



## “When the Word of God Seems Rare”

Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-20, 2 Timothy 3:1-5, 4:1-5

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Every now and then, when you're reading through the pages of a book, a phrase will jump off the page and implant itself into your consciousness. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” “I can't go back to yesterday because I was a different person then.” “The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.” “Not all those who wander are lost.” The list goes on and on.

Who knows why they imbed themselves in our minds and memories, but they do. They encapsulate so much in so few words. They demand a moment of attention and hours of consideration.

A month or so ago, I was reading the lectionary passages for the summer months, those lessons assigned to each Sunday that systematically lead us through the major characters and teachings of Scripture. I looked at the Old Testament lesson assigned to this Sunday. 1 Samuel, chapter 3. Great, I thought. Nothing much to preach about there.

But then, it happened. The words kept off the page. A phrase - a sentence - 10 words in English. They burned themselves into my consciousness. “The word of the Lord was rare in those days...” Wow! We're about to read the story of one of the most pivotal characters in the Old Testament. Samuel is a small boy being given to God's service by his mother. He is going to live with and be trained by the great prophet Eli. Samuel would go on to be the bridge between the time of the Judges and the time of the Kings.

And he is called to this life-long ministry at a time when “the word of the Lord was rare in those days.” Perhaps God didn't have much to say back then, but I can't even begin to imagine that. God is ever and always speaking, always calling us back from the edge, always challenging us to take up the life for which we were created.

There is a greater chance that those entrusted with the Word of the Lord were simply not sharing it as it demanded to be shared. Rather than presenting the unvarnished Word of the Lord, which is sure to upset more than a few apple carts, the preachers and teachers of that day were a little timid in presenting that Word to those in their care and keeping. The old challenge to preachers is “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” But, there will be times – if you do that – when the preacher has a hard and difficult time.

So, there are times when the Word of God seems rare.

I have noticed, over the years, that when someone of some expertise encounters shoddy work of someone in their field, they feel constrained to comment upon it. I’ve had carpenters in my house, who upon discovering a muffed job by another carpenter, take the absent carpenter to task over their substandard work. I’ve had plumbers do the same thing, along with roofers, carpet installers, painters, tile installers, and more. There is a presumed standard to their work and when that standard is not met, it casts a poor reflection on the entire profession.

I’ve known a fair share of executive types, and professors, and other white-collar professionals, who are harder on people in their chosen fields than they are on anyone else. It’s about the quality and the standards that are expected in that field – the ethics, the practice, the end results – and if any of those are found wanting, the word goes out.

I offer you that observation because I tend to be a little hard on preachers. Preaching – sharing the Word of God – is a critically and vitally important calling. It is the challenge to bring God’s intention and expectation to an audience that may, or may not, be interested in hearing it. It doesn’t always make you popular or celebrated. It doesn’t always result in monetary benefit and abundant possessions. You preach the Word of God to make the world more of what God meant for it to be by changing the hearts and lives of those to whom you preach.

Still, throughout history, there are those times “when the Word of God seems rare,” or at least strangely offered.

This week, we were treated to a story of a television preacher who lives in a 34,986 square-foot house, with 25 rooms and two double car garages, seeming to ask his followers to help him purchase a \$54 million dollar private plane. We are often treated to stories of mega-preachers and evangelists who make multi-million dollar salaries and live in opulent homes and fly in their own private planes and rub shoulders with the richest and most powerful in the land and in the world. And whenever those stories emerge, the cause of Jesus Christ is held up to ridicule, derision, and even contempt.

We are regularly treated to stories of religious leaders currying favor with political leaders, bending scriptures and twisting teachings to overlook obvious wrong-doing, lest the word of God lead them to speak truth to power. Too often we hear of preachers who have absconded with funds meant for their ministries. We even hear of preachers and pastors who mistreat their parishoners in the cruelest ways imaginable.

The preachers who have come to represent all of Christianity in the public's eyes hardly ever preach about the poor, though the sheer volume of verses on the poor in the Bible would make your head spin. The preachers that represent us hardly ever preach about justice and yet the scriptures make it clear that the cause of justice is to be the cause of God's people. The preachers who make the news rarely preach about compassion and humility, and instead teach a gospel of prosperity and abundance, which in no small measure means that if you aren't prosperous and glorying in abundance you are obviously not blessed by God.

The church - and much of religion in general - no longer holds the respect of the world around it. Could it be that is because we are living in a time "when the word of God seems rare?"

Let's head over to the Second Letter to Timothy. In all honesty, we don't know who wrote the letter, nor do we know who was to receive it. The tradition tells us that the Apostle Paul was writing to a young friend who was just beginning his ministry, but that is conjecture. Still, what the elder teacher shared with the neophyte still speaks across the centuries.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you:

- Proclaim the message
- Be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable
- Convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate teachings to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Easy work? Hardly ever. Popular work? Not really. The Word of God is hard and challenging and asks more from us than we are sometimes willing to give.

And I'll let you in on a little secret. That's not just for the preachers. It's for everyone who calls themselves by the name of Jesus Christ. Each one of us who seeks to live as Jesus called us to live has the challenge to proclaim the message in word and action, to be persistent in good times and bad, and to engage with those who are trying to figure out how they are to live. And that's not just for one hour on Sunday morning. It's about Monday morning at the office, and Tuesday morning on the job, and Wednesday morning at the meeting, and Thursday morning in the classroom, and on Friday evening at the party, and Saturday afternoon at the lake. Staying faithful to Jesus' teaching is for every day and for

everywhere life takes us. It is living as light in the darkness, with hope in the midst of chaos, with love in the presence of hatred, and with justice in the face of inequity.

This is the time of year when some churches are beginning their plans for the annual fall revival. This is typically not an evangelistic outreach, but a time when the local church gets re-energized for the work they have been given. It's a really big deal in the more conservative churches, and the jockeying for the really inspiring revival preachers has already begun.

Revivals are about coming home – literally, with people returning to the churches where they grew up – and symbolically, with churches returning to their calling and their mission with new vitality and new commitment.

And, at every great revival, there is music. Some of the music is offered to energize the people. Some of the music is used to lay open the emotions of the people. Some of the music is offered to bring conviction to the souls of the less than repentant.

One of the old hymns that is always sung is the one we'll sing in a moment – “Revive Us Again.” No, you won't find it in a Presbyterian hymnal. We're too cerebral for that.

But the hymn is really a prayer – a prayer that God will restore the passion that once burned in the heart of the church. “Revive us again, fill our hearts with Your love, may our souls be rekindled with fire from above...”

In times when the Word of God seems rare, a good place to start is to ask God to bring back the fire and passion that once burned in the hearts of God's people. In times when the Word of God seems rare, we need to be reminded that God's greatest care and concern is for the poor and the beaten down, and not for the luxury-laden super-preachers who are considered the “norm” beyond the Christian world. In times when the Word of God seems rare, we need to recount the sheer volume of verses throughout Scripture that remind us that God is about justice and righteousness, and that God's truth is not something that can be man-handled and manipulated by those who seek power and reward for themselves.

In times when the Word of God seems rare we must

- Proclaim the message
- Be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable
- Convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching,

And we must pray that God will re-energize, re-ignite, and even “revive us again.”

For now and evermore. Amen.