

Song: "Ancient Words"

"We have come with open hearts." That's what we just sang. *"O let the ancient words impart."* Do you expect the ancient words to impart something to *you*?

Hebrews 4 is very sure that God's Word intends to do something to you. "Ζῶν"! That's the very first word of verse 12 in the original Greek. It is the same word that our English words zoo and zoology come from – the study of *animated life*. "Ζῶν γὰρ ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ" = **Alive** is the word of God! – "καὶ ἐνεργῆς" – **and energetic!** "Active" is how the NIV translates "ἐνεργῆς" – "Powerful" is the KJV translation. *"The Word of God is living and active."* It is *not* a collection of musty old writings that might have some magic ancient secrets to decode, if you just figure out the right way to do something to it. The Word of God intends to do something to you – if you will come to it with an open heart. The Word of God is *alive* and *active* – transforming anyone who opens up his or her innermost being to the powerful, energetic, active, living Word of God.

Are you opening up your heart to let the Living Word transform you?

Now it is possible to be bored when reading the Bible, but if we are bored, it will be because we have not yet learned to *listen* for what *God* wants to say to us through all that God's people have recorded about how God spoke to them, chastened them, transformed them, and delivered them from evil – and how they have learned to know that God will yet work mightily among faithful people.

Now, we might well be a bit anxious about *how* the Word of God works. Did you notice what Hebrews 4 says? *"Sharper than any double-edged sword, [the Word of God] penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered [literally: naked] and laid bare [literally "thrown on the back so as to have the neck laid bare," like a victim with neck exposed for sacrifice] ... Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."*

If we truly open our hearts to the Word of God, we are laid bare to something “*sharper than any double-edged sword.*” That can be scary.

Our grandchildren know that sharp blades are dangerous. When we go out to eat, they open their napkin bundle of silverware and immediately hand the knife over to the closest adult. Someone else can cut their meat if need be. They know the knife is dangerous and they are glad to hand it over.

Some of us hand the sword over to others to cut our meat for us – we always want someone else to tell us what it means, instead of studying the scriptures ourselves and trying to discern what the double-edged sword wants to impart to us as individuals, as families, as a church or as a nation.

In the statement of purpose we recently put together to describe our congregation, we said: “*we are partners in Biblical teaching.*” A key part of our purpose as a congregation is help people learn what God is trying to say to our world. Are *you* familiar enough with God’s Word that you can be a partner in Biblical teaching?

Only 40% of Americans can name more than 4 of the 10 Commandments, according to a book by Bill McKibben. Only half of us can cite any of the four authors of the Gospels. Three quarters of Americans believe the Bible says that God helps those who help themselves – but that statement is nowhere in the Bible. It is a quote taken from Ben Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, written in 1757: “God helps those who help themselves.” The Bible actually says the exact opposite: the Bible declares that when we are most aware of being help/less – that is when Christ is able to help us. How much do *you* know about what God’s Word actually says?

One of the best ways to learn is to help others learn – you probably already know that. When you have to put into words why you believe what you believe, you begin to figure it out better for yourself. So ... be a partner in Biblical teaching. You don’t have to be the teacher to come prepared, having read the Bible passage, ready to share some insight you have gained by pondering God’s Word for yourself. If you aren’t already taking time for a time devotions at home, do so, even if just to read and discuss Bible stories with your children or grandchildren or someone else’s child.

Sometimes our goal of helping our children become biblically literate is achieved by someone other than us. That's why youth advisors and S.S. teachers are so helpful – they become substitute parents and can sometimes get a message through to our kids that we can't seem to get through.

I was amused by my daughter's posting on Facebook recently – she was wondering whether she should tell her son that the only goal his team had scored all season was actually kicked by the other team.

It's kind of nice when someone else helps us get our job done. But don't sit back on your laurels expecting others to do the task for you. If others help you or those you love, then you can find ways to help yet others as you share your insights and wisdom – as a partner in Biblical teaching.

Talk with your husband, your wife, your friends – not to show off knowledge learned, but to give a glimpse into your inner being and how God is stirring your soul with bits of insight learned from pondering the ancient words.

Let God's Word get into you. Sometimes people talk about "getting into God's Word." Today's passage lets us know that God's Word wants to get into us!

Hebrews 4 says that the Word of God is incisive – it is sharper than a double-edged sword for the purpose of getting deep inside of us, into our innermost being. It can affect the very core of who we are, if we will let it do so.

Another place in the Bible where a double-edged sword is mentioned in Proverbs 5. It is a sword that also affects us deeply. In Proverbs 5:4, we are warned against adultery. Even though the lips of adulterers drip honey, and their words are smoother than oil, in the end they will be as bitter as gall and as sharp as a double-edged sword, taking you down to death with steps leading straight to the grave, giving no thought to the way of life that God wants you to live.

Some of us know how destructive it can be to betray God's purposes for our lives by playing around with sexual appetites. *All* kinds of sins hurt us like a double-edged sword – piercing our souls when we let temptations infest us and destroying our integrity as the ugly truth comes out – tearing us apart both on the way in and on the way out, like a double-edged sword.

The Word of God is a different kind of double-edged sword. It is not plunged into us to destroy us, the way that sin does. It is more like a surgeon's scalpel designed to penetrate and sever spiritual cancers or gangrenous guilt away from the life God wants to save in us, so that we might be set free from whatever leads to death.

Do *you* know what that is like? To have the Word of God pierce your heart ... and get to the root core of your innermost being? It is a piercing designed not to destroy, but to convict ... to convince us of the Truth about who we are, what we have done, and what we have left undone. This penetrating Word of God "*judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*" – making us aware of our frailties and faults, preparing us for repentance and letting us know our great need for God's saving grace.

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." Three times the author of Hebrews repeats that admonition before describing the double-edged nature of the sword of God's Word. In chapter 3 verses 7-8 and verse 15, and in chapter 4 verse 7, the author of Hebrews pleads that we not rebel, that we not be hardened by sin's deceitfulness, that we not be disobedient and thereby miss out on the wonderful rest God has promised to us: *"Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."*

The way to keep our hearts from being hardened is to keep our hearts open to whatever God wants to say to us. Whenever I come across a scripture that is hard for me to accept, I seem to always hear the voice of Professor David Wieand from Bethany Seminary echoing in my mind: "If it's in Scripture, we'd best take it very seriously." Of course, we hold any individual verses in the context of the whole of the Bible – it must be understood in some way as a part of God's work to redeem Creation from sin and death. That's the overarching purpose of God's Word – to redeem you and me and all of his Creation from sin and death. But every part of it must be taken seriously. *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,"* 2 Timothy 3:16 says (one of those famous 3:16 passages). *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man [or woman] of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* The holy Scriptures *"are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,"* as that same passage in 2 Timothy chapter 3 says. Will **you** keep your heart open to the Word of God – even when it forces you to face things you'd rather ignore or disown and forces you to give an account for the choices you have made?

I am reminded of the ending of Psalm 139, where the Psalmist reacts against all the evil and wickedness of bloodthirsty men, declaring hatred for those who hate the Lord. But then, with insight that comes only to those who honestly and earnestly wrestle with life's issues and problems, the Psalmist suddenly realizes that evil is not just out among those he calls wicked and bloodthirsty, but also lurks inside himself, and he concludes with words that our passage from Hebrews 4 would also invite us to pray: *“Search **me**, O God, and know **my heart**; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”*

When was the last time you invited the Word of God to check you out thoroughly? It might be the Word of God you experience as you read Scripture, or it might be a word from God that you hear God's voice speak to you in a time of prayer or through something someone says that convicts you in your innermost being regarding the judgment and call of God upon your life. In all the times when you hear the Word of God, invite the Lord to be *alive* and *active* in you with his two-edged sword! “Ζῶν!” and “ἐνεργῆς!” Alive and powerful! Let the Word of God grapple with your soul.

Perhaps you have a special place where you can go for that kind of meditation. On the back of today's bulletin cover is a message written by Curt Rowland, the son of a previous pastor of this congregation. He is program director at one of our church camps and is thinking of places like vesper hills or lookout points when he asks, *“Is there a ‘sacred place’ where you feel the word of God is living and active for you? Is there a place where you feel the indescribable quiet presence of God? Make it a priority this week to seek out that place and spend some time alone in prayer and meditation with your Creator.”*

Actually, one of those places where you may wrestle with God is here – in the midst of this gathering of God's people. We don't need to be alone. In fact, our heritage is clear that we must check out with the rest of God's people what we hear God saying that he wants to do in our lives and in our world. We are to study God's Word together and help each other live it out in every aspect of daily life. The goals we came up with a couple weeks ago is to get more people involved in Bible study and Sunday School – to be serious about our calling to be partners in Biblical teaching. Make use of your opportunities here. Let God's Word get into you.

You need not be afraid to do so, Hebrews 4 says, because Jesus has gone through the heavens – he has conquered death and opened the way into Life with God! So whatever God’s Word lays bare in you, whatever faults he shows you, rest assured that he will help you. He was tempted in every way, just as we are – he understands our struggles. Therefore *“hold firmly to the faith we profess”* – be clear about the Good News that God wants to forgive all who repent; and will lead us into New Life! That is the faith we profess. Hold firmly to it, and you will be able to approach the throne of grace with confidence. Jesus stands by that throne, praying for you, wanting your life to be made right – you can be sure that you will receive mercy and will find grace to help in your time of need, as you let the sword of God’s Word pierce your soul.

Receive God’s Sword with confidence. Let the Word of God impart to you ... both the conviction of sin and the assurance of God’s saving grace.

*“Ancient words, ever true, changing me, changing you;
we have come with open hearts, O let the ancient words impart.”*

Hymn 567 *How Firm a Foundation*