

“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart,” says Paul to the Romans. (Rom 10:8b). A few chapters beyond today’s Deuteronomy lesson, we hear almost the same words, “No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” (Deut 30:14). Paul’s mind and faith are deeply formed by his knowledge of the Old Testament. Paul borrows this thought in Romans 10 from Deuteronomy 30 when Moses tells the Israelites about how accessible the Law is for them. Moses says, “Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.” (Deut 30:6). The Law is not far away—it’s not in heaven, neither is it beyond the sea. No, it’s very near you. I wonder what life would be like if we fully seized Paul’s teaching and paid attention to this phrase of Scripture, “The word is near you, on you lips and in your heart.” To pay attention to this is to answer the call to read, mark, and inwardly digest Holy Scripture. In order to have the word on our lips and in our heart, one must read the word! It’s an interesting discipline to embrace as we begin Lent.

In this very short passage from Romans, Paul quotes not only Deuteronomy 30 but also the prophet Isaiah (“No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” Isaiah 28:16) and the prophet Joel (“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Joel 2:32).¹ So, to Paul Holy Scripture was crucial in the way to live one’s life.

¹ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 39-43.

The stories we hear of Jesus indicate that he was also shaped by Holy Scripture. In his sparring with Satan in Luke's Gospel, Jesus quotes parts of Deuteronomy (8:3, 6:13, and 6:16). Jesus lives and teaches this nearness of the word. I mentioned in my sermon yesterday at Hellie Trussell's funeral that Hellie always wanted her Bible close by. It was a gift from her mother that she cherished. When she was still settling in at Governor's House and having items brought to her from her condo, she specifically wanted that Bible with her in her new home. It was a Bible she read regularly—not just one that sits on a shelf with only a memory of when it was given or from whom it came as gift.

I remember growing up that I had many friends who were Baptist, and I was amazed at how they could quote Bible verses. As young children they were taught passages to memorize and to recite. I used to wonder why my Episcopal Church didn't do those kinds of Bible quizzes and games that they played. I came to understand that we are seeped with Holy Scripture in our liturgy—in the prayers we pray throughout *The Book of Common Prayer* and also in the music we sing—in all parts of our liturgy there is Holy Scripture abundantly woven in. The only way we recognize that is to read Holy Scripture.

Martin Smith, former prior at the Society of St. John the Evangelist, has written a wonderful book entitled *The Word is Very Near You: A Guide to Praying With Scripture*. It's a practical book that teaches one how to not only read Scripture but also how to meditate and to pray with Scripture. Smith says these words: "Beginning to read the Bible seriously is rather like visiting a vast art museum. We are bewildered at first by the profusion of images and tend to survey them all in a daze, pausing before only a few of the most famous or striking works. But if we begin to make regular visits we learn to contemplate just one object at a time and let it work on our imagination. In time a single painting or sculpture can come to show us many things about life. It can work many changes in our

understanding and vision if we allow it to. In the same way one scriptural symbol can in time work changes in us at several levels through the power of the Spirit.”² The aim of Smith’s book is “to foster intimacy with God...(Intimacy! With God! What would *that* involve?) Can a *book* really help here? Can it fulfill such a promise?”³ Smith unfolds how the Bible can lead one into intimacy with God. Wouldn’t that be an interesting journey for Lent?

“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart,” says Paul to the Romans. (Rom 10:8b). Paul calls each of us to consider moving closer to that place where the word is on our lips and in our hearts. It’s a new way of living. It’s a new way of thinking. It involves a new way of praying with the Scriptures. It’s not something that happens in 40 days of Lent, but it is something that can begin or deepen in 40 days of Lent.

Today we’ll begin the journey with some extended silence following the sermon—a little time to pray with these words and to imagine ourselves in the midst of them—to wander through them as if going to an art museum.

“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart,” says Paul to the Romans and to us in our time.

² Marin L. Smith, *The Word is Very Near You: A Guide to Praying With Scripture* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1989), 64.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.