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# The Word is Very Near You

**Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 9 March 2025**

Romans 10:8-13 • Luke 4:1-13

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

The word is very near you, on your lips and in your heart. (Romans 10:8)

I've often spoken about my own journey to faith. I began from nothing — nothing in the way of faith, that is; otherwise I was very privileged as a child. I had a nice home, food on the table, things to wear, toys to play with — but I did not have Christ. For much of my early life I was not aware of any lack; that is the funny thing about God. God seems content to allow many people to live their lives without coming to Christ. Although I am sure that God will act when he chooses to act to make his presence felt, I sometimes wonder, in my own case, why it took so long. I know that God doesn't push; he always invites. We see that clearly in the Gospel stories about Jesus. But I did not feel that invitation for nearly fifty years.

When it came, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. It was as if God had been walking beside me all the time, like a companion on the road who

keeps silent, and you almost forget he's there — and then he speaks, and you turn to him in surprise. Or not exactly speaks, but makes his presence felt. Maybe God made a sound like a church choir, since I began to feel God while attending Evensong at the Cathedral. Or maybe his voice was the voice of the Dean or one of the lovely people who attended services there, true Christians and fishers of people. The word was very near me, perhaps not yet on my lips, but in my ears and in my heart.

That verse has always held a special meaning for me. It is so true. The word of God, in the sense of Scripture and prayers, is very near to me. The prayers I know by heart, the ones given me by the Spirit when I don't know how to pray, and the verses from the Bible which resonate with me, are very near. Just as Jesus is in me (and I in him), the word is near to me. And similarly, the Word, with a capital W — that is, Jesus Christ himself — is always very near. Paul goes on to talk about confessing our faith to others, which is the necessary adjunct to our personal faith. We believe in Christ, and so we tell others about him. "For it is by our faith that we are put right with God; it is by our confession that we are saved" (Romans 10:10). Both faith and public confession are required. And confessing our faith should not be difficult, for the word of faith is very near to us. We know it. We believe it.

In another sense, the word is near to all of us. In our Western world, there can hardly be anyone who does not have access to learning about the Gospel. Even today, when church attendance in many places is declining, anyone can seek and access a Bible and someone to help them understand it. More than that, God's word is already in everyone's heart. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God says:

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." (Jeremiah 31:33)

It is in our hearts! God's law, the knowledge of right and wrong, and of God himself, is in our hearts. It first came to Israel, and then to us Gentiles as well. So we have no excuse. God is in us — God is part of being human.

So when I lived my life for nearly 50 years, not being a particularly bad person, I must have been ignoring that little spark of God-within-me. Until God decided: This is it, time for John to wake up! And God activated something within me which then responded to the choir music, perhaps; to the Christians around me (including Melissa), perhaps; to whatever God decided to use to bring me to a conscious realisation of my already existing connection to God. And as Paul says, God "richly blesses all who call to him" (Romans 10:12). In my newly-awakened state, I called out to God and God has blessed me. That connection was truly completed when I was baptised and received the Holy Spirit. Then God was truly within me.

Another thing happened as well, when I accepted God into my life. All the Christian teachings I had ever heard, and the little bits of the Bible I had read, began to make sense. Before, they struck me as simply good rules for living; now, I saw the God-inspiration behind them and how truly good they are. When I pray and give thanks to God it is more than words; it is a feeling of connection, a feeling of rightness. When I look at God's beautiful world, I see the love behind everything and I'm prompted to give thanks again.

Is it not wonderful that the inclination towards God is in every one of us? We are born with it, and God chooses the time and place when we will fully open up to it and declare ourselves as God's people. More than anything, I give thanks that God did not leave me alone and separate forever. Thank God that he planned something else, something so much more wonderful, for me. I am a part of Christ's body, and one with God and all of you. Thanks be to God. Amen.