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Today's sermon is the second in a series on the beliefs and practices of our church – in preparation for the Centennial of our Independence as a Congregation on March 25. Last Sunday's sermon "Counting the Cost" talked about the risks we may have to take to be faithful followers of Jesus. The youth learned a bit about that last night when they were "taken hostage" during a Bible story simulation – a reminder that simply teaching about Jesus has caused people to be imprisoned, as happened to the early Christians (Acts 12, 16, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24). Certainly putting into practice the different way of living that the Bible teaches – when we hold people accountable to do justice, to offer forgiveness, to love their enemies – can bring ridicule, rejection, and suffering. There are many places around the world where Christians are still harshly persecuted today. We are particularly aware of the suffering our Nigerian Brethren face in the midst of on-going Muslim-Christian violence. Do you pray faithfully for your brothers and sisters in Christ who face such terrifying ordeals?

Gathering around the Word to learn the Way of the Lord was so important to the early Brethren that they continued to study the Bible in their homes even when they knew that the government could impose harsh penalties for doing so. And we continue to regard the Scriptures as being an authority higher than the authorities of this world – even when it gets us into trouble with people around us.

But notice that the portion of God's Word we read today is not calling us to focus on the Bible. As important as the Bible is, the Word of God is bigger than what can be put into print. The Word = "logos" in Greek = not just what is spoken, but also the unspoken word, the word still in the mind – the reasoning. That's what my NIV Study Bible notes say. Long before any Word from God had ever been written down or even uttered from human lips, the Word – the intention of God – was already at work. From the very Beginning, in the midst of creating this whole world, God's Word – God's purpose, God's intention – was at work. Nothing took shape apart from the Word; the very power to live was in this Word. This Word is light that the darkness cannot understand or overpower. This is the Word that became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth ... in the form of God's one and only – whom the Jews call the Messiah, the Greeks call him the Christ – in the form of Jesus. He embodies – he lives out among us "the Word" – the purpose, the very intention of the Mind of God. No one has ever seen God, but when God became flesh in Jesus Christ, that was God's way of revealing himself – his intentions, his purpose – to us. We have *seen* the Word!

In Jesus we see the forgiving, redeeming grace of God and the Life-giving strength of God's resurrecting power – power stronger than all the powers of evil and sin and death. This redeeming grace and this resurrecting power have been God's intention from the very Beginning. God knew we would mess up this spectacular creation, so from the very beginning, God planned a way out, a way through, a way beyond the guilt and shame, the fear and doubt, the terror and suffering that already from the beginning of time God knew would come when he created this world and us.

Starting with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, working through all the prophets of old, God prepared the world to receive his Word – his message of forgiveness, redeeming grace and resurrecting power. Only ... it didn't remain a concept or merely a spoken or written word – it became an Alive Word – in the form of Jesus Christ, God-with-us! And this is why we gather around something far bigger than just a Bible – as important as the Bible is to us. We gather around The Word – around Jesus, the Risen Lord, the Word of God lived out in human flesh – and we give our obedience to Jesus.

Some Christians start by asking, "Are you saved?" We start with Jesus' first words of preaching: "Come, follow me." So we ask, "Are you following Jesus?" It is not enough to accept Jesus as Savior – as important as it is to be forgiven and cleansed from our sins. We know we must also accept Jesus as Lord – the One whom we will obey, allowing his Word to shape the very spirit of our living, to make us like him. Jesus is the focus of our faith. He is God's Word to us.

The Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures are important to us because they prepare the way for that Word of Jesus to come to us. The New Testament is even more dear to us, especially the four Gospels, because they get us in touch with Jesus.

We are very cautious about groups that want to "go beyond Jesus" or who have writings other than the New Testament that they hold to be sacred. We believe: "any truth about God will be in keeping with the truth Christ revealed," as our membership training book says. The Bible itself must be understood in the light of Christ. So here's a good quote to ponder: "Brethren believe the Old Testament must be read in light of the teachings of the New Testament, ... the New Testament must be read in light of the Gospels, ... [and] we must read the Gospels in the light of Christ, his mind and his spirit. We begin with Jesus."

So ... what we will do next is very important.

Communion is a tangible, physical way of expressing our desire to allow the Word of God that was made flesh in Jesus to be made flesh in us today. It is a way of welcoming Jesus to come into our hearts, into the core of our living. It is an expression of our conviction that when Jesus is our Savior and our Lord, we belong to God – not just in this world, but in all eternity. We are convinced that Jesus is the Word of Life. Apart from him our spirits will die.

Communion is not something we do alone. We receive God's Word as a congregation. The Risen Lord Jesus helped the Apostle Paul explain this to us in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. We are the Body of Christ, each of us a different part of it, called to bring the Word of God into the world today by fleshing it out together as his body. So we teach each other, we learn from one another, we encourage each other to be bold and alive, active in living out God's Word by freely offering forgiveness, seeking to redeem the messed up people around us, making peace with enemies, trusting God's power to bring forth new life, no matter how miserable the world has become. It is still God's world, and God is still speaking his Word, still acting it out ... through followers of Jesus like you and like me.

Come, be the Body of Christ. Receive God's Word – the very Presence of Jesus – as we partake of the bread and the cup, symbols of the power of God's Word to overpower all our sin, any evil, even death itself. Come. Let communion represent your commitment to embody the Word of God!

Communion – invitation to all believers who have made a public commitment to Jesus through baptism and membership in any church to take part in communion – invitation to children and others to observe and consider when you might be ready to make this commitment. Reading of 1 Corinthians 11:23-26