

Pentecost 5, Proper 10, Year A, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Back in the 1980s  
there were a couple of well known Christian singers,  
Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith.  
They wrote many songs, some of them making it into the regular music charts.

And one of their songs, written in 1984  
was based on the first verse  
in our psalm today.  
The story goes  
that they were at a ranch in the Rockies, where there's a recording studio.

Smith originally came up with the song's melody and some words for the chorus straight from  
our psalm today.  
Grant fell in love with his demo,  
but all Smith had was a chorus;  
he had no idea what to put in the verses.  
So he gave it to Grant and told her she could finish it.  
Later that night she started walking back to her cabin,  
and she got lost.  
Now the ranch  
was in the middle of nowhere. It was dark, that total darkness that you get when you're far away  
from city lights,  
and there are bears and who knows what else out there.

Finally, she saw a light, and started walking towards it. And it was her cabin  
and when she got there, she sat down  
and wrote the verses.

And that song  
became one of their best selling hits,  
one that has made it into hymnals and been sung across the world.

<http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=16213>

And the chorus goes like this.  
Thy word is a lamp unto my feet  
And a light unto my path

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet  
And a light unto my path

The first verse  
of our psalm  
today.

And of course  
it's one we've read before.  
It's part of Psalm 119, and we read parts of it earlier this year, back in February.  
If you remember, this is the longest  
chapter of the bible, one hundred seventy six verses in all.  
And it's divided into twenty two portions,  
twenty-two groups of verses  
and each one of them  
begins with a different letter  
of the Hebrew alphabet.

In this portion,  
all eight verses  
begin with the fourteenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet,  
the letter נ (nun).

We miss the alliterative effect in English,  
but what we do get  
is the theme.

Your word {God] is a lantern to my feet  
and a light upon my path.

Imagine you lived back  
in the time of King David, the time  
when we believe  
many of the psalms were first spoken.  
This is a thousand years before Christ; it's the middle  
of the Iron Age.  
Most lamps  
are a simple pottery bowl, quite small,  
filled with oil  
with a pinch on one side  
to hold the wick.  
The light they provide  
is very small,

not much different  
than a single candle.

But in a world where there is no electricity  
no street lights,  
where the only alternative is a fire  
that smokes  
the light they provide  
is miraculous.

You probably got a sense of it  
when Hurricane Sandy hit  
and we lost power.  
None of the ambient light we are used to  
spilling out from the city.  
Just the power of flashlights and candles  
and perhaps the screen on your phone  
until the generators got going.

In the darkness  
even the smallest light  
is a gift.

And what the psalmist says  
is that the word of God  
is like that tiny light.  
Something  
that allows you  
to see the way.

God's word,  
God's word  
is the thing  
that allows us  
to find our way.

Your word {God} is a lantern to my feet  
and a light upon my path.

So what is God's word?  
What is the psalm talking about?

The word itself in Hebrew,  
 the original language of the psalms,  
 the word, “word” דָּבָר [dabar],  
 means not just word  
 as we normally think of it.  
 It’s more than just letters on a page.  
 It carries the idea of “something that communicates”.  
 So it might be a literal word, written on a page,  
 but also talk  
 or speech,  
 or an event that communicates,  
 or even  
 the person who is communicating.

So when Scripture uses the term  
 “word of God”  
 it means not just the words that God speaks  
 but everything that is about communication with God.  
 It’s used  
 when God appears to people.  
 It’s used  
 of the things that God says.  
 It’s used about the written record  
 of God’s interactions with humanity  
 that we know as the Bible.  
 And above all,  
 because it’s anything  
 that communicates God,  
 the ultimate word of God  
 is Jesus Christ himself,  
 who as the gospel of John  
 reminds us,  
 is the word that was in the beginning with God,  
 the word through whom all things were made,  
 the word made flesh and come among us,  
 the word who is life a  
 and that life is the light of all people,  
 and the darkness  
 cannot  
 overcome it.

Your word {God} is a lantern to my feet  
 and a light upon my path.

Jesus  
is the word of God  
made flesh.  
but unfortunately  
we're two thousand years too late  
to meet him in person.  
The primary way we meet him  
is in the record of his life and words,  
the record of his death and resurrection,  
the record that we know  
as Scripture.

The word  
is Scripture  
and the word  
is Christ,  
the one  
whose presence in our lives  
allows us  
to read Scripture  
and to make sense of it,  
and through it  
to come to know God better.

But to do that  
we need to read it.  
We need to read it  
and live by it.

There are no short cuts.  
There are no substitutes  
for reading, studying Scripture.  
That is how  
we get to know God,  
and not only get to know about God,  
but that's how we recognize God.

Scripture  
is kind of like an expanded form  
of one of those descriptions you get  
on lists of the FBI's most wanted.  
Date(s) of Birth Used: October 3, 1947

Hair: Gray  
 Place of Birth: Myrtle Point, Oregon  
 Eyes: Blue  
 Height: 6'2"  
 Weight: 230 pounds  
 Sex: Male  
 Race: White  
 Occupation: Unknown  
 Nationality: American  
 Scars: Right knee and right wrist.  
 Source: <http://www.fbi.gov/wanted/wcc>

The description tells us  
 who to look for.  
 Scripture tells us  
 who to look for,  
 so that we will recognize  
 God.

And the added benefit  
 as the psalm points out  
 is that when we read scripture  
 when we live by it,  
 God will be with us,  
 in good times  
 and in bad.

Now wonder the verses that Amy Grant wrote  
 that dark night in the mountains  
 go like this.

When I feel afraid  
 And think I've lost my way  
 Still, You're there right beside me  
 Nothing will I fear  
 As long as You are near  
 Please be near me to the end

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet  
 And a light unto my path  
 Thy word is a lamp unto my feet  
 And a light unto my path

I will not forget  
Your love for me and yet  
My heart forever is wandering  
Jesus be my guide  
And hold me to Your side  
And I will love You to the end

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet  
And a light unto my path  
Thy word is a lamp unto my feet  
And a light unto my path  
And a light unto my path  
You're the light unto my path

Songwriters Amy Grant Gill & Michael W. Smith  
Lyrics © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.

When we read scripture  
when we live by it,  
God will be with us,  
in good times  
and in bad.  
But not only will God be with us,  
God will be in us.  
Because the gift of Christ is that not only is Christ incarnate, made flesh,  
and walked this earth,  
Christ continues to walk this earth  
in and through us.

Christ the word of God, lights our way,  
and we carry  
we carry  
some of that light  
within us.  
We become the light  
for other people.  
We light the way  
to the bigger light  
of Christ.

Which is why we can sing that well known spiritual  
This little light of mine.

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.  
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.  
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.  
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Let it shine for Jesus, Yes! I'm gonna let it shine.  
Let it shine for Jesus, Yes! I'm gonna let it shine.  
Let it shine for Jesus, Yes! I'm gonna let it shine.

Every day in every way, I'm gonna let it shine.  
Every day in every way, I'm gonna let it shine.  
Every day in every way, I'm gonna let it shine.  
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

I'm gonna take this light around the world and I'm gonna let it shine.  
Gonna take this light around the world and I'm gonna let it shine.  
Gonna take this light around the world and I'm gonna let it shine.  
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.  
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.  
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.  
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.