

Ephesians 1:3-14

John 1:1-18

January 5, 2020

The Ordination and Installation of Ruling Elders

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, North Carolina

GOD GAVE US HIS WORD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When you tell someone, "I give you my word," what you mean is, "I promise . . . I guarantee . . . I vow." To give somebody your word is a serious matter.

And so it was when God gave us his Word. God made a promise . . . God made a guarantee . . . God made a vow.

On this second and last Sunday of Christmas, we have heard another Christmas story, but it's different from the story we heard from Matthew's gospel on December 22 and from Luke's gospel on Christmas Eve.

There are no shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night in this Christmas story. There is no star guiding the wise men from the East. There is no baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. There is no heavenly host singing "Glory to God in the highest!"

This Christmas story goes back a lot more than 2,000 years. In fact, this Christmas story goes all the way back to the beginning: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." (John 1:1-4)

This Christmas story takes us all the way back to the beginning, when God gave us his Word and there was light and sky and Earth and Seas and vegetation and plants and trees and the Sun and the Moon, and day and night and living creatures on earth and in the ocean and in the air and human beings made in God's image.

God gave us his Word when the word of the Lord came to the prophet Jeremiah in the days of King Josiah, to the prophet Hosea in the days of King Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, to Joel son of Pethuel, to Micah in the days of King Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, to Zephaniah in the days of King Josiah, to Zerubbabel and Joshua through the prophet Haggai, and to the prophet Zechariah.

And now, on this second and last Sunday of Christmas, as we bring to a close our celebration of God giving us his Word, we are reminded with the words of the Letter to the Hebrews:

"Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful

word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.” (Hebrews 1:1-4)

God gave us his Word . . . and his Word has given us life and light, and the darkness cannot overcome the life and light.

God gave us his Word . . . and his Word has given us glory and grace and truth and a vision of who God really is.

God gave us his Word . . . and that Christmas Word is:

* He will save his people from their sins.

* Emmanuel, God-with-us, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

As we come to the Lord’s table this morning to celebrate the Sacrament, we are reminded of the vital connection between God’s Word to us and God’s table before us.

As our “Directory for Worship” reminds us, “The Lord’s Supper enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God’s sustaining grace offered to all people. The Lord’s Supper is at once God’s gift of grace, God’s means of grace, and God’s call to respond to that grace.” (Book of Order, W-3.0409)

As we come to the Lord’s table this morning, we have heard again God’s faithful Word/promise/vow/guarantee — “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

John’s Christmas story and our trip to the table at our Lord’s invitation emphasize again that “God brings all things into being by the Word. Through the incarnation, this same, eternal Word of God became flesh and lived among us, in a particular person in a particular time and place — Jesus of Nazareth. Through Jesus Christ, God speaks to us in truth and reaches out to us with grace; through Jesus Christ, we may speak truthfully to God and lift up our hearts with gratitude.” (Book of Order, W-1.0301)

When you tell someone, “I give you my word,” that person might respond, “I’ll take your word for it.” In other words, “I’ll choose to believe what you are telling me based on the fact that I trust you.”

So, what does it look like when we say to God, “We’ll take your Word for it”?

Again, according to our “Directory for Worship,” “Where the Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the living Word is present by the power of the Holy Spirit. We respond to the proclamation of the Word in a variety of ways: confessing the faith of the Church, celebrating or reaffirming the Sacrament of Baptism, praying for the Church and world, and offering our lives in gratitude for God’s grace. The proclamation of the Word is incomplete if it fails to evoke the response of the people of God. When the Word is proclaimed, we are called, above all, to discern Jesus Christ, receive his grace, and respond to his call with obedience. All of these things depend on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, whom we seek in prayer.” (Book of Order, W-3.0301)

Today we celebrate one way the Church says to God, “We’ll take your Word for it.” As we ordain and install Darleen, Fred, and Patsy as ruling elders in the Class of

2022, they will affirm God's Word to them by answering some constitutional questions, two of which are:

* Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

* Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?

But Darleen, Fred, and Patsy — along with the other elders on the Session — aren't taking on the work of the church all by themselves. In a few minutes, you, the congregation, will also make some vows — you'll give your word, if you will — to pray for our elders, encourage them, respect their decisions, and follow them as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ who alone is Head of the Church.

Several years ago, in a discussion around the session table about the role and responsibilities of ruling elders in our congregation, I shared this description from our church's *Book of Order*: "Ruling elders are so named not because they 'lord it over' the congregation, but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life." (G-2.0301)

One of our elders said, "How in the world are we supposed to do that? How are we supposed to discern and measure the congregation's fidelity to the Word of God?" And I responded, "That's the question, isn't it?"

What does it mean to be faithful to the Word of God?

It starts with us saying to God, "We'll take your Word for it."

And then living and acting as if we really mean what we say.

When God gave us his Word, he made a promise to us. He didn't just talk about it, he did something about it.

When we tell God, "We'll take your Word for it," we need not just talk about it — we need to do something about it. We need to trust the Word made flesh, who lived among us as one of us, and we need to believe and do what he says based on the fact that we trust the Word.

On Thursday, Geneva and I talked about when to take down the Christmas decorations in this sanctuary. She said, "I know you like to leave them up through January 6." I said, "That's right. It's good to remind all of us that it's still Christmas." Soon enough, all of the Christmas decorations will be gone from the sanctuary. They're pretty much gone from every other place, and we've moved on to whatever comes next.

But God's Word remains with us, because God's Word in Jesus Christ isn't just for creation or the first Christmas. When God gave us his Word in Jesus Christ, it was for all time.

If we say to God, "We'll take your Word for it," how will we make good on that promise in the coming year?

Howard Thurman, author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader published a book in 1973 called *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*. The book is described as “brief meditations” which “incorporate the hope, celebration, love, compassion, and blessing of the Christmas season and encourage us to find them throughout the year.”

Thurman included his poem “Now the Work of Christmas” in his book, a piece someone has described as a “fit accompaniment to John’s Prologue.”

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.*

Let us pray: Lord your light calls us forth to follow and serve you. Your light still shines for all to see in this world. May we continue to reflect your light in our lives, in our service, in our words and in our deeds. May we each say, “Here I am, Lord. Send me.” Amen.