

Bible Study Lecture Notes: Week I (5/6/26)

Written and Prepared by Fr. Michael Erickson

God's Word is God's Action

In order to understand Prophecy, it is necessary first to concern ourselves with the character of God's Word.

Tertullian [Early Third Century AD Christian Apologist]: *Observe, then, that when you are silently conversing with yourself, this very process is carried on within you by your reason, which meets you with a word at every movement of your thought... Now how much more fully is all this transacted in God... the Word is itself a different thing from yourself.*

Tertullian's insight is that the Word is an expression of the creative self-conversation born out from an exercise of reason. When we think, and a word comes back to us to encapsulate some coherent thought, it is as if reason is speaking back to us. This self-conversation points to ideas outside of the self, though, or else there would be no basis for differentiating those ideas from the self. Philosophically, we might call Tertullian a *phenomenologist* almost two millennia prior to the development of that philosophical school. Being (ontology), when viewed epistemologically (how we know), is being that reaches out toward what is outside of itself (see Heidegger's idea of the *Dasein* – being is “being in the world,” or relating to the world outside of itself).

Therefore, Word is Reason pushing forward from one idea to the next. With us, word is partially creative, for we have only partial reason. With God, Word is fully creative, for God is in Himself perfect reason. This means that when we speak of the Word of God (Logos) what we are really saying is that God's Word and God's Action are the same thing. There is no separation between the two as there is with us. We have an abstract idea which is somewhat different from what is created in the real world from that idea. That is not the case with God. His abstract idea and His creation that comes from that abstracted idea are in total harmony. Moreover, since Word tells

us that the exploration of an idea intrinsically reaches out toward the creation of something out from that idea – and then the exploration of the next idea that flows from that – God’s Word is intrinsically self-expressive in creation of something outside of Himself. God has free will, so He does not have to create; but when He does, His creation flows naturally from who He is and so is not a departure from His divine character.

Genesis 1:3-4: *And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good....*

With this in mind, we can break down Genesis 1:3-4 as follows:

God’s Word: *And God said, Let there be light:*

Is the same as God’s Action: *and there was light.*

The way the two clauses are written expresses an equality between them. The colon could just as properly be written as an equal sign.

So, when God saw the light, why did He also see that it is good? Because the light expresses in fullness the equality of His Word with His Action.

For our purposes, Word is not just an expression of an idea. Word is the doing of that idea in a way that *creates something outside of itself* (again, see Heidegger’s *Dasein*). Therefore, when below we talk about the Prophetic Word, we mean a Word uttered by a Prophet that *creates*.

From this we shall see that the Prophetic Ministry can be understood only in the context of the Creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:4. The Prophet in his Prophetic Word is literally changing the world into *a new creation* (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Elements of Prophecy

Isaiah 7:14: *Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*

Prophecy begins with God and leads back to God: *Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign.* Notice how this is parallel to the Seven Days of Creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3. Creation is an expression of God's order in a manner that brings order to what had been disordered. In that way, creation is salvation (bringing order to what is disordered), and creation is revelation (we can know about God in the systematically ordered differentiation among all created things, for God sees that this is good and, therefore, revelatory of who He is). The endpoint of salvation and revelation is *theosis*, which is the Seventh Day of Creation, when God rests and, therefore, manifests in Himself that all of creation is in sync with Him (see also John 17:21-23). Thus, the prophetic word is God's self-giving into the world through word or action, which will guide the hearer back to God and, in time, change him into a creature able to live in and for God. It is not just a foretelling of future events. It is not just an urging to right the ship that has gone terribly off course. What separates the Prophet from the fortune teller, or the doomsayer is that in the Prophet's words and actions the Holy Spirit reaches out to people and guides them back.

Prophecy is miraculous: *Behold, a virgin shall conceive.* From the vantage of the fallen world, it is impossible for a virgin to conceive. The statement is as intrinsically contradictory as to say the High Priest will be also the Paschal Lamb. For the prophetic word to resonate, the hearer must put his faith in God above the cynicism born from his experience in the world. He must put his faith in God above the admiration of men, since for most men the prophetic word is foolishness and unworthy of consideration. The miracle indicates that God is at work, but the miracle also indicates that faith is necessary for that word to be efficacious among men. Prophecy will not mean much among the faithless.

Prophecy refers to our world: *and bear a son*. Notice the juxtaposition of miracle in the prior clause and commonplace occurrence (bearing a son) in this clause. We see here the coming together of God and Man: the miracle into (and on behalf of) the commonplace. God will do miraculous things *for us*. The prophetic word or action, therefore, is not concerned with any idea, real or imagined, divorced from man's natural state and circumstance. The true Prophet never speaks of ideas that we may relegate to fantasy, even though what he indicates may be hard for us to fathom given our present-day situation. He will speak about our condition (sin), our hope (salvation), and our return home (God's Kingdom). What is irrelevant to this will not be the concern of the Prophet.

Prophecy ends in God in us, and we in God, which is to say, *theosis*: *and shall call his name Immanuel [God with us]*. This reiterates the Seven Days of Creation as the root of Prophecy.

The Prophetic Word Changes the World

Unlike how we commonly use the word, *prophecy* is more than just telling the future. Fortune tellers and psychics may be able to tell the future, though if they are accurate almost certainly they are tapping into a *Spirit* that is not the Holy Spirit. Analysts may be able to tell the future based on present day circumstances and the likelihood of certain projections. Though there is a sense in which the prophet is telling the future, he is not primarily an oracle for that. Similarly, *prophecy* is more than just decrying the present. Doomsayers may be able to pinpoint exactly what is wrong with present day circumstances and warn folks that they are on the wrong track. Though there is a sense in which the prophet is a doomsayer, he is not primarily a voice for that either. What a prophet is most fundamentally is as follows:

A prophet is a person set aside by God for the purpose of articulating the Word of God, both in his words and in his manner of life, in a manner that spiritually changes those who respond one way or another to his prophecy. He is a vessel through which God encounters people, who will respond either by being guided into Him or running from Him. There is no neutral encounter a

person may have with a prophet: He is either given grace by his encounter with the prophet or damned by his rejection of the prophet. In this way, a prophet is a prefiguration of Christ Jesus, for if God interacts closer with men through the prophetic word, He interacts closest by being a Man Himself. The prophetic ministry provides a kind of prevenient grace to the world. Prophets spiritually change the world by grace in such a way as to make the world more amenable to the coming of Christ Jesus. They not only set the stage for the coming of the Messiah. They change the fundamental nature of the stage to one where the Messiah can do His work in establishing the Church. Thus, for example, later Jewish Prophets began to articulate how God's people will include those not counted among the original Twelve Tribes of Israel (see Isaiah 2:2-4: "*And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it... And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up their sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore*"). The Prophet Isaiah is not just foreseeing this future. He is helping for this future to come into being by articulating a statement that God has ordained *to be prophetic* (see 2 Peter 1:21: "*For the prophecies came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost*"). God's Spirit is articulated not just to inform but to change, to recreate what is lost into something that can be found, or to recreate what is broken into something that can be fixed and put forward in God's time to an even better use than before (see Isaiah 43:19: "*Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and new rivers in the desert*"). In Isaiah 43:19, God is *doing a new thing* through the prophetic word. Now, God does not need a prophet to change the nature of His creation into an order more amenable to God's Incarnation. God chooses to work through the prophets. Similarly, God does not need Adam to till the soil and to name the creatures in Eden. God can perfect Eden himself, but God chooses to deputize Adam to that service. Therefore, the prophetic ministry is a sign of God's largesse. He is including people in the work He can do entirely on His own so that, by participating in the work, people may become more like God. Now, God could just give man His likeness, just like a university can confer a degree upon a newborn infant without that infant ever having to attend

a class there. There is something about having to work for the degree that makes it all the more meaningful when achieved. In making sacrifices to achieve that degree, the student learns then to identify sacrificial love with the degree being attained. Similarly, the person who has to work out his salvation with fear and trembling (see Philippians 2:12) learns to identify sacrificial love with being in God's likeness. Thus, the prophetic ministry is God bringing people into the work of spiritually changing people's lives, and spiritually changing the world, so that people (and the world generally) may be more capable of *theosis*, which is to say, changed by grace into a new creation that is like God and lives in God as naturally as God lives in this new creation. This is to say that the prophetic ministry is God bringing people into the work of grace. Where else do we see this? The Holy Sacraments. The work of the Holy Church. Thus, the prophetic ministry can be defined as *sacramental*. Like with the Holy Sacraments, when the Prophet speaks/acts, his word/action is a means of grace that changes the lives of people. Those who hear the prophetic word/action (or receive the Holy Sacrament) efficaciously receive grace which in turn allows for them to do better in doing God's work. Those who reject the prophetic word/action (or reject the Holy Sacrament) are condemned by that same divine power (see 1 Corinthians 11:29: "*For he that eateth and drinketh [the Holy Sacrament] unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body*"). The prophetic ministry is only tangentially about what is going to happen in the future. More fundamentally, the prophetic ministry is about how the prophetic word/action *sacramentalizes* the here and now. The Prophet Isaiah, therefore, can be said to foresee the coming of Christ Jesus because in his prophetic word/action Isaiah is playing an important role in bringing that divine grace into the world that will make possible sometime later the Incarnation of God. His forecast is just seeing what God will do with what God is doing right now in part through his own prophetic ministry.

Remember how when we discuss creation in *Genesis*, it is not *creatio ex nihilo* so much as it is *bringing order to what is disordered*. First, *creatio ex nihilo* is not what is being described here at all. "*In the beginning*" (Genesis 1:1) implies that there is a semblance of time already, since a *beginning* of something implies what it is before it is something else (or what it is before it is in a later state of time). Time is something. It is not *ex nihilo*. Then, God moves upon "*the face of*

the waters" (Genesis 1:2). As we discussed before, the best image here is a hen sitting upon an egg not yet hatched. "*The face of the waters*" is fragile, unformed, disordered reality that God protects until this reality is ready to be ordered. This disordered reality is something, even if in appearance and function it is very different from what we would call "reality." It is not *ex nihilo*. Secondly, when we set aside *creatio ex nihilo*, what we see is that creation in *Genesis* is more fundamentally about how God brings order to what is disordered. Bringing order to what has been disordered means the same as "making it to be in sync with God," which is to say, "giving it a likeness unto God." Ordering what is disordered, and taking what is lost/broken and then restoring it to God, is the same as salvation. That which is ordered by God, and remains in sync with God, can tell us something about God. This is what we call revelation. Therefore, we have learned the following lesson: In God, creation is salvation is revelation.

Creation/Salvation/Revelation is God reaching outward from in Himself. Thus, we can say that Creation/Salvation/Revelation is rooted in love. (see St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*: "*God creates all that exists as objects for His loving kindness*").

From the perspective of man (or any being lesser than God), Creation/Salvation/Revelation is miraculous, for it is an action coming out from God that transforms (and thus is unbound by) the natural state of things before God's action. So, creation is miraculous in transforming the disordered into ordered reality. Salvation is miraculous in overcoming death with eternal life. Revelation is miraculous in replacing darkness/unknowing with light/knowing, as when blind can see and deaf can hear. (see Psalm 77:14: "*You are the God who performs all miracles. You display your power among the peoples*").

Creation/Salvation/Revelation comes out from God but serves the needs of man (or any being lesser than God). Thus, the work of creation/salvation/revelation is miraculous but situated in the here and the now from our perspective. (see Acts 19:11-12: "*And God wrought His special miracles by the hands of Paul: So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them*").

Creation/Salvation/Revelation is God reaching outward from Himself to draw back into Himself. God is the beginning and the end of creation/salvation/revelation. When God *rests* from all the creative/salvific/revelatory work He did on the Seventh Day, He is acknowledging in *His rest* the truth that everything has been (and will be) resolved in Him. (see Matthew 11:28: “*Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*” And also see, Hebrews 4:9-11: “*There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his. Let us labor therefore to enter into that rest*” And also see, John 17:21: “*That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me*”).

Creation/Salvation/Revelation has the same elements as the Prophetic Word/Action, as we saw the last time with Isaiah 7:14, to wit:

Isaiah 7:14: *Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*

1. As Creation/Salvation/Revelation comes out from God, so Prophecy comes out from God: *Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign.*
2. As Creation/Salvation/Revelation is miraculous, so Prophecy is miraculous: *Behold, a virgin shall conceive.*
3. As Creation/Salvation/Revelation serves the needs of man (or any being lesser than God) and is therefore situated in the here and the now, so Prophecy is situated in the everyday world as we have come to know it: *And shall bear a son.*
4. As Creation/Salvation/Revelation guides everything back to God, so Prophecy guides us back to God, which is to say, guides us into *theosis*, or the state of being like God and as much in God as God is in us: *And shall call his name Immanuel [God with us].*

From God's view, the Prophetic Word/Action is the same as Creation/Salvation/Revelation. The *Genesis* creation account is prophecy, and prophecy is creative/salvific/revelatory. The *Genesis* creation is sacramental (form/matter as a conduit of grace to lead back to God on the Seventh Day), and prophecy is sacramental (prophetic word/action as a conduit of grace to lead back to God in the Incarnation). Thus, whether we speak of creation/salvation/revelation, or we speak of prophecy, God is the primary actor. It all comes out from Him. It all transforms the object or the observer/hearer into a new creation *in reference to God*. It all leads back to Him. When God in *Genesis* says that each phase of creation/salvation/revelation *is good*, He is not only seeing that it is in sync with Him, He is seeing that He is in it, as it is in Him. So, God's acknowledgment that *this is good* is an acknowledgment of His relationship with it and it with Him. The heart of what is good is relationship between God and something or someone that God has created, or saved, or to which He has revealed Himself. Creation/Salvation/Revelation exists for the one purpose of facilitating a good relationship between God and something or someone other than God. The Prophetic Word/Action exists for the one purpose of facilitating a good relationship between God and the person or persons transformed by the Prophetic Word/Action. What is at stake here then is a relationship that God originates, that God redeems, and that God resolves.