

No Distinctions

Romans 10:8b-13

^{8b}"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹ because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. "The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³ For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

In many churches the sermon this morning is about the temptation story in Luke. The story of Jesus in the wilderness for forty days being tempted by the devil is so definitive for the Lenten season that most preachers' sermons instruct us on that scripture. This reading from Paul's letter to the church in Rome, however, also has much to say to us at the beginning of the season of preparation for Easter. This passage, coming in the middle of Paul's wrestling with the fact that many of his fellow Jews have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah (Rom. 9-11), reflects the fact that Paul's mind and faith were deeply shaped by his deep understanding and familiarity with the Old Testament and the grand narrative of the people of Israel. These few verses in Romans 10 take us on an enlightening journey through many different books in the Old Testament.

Paul rewords a passage from Deuteronomy 30, where Moses speaks to the Israelites about the accessibility of the Law. Moses tells the people that the Law is not out of reach in heaven and or beyond hearing across the sea (Deut. 30:12-13). Paul takes this story of Moses and the Law and uses it to speak of the fact that faith is accessible through the proclamation of Christ—"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim)." Paul goes on to quote from Isaiah 28:16: "No one who believes in him will be put to shame" (v. 11). Paul takes the point of

accessibility to salvation through Jesus a gigantic step forward by proclaiming that in Jesus there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because "the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him" (v. 12). To reinforce this declaration of generosity, Paul quotes from the prophet Joel, who had already written, "Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved" (Joel 2:32). Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Joel are all referenced in these four and a half verses! Jesus was shaped and strengthened in ministry by his deep reading of the Old Testament. Jesus matches the temptations of Satan by quoting from Deuteronomy (Deut. 8:3; 6:13; and 6:16).

Paul came to his understanding of Jesus by way of the Old Testament. We all need to become biblical scholars by reading and meditating on the entire Word of God in Scripture. To understand the real depth of these verses is to follow the references into the whole story of God's redemptive work through the Jewish people, finding fulfillment in the life, death, and resurrection of the Jew Jesus Christ who gives salvation to all who believe and confess him without distinction.

We are in the season of Lent where we are encouraged to admit the presence of sin among human beings. For forty days we examine the times we have "missed the mark," done what we should not have done (Rom. 7:14-20), and not only committed sins, but have lived "in sin" (Rom. 6:1-12). We admit freely that we have done what is displeasing to God; admit our sincere sorrow, and our intention to change our ways.

In our text for today, Paul, who self-confessedly kneels with us at the altar of sorrow, announces that near us, even in us (Rom. 10:8b), is a transforming word of salvation (v. 8c). He declares that if we call upon the Lord, we will be saved from the plight of our sin (vv. 12b-13). If, with our

entire beings, we confess and believe (v. 9), we will no longer be shamed by the stains of our sin (v. 11), but rather will be enlivened, forgiven, renewed, and enriched (v. 12). Also, the whole world is invited to join in being raised from the ashes of sin into the wonderful presence of God (vv. 12a, 13).

Paul's understanding of the gospel, the good news, is that it is a universal message for Jews and non-Jews. "All" are included; "no one" is excluded (vv. 11-13). In chapters 1 to 8, Paul made his case for all persons to recognize their need for salvation; in 3:23 he tells us "all have sinned. No one, he claims, is righteous according to the law. At the same time, he declares that no one is hopeless. If one confesses/believes/trusts, one can be transformed by a spiritual renewal (Rom. 10:9). No matter how good and wonderful we think we are, all of us need a Savior, all have sinned. Paul's "all" includes those of us who are totally convinced of our sin, unworthiness, and alienation from God and grace. If you are one who feels rejected and unloved. Paul addresses both groups, including both in the category of "sinner." The bad news: sin happens. All fall short.

But our passage also has good news: salvation is near, and it is near for all (v. 8b). Like the reign of God in Mark 1:15, salvation is "at hand." For some of us, this involves not resting in our false perception of our righteousness; for others of us this means not being mired in unworthiness. Paul tells those in both groups to open ourselves to receiving the riches (v. 12) endowed by salvation. He is talking about an event, a happening, an experience of transforming grace. Paul is telling us to proclaim the nearness of God, in the hope that we experience it in our heart (v. 8b) and confess it with our lips (v. 9).

Karl Barth, in his commentary on Romans, cautions each of us to announce God's saving presence and proclaim that God is indeed among us.

The Word of our salvation is announced in the silence of searching and longing hearts—as the impossible possibility becomes present among us. "Because it is the Word of Christ, it is beyond our hearing and our speaking, for, to hear it and to proclaim it—we must wait." As, during Lent, we await Easter morning.

Our scripture also teaches that our repentance and salvation begin and end with God. Sin is our problem; salvation is God's answer for our situation. To experience God's saving presence, we must believe in our hearts (v. 9) and confess with our lips (v. 10). A bounty of spiritual gifts accompanies God's presence (v. 12) and all this is of God, the author and agent of our salvation, as an act of grace.

The French painter John-Claude Gaugy came to America in 1966 and developed an art medium of works carved into wood. His most famous work, "The Awakening," consists of more than 400 brightly painted wood panels, depicting the personal awakening that may visit us when we ponder the prospect of the love of God and new life in Christ. By grace, sometimes—by words heard and sights seen—the Word is heard and new life arises. During Lent, sober darkness clouds our lives for forty days, only to be replaced by the luminescent brightness of the resurrection of new life in Christ. (**Donald W. Musser**)

"The word is near you," Paul writes, "on your lips and in your heart" (v. 8b). God is doing the heavy lifting here—bringing the Word near, planting the seeds of faith in our hearts, placing words tenderly on our lips. We do the telling—setting free those words already in our hearts and on our lips, sharing the questions central to our faith, in order to build up one another. But this does not be that we confess once and that is the end of things. We are to confess our faith continuously and that takes practice. It is an ongoing

act that changes as faith evolves throughout life. It also takes courage to articulate faith in a culture that discourages the sharing of faith. But we must draw out the words that God has planted in our hearts and set gently on our lips.

This passage is a call to individual confession of faith in response to Christ. This passage is also a call to communal confession of belief. As member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) we do not have a creed, but a statement of faith. We must consider the many ways we call on the name of God during worship. What names do we use for God? Which images for God have been given priority in our worship? How do we leave room in our worship for people to express their faith in creative ways?

All who call on the name of God will be saved, whether this call is perfectly in tune or just a jumbled joyful noise. Practicing this call is our task this Lenten season. To learn to make this joyful noise, we can listen to the voices of those who have gone before us: ancestors in the faith, hymn writers, and confessors. We can also listen to the voice of Righteousness by Faith, which assures us of our salvation, no matter how small the mustard seed of faith may be. (**Callista S. Isabelle**)

Paul also reminds us of the equivalence of Jew and non-Jew in God's plan for salvation. Belief in Christ is the sole requirement, he says. As far as God is concerned, it makes no difference whether a person remains devoted to Jewish traditions or is a non-Jew, turning to the God of Israel from the polytheistic cults of the day. In an earlier writing Paul lashed out angrily at the suggestion that non-Jewish believers should adopt Jewish practices. Here Paul provides a framework for Jewish and non-Jewish believers to form a harmonious community in their one Lord.

At the same time, Paul is saying Israel has not lost her covenant with God. Even though Paul holds that "righteousness through faith" is the teaching of the Law, he points out that the conversion of Israel remains part of God's plan. For Christians who take their cue from Paul, the Reformation slogan "righteousness through faith" could be a path toward reconciliation in divided communities, calling us to heal what is divided by fierce devotion to rules and ethnic claims to be the people of God. (**Pheme Perkins**)

Reading and meditating on Scripture is a practice that equips all followers of Jesus to face the allure of lesser gods and dead-end pathways in life. Disciplined and prayerful reading of the sacred stories of the Hebrew people; the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and the birth and early life of the church leads to wholeness and strength for the living of these days, without distinction. (**Robert W. Prim**)

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