.
 - We can't see that in this natural world but it's very obvious in the spiritual world.
 - Emanuel Swedenborg, whom the Lord allowed to see into the spiritual world, wrote down what he saw in the books of the teachings of the New Church.
 - As a result, we get to hear about just how powerful the Word of God is.

- Here are a few excerpts from the book *True Christianity*, from the chapter on the Word:

- *True Christianity* 209

- In the physical world, no amazing things happen because of the Word, since its spiritual meaning does not appear here and the true nature of that spiritual meaning is not being accepted at any deep level within us. In the spiritual world, however, amazing things do happen because of the Word, since all who are there are spiritual, and spiritual things affect spiritual people the way physical things affect physical people.

In the sanctuaries of church buildings in the spiritual world, the Word itself shines like a giant star before the eyes of the angels. Sometimes it shines like the sun.

Each and every truth in the Word shines. This has been made clear to me by the fact that when anyone writes a verse from the Word on a piece of paper and throws it up in the air, the piece of paper generates a glowing form that takes the shape of the cut paper.

Many other amazing things happen with the Word in the spiritual world. They relate to the power of truth there, which is so immense that if I described it, it would exceed belief. The Word has so much power that it overturns mountains and hills there, moves them far away, throws them into the sea, and more. Briefly put, the power of the Lord that comes through the Word is infinite.

- The Word of God has the infinite power of God in it.

How Do We Access the Power of the Word?

- Sometimes when we read passages like this about how things work in the spiritual world we might feel like, "That's great for people in the spiritual world but what about for those of us who are still here in the physical world?"

- We won't have the same experiences of seeing the reality of the Word's power with our physical eyes but, of course, we are not just in the physical world: we are spiritual beings, living even now in the spiritual world, and so we can experience the power of the Word of God in our spiritual lives.

- The way we access the spiritual power of the Word of God is somewhat counter-intuitive.

- One of the amazing things that was revealed to the world through the publication of the teachings of the New Church is that there is a deeper meaning or internal sense in the Word of God.

- There's a section in the chapter on the Word in *True Christianity* that is titled "The Word Has a Spiritual Meaning That Has Not Been Known until Now" (193-209).

- As Jesus said, "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63).

- This is a crucial thing to know about the nature of the Word of God.

- It changes how we understand every single verse of the Old and New Testaments.

- As a result, people who read the teachings of the New Church, often give a lot of focus to trying to understand the spiritual meaning or internal sense of the Word.

- But, in pursuit of that goal, we might sometimes forget about and under-prioritize the power and role of the *literal* sense of the Word

- The very next section in *True Christianity*, after the one about the Word having a spiritual meaning, is titled "The Word's Literal Meaning Is the Foundation, the Container, and the Structural Support for Its Spiritual and Heavenly Meanings" (210-213).
- And the section after that is titled, "In the Literal Meaning of the Word, Divine Truth Exists in Its Completeness, Holiness, and Power" (214-224).
 - One passage even goes as far as to say, "The heavenly and spiritual meanings are not the Word without the earthly meaning. They are like spirit and life without a body. ... [T]hey are also like a palace without a foundation" (*True Christianity* 214:2).
- So, if we want to experience the power of the Word of God in our lives, we need to look for it in the Word's literal meaning.
 - Yes, we should be looking for the spirit that is contained in those words but we should be looking in the pages of the literal sense.

The Lord's Transfiguration

- *True Christianity* explains and illustrates these ideas about the importance and power of the literal sense of the Word using the story of the Lord's transfiguration.
- Let's read that story and then read the explanation of it:
 - Matthew 17:1-8 (NKJV)
 - ¹ Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; ² and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. ³ And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. ⁴ Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."
 - ⁵ While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" ⁶ And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid." ⁸ When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

- This is what Swedenborg wrote about this story:
- *True Christianity* 222
 - I have been taught that in this instance the Lord represented the Word. His face shining like the sun represented the divine goodness of His divine love. The clothes that became like the light represented the divine truth of His divine wisdom. Moses represented the Word that was written through him, and the historical Word in general. Elijah represented the whole prophetic Word. The shining cloud that covered the disciples represented the Word in its literal meaning. That is why a voice was heard coming from the cloud saying, "This is my beloved Son. Hear him."
 - Swedenborg explains all of these details and then says this: "All communications and answers from heaven come solely through outermost things like those in the Word's literal meaning."
 - Just as the voice that spoke to the disciples came out of the bright cloud that overshadowed them, the way the Lord will communicate to us is through the clouds of the literal sense of His Word.
- If we want to hear from Him, we need to spend time in those clouds.

We Need the Power of the Literal Sense in Temptations

- We also need the literal sense of the Word when we are in temptations and fighting against hell.
- Listen to this passage from the book *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture*:
 - One must fight against the hells by means of truths from the Word's literal sense. It is also by means of the truths a person has that the Lord has the power to save them. For a person is reformed and regenerated by means of truths drawn from the Word's literal sense, and they are then released from hell and introduced into heaven (49).
- The Lord Himself used verses from the Old Testament when He was tempted by the devil in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11).
 - The Lord responded to everything that the devil threw at Him by saying, "It is written..." and then quoting something from the Word of God.

Examples

- Let's talk about a few examples of how we might use the power of the Word of God in the literal sense.

When Feeling Anxious

- Let's imagine that you're feeling stressed or anxious and you find yourself getting into that mode where everything other people do is wrong and annoying and you just need to control all of them and everything and then everything will be fine if they'll just do what they're told!
 - One of the hardest parts is recognizing that you're in this state and that it's not just other people that are the problem.
- Let's say you realize that you've got some work to do and you ask the Lord to help you think of some teachings from the Word to help you.
 - You might think of the Lord in the sinking boat during the storm, rebuking the wind and saying to the sea, "Peace, be still!" (Mark 4:39).
 - You might think of the Lord saying that the very hairs of your head are all numbered (Matthew 10:30)
 - Or maybe part of your stress is about something you're doing going really badly and you find comfort in remembering that, if that happens, the Lord will help you keep going, as it says in Psalm 37:23-24
 - ²³ The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD,
And He delights in his way.
 - ²⁴ Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down;
For the LORD upholds him with His hand.

When Someone You Love Might Die

- Another time you might turn the Lord in His Word is when you are confronting mortality.
 - Maybe someone you love has just received a scary diagnosis or they're just getting old and you know that their remaining time on this earth is growing short.
 - Or maybe you're watching your perfectly healthy child play and you suddenly are hit by the possibility of them being harmed.
- In those times we can pray to the Lord for support from His Word.
 - Maybe we will think of the Lord saying, "it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (Matthew 18:14).
 - Or of the Lord saying, "In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2).
 - Or maybe we are reminded of the shortness of life in this world compared with eternal life by thinking of a passage like Isaiah 40:
 - ⁷ Surely the people are grass.
 - ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.
 - Or maybe you would be comforted by the Lord's words in Jeremiah where He says, "Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love...." (Jeremiah 31:3).

Your Faith Can Grow Like Strands in a Cable

- Maybe you're feeling like you wouldn't be able to think of verses from the Word like that.
 - Maybe you'd pray to the Lord and nothing would come to mind.
 - What then?

- Two thoughts:
 - 1st - This is part of the value of being in a church community. There are other people who you can talk to.
 - There is such a wealth of knowledge of the Lord's Word in this room and in this church community.
 - You can benefit from it if you ask.
 - You can ask people to help you think of relevant teachings and stories from His Word.
 - And you can be a person to help someone else think of teachings when they're struggling.
 - We can be like angel messengers for each other.
 - Psalm 91 says,
 - 11 For He shall give His angels charge over you,
To keep you in all your ways.
 - 12 In their hands they shall bear you up,
Lest you dash your foot against a stone.

 - We can be those angels for each other, bearing each other up.

- 2nd thought: this is an area in which you can make progress.
 - You can learn more stories and passages from the Word of God.
 - There's a passage from the chapter on faith in *True Christianity* that says that each truth we learn is like a strand in a cable and as we learn more and more truths it's like the cable gets more and more strands in it and so stronger and stronger.

- *True Christianity* 352
 - Since faith in its essence is truth, our faith becomes more spiritual, and more perfectly spiritual, depending on the quantity of truths we have and how well they fit together. True faith, achieved through a quantity of truths that fit together like strands in a cable, also becomes more enlightening, perceivable, obvious, and clear. True faith also becomes more easily united with acts of goodwill or charity, and therefore more alienated from evils and progressively more remote from the enticements of the eye and the cravings of the flesh. Therefore faith becomes more truly happy. Above all, it becomes more powerful against evils and falsities, and therefore more and more living and empowered to save.

- Each truth we learn can be another strand in the cable of our faith, another arrow in our quiver in our fight against the hells, another shining truth that the Lord can bring to our minds when we're struggling through the darkness, and another rope we can throw to other people who are trying to follow the Lord.

Conclusion

- To finish this off let's go back to Moses' speech from Deuteronomy.
 - Right after he said the part about the Word being very near to people he said this:
 - Deuteronomy 30:19,20
 - ¹⁹ "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; ²⁰ that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days..."
 - The ultimate point of the Word of God is so that we may have a relationship with our God, the Lord Jesus Christ – that we may love Him, obey His voice, and cling to Him.
- In the New Church we are lucky enough to know that the Lord did in fact make it so that someone could ascend into heaven and bring even more of the Word of God to us.
 - And that can be overwhelming to have all of those books and all of those ideas to try to understand.
 - But, even now, the goal has not changed: the goal is for us to hear and do what the Lord teaches in His Word.
- We can learn and use teachings from the Lord's Word tiny strand by tiny strand.
 - We can talk to other people to help us understand it, pray to the Lord for enlightenment, and do our best to live according to it.
 - "It is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. [T]he word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it" (Deuteronomy 30:11, 14).
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.