



FIRST  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH  
SPARTANBURG

## OUR SACRED SPACE: THE PULPIT

Isaiah 40:8, John 6:63, Hebrews 4:12, Romans 10:14

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The carpenter has his hammer, the seamstress her needles, and the preacher has their pulpit. And, like the feel of a catcher's mitt, each one has its own smell and feel and, like the slugger's bat, the right one brings confidence and a bit of luck.

...And this one feels mighty good!

Perhaps the most obvious feature of our pulpit is its location. It sits at the center of the Chancel and draws the majority of our attention. This was the most dramatic difference I noticed during my tour throughout the cathedrals of Europe (outside of the one pulpit that had a spectacular carved dragon being slayed by the Angel Gabriel on top of it!). For the Catholics, the Mass is the center of worship. The pulpit, more often than not, was off to the side in the middle of the nave, that is the congregation.

In the Reformation, the Word of God and its proclamation became *the* foundation of worship and, thus, took center stage. The word is the center of our worship, rather than the liturgy and the sacrament as in our sister Episcopalian churches.

We focus on scripture because God's word is  
intelligible,  
powerful,  
and gives life.

The Bible is intelligible because it comes from God as I Thessalonians explains: *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, ...* (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

This pulpit is meant to underscore God's Word and the need of the people to hear it every week. God's Word; not the preacher's word; not the church's word. The reformers wanted to build everything on the Bible.

Like any institution run by humans, over time things became overly complicated. I remember trying to navigate the billing for Matthew's procedure several years ago.

The first bill came from the hospital, I paid it and thought I was done. How foolish. Next came the lab bill, then the anesthetist's bill, and finally the surgeon's bill. Eighteen months later, it was all taken care of...or so I thought. I received a notice from my insurance that there were changing how much they were paying, and I had to start the whole thing over again. I am convinced no one understands the system! In fact, my insurer said they were legally barred from telling me how much it was going to cost!

In the same way, the church and its theology became complicated beyond belief. The Reformers wanted to start over and get back to the basics – it all begins and ends with the Bible; it is at the center because it speaks clearly and plainly to our faith.

*God is love...*

*...the lord is my shepherd...*

*...forgive others...*

*... don't be anxious.*

Nothing in all human history has spoken with such clarity. The Bible speaks to our everyday lives in ways that make direct sense. On my Sabbatical, one woman spoke of how powerfully scripture connected her directly to God. Her daughter had tragically died as a teenager. Nothing any doctor, friend, or pastor said helped. But there was a Bible verse she clung to, "I know that my redeemer lives." Reciting that simple phrase became the words of God mainlined into her heart. In a very basic practical way it helped her live through that Hell.

But it not only speaks from God's mouth to our ear in the moment. It endures all things. As Isaiah

teaches: *The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.* (Isaiah 40:8)

The one constant throughout human history is change. Morays and morals shift as fast as the wind. Cultural norms shift and, despite the vast scientific advances in the modern world, we still don't even know what to have for breakfast! Fifty years ago, bacon and eggs were the ideal. Then, 20 years ago, it was a great horror. Eat bagels instead, but now carbs are the great evil. And just last week guess what I read – the benefits of a bacon and egg breakfast! The world constantly changes.

But, more to the point, even our own lives and that of our loved ones can be taken in an instant. Here today and gone tomorrow. The fleeting nature of life can be scary and unnerving. We know a child who lacks consistent parenting grows up with all kinds of troubles. We need stability. And there is one thing we can always count on that will not change.

God's Word.

This pulpit is strong; it is built to last for centuries. Like the Word of God, it is beautiful and a work of art; also like the Word of God, it is weighty (over 300 pounds!). It is not flimsy or immaterial; it is solid. It dominates the space and it exudes a certain power to remind us of the power of the Word of God.

The power of the Word of God for the salvation of humankind ... *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then can they call on the One they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the One of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"* (Romans 10:13-15)

Through the Holy Spirit, the Word of God has the power to convict people – that putting their trust in the Lord will lead to everlasting life. So, from this pulpit, we proclaim most centrally of all – the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord.

The symbols on the pulpit are meant to point us to Christ. Thus, the Alpha and the Omega (the first and last letter of the Greek alphabet) are carved into the front. It reminds us that Jesus was there at the beginning of creation and that he will be there at the end. It reminds us that, in our own lives, Jesus is Lord of the entirety of our life, from soup to nuts, from the beginning to the end.

One Catholic brother I met in Alabama at a monastery explained how the Bible bookends their day. He explained how upon rising he calls to mind verses such as "The Lord is my light and my salvation, of whom shall I be afraid." This verse gives him confidence to face even irksome people! And then as he lies down, he calls to mind, "In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety."

Alpha, the beginning of the day and Omega, at the end. God's will and God's Word is for the whole of our lives.

The Chi-Rho is the combination of the first two Greek letters in the word Christ. Before a crucial battle in the year 312AD, Emperor Constantine dreamed of putting such a symbol on his soldiers' shields. After victory, he proclaimed Christianity the official religion of the Empire. The Chi-Rho reminds us that we are victorious in all things through Christ who loves us.

And these Acanthus leaves on the pulpit remind us of Christ's sacrificial death to bring us life. "Acanthus" comes from the Greek meaning thorny flower. It is evocative of the crown of thorns worn by Christ when he won victory over the grave.

The words of our Lord are filled with life. And, perhaps nothing demonstrates this more clearly, than when Jesus' words brought back Lazarus from the dead. But its power is not only for the next life, but for this one right now.

*Speak His words, speak the Scriptures, because the word of God is life.* (Hebrews 4:12)

And since its essence is life, it can enliven every aspect of our existence. It has incredible power, but

it is not so much magical power like an incantation, but an enduring power born out through the way it has carried faithful people for thousands of years and speaks very fresh to our lives today.

We see that Christ used God's word to combat Satan. Three times he was tempted in the wilderness and three times he used Scripture to defeat him (is the devil a "He"?). This is why the psalmist wrote, *"I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."* God's Word can be a bulwark against temptation.

The Word of God has creative power for we know that in the beginning when God said *"Let there be light"* ... there ... was ... light!

There is a certain resonant power in the Word that has global and governmental reach to shape countries and peoples. Our society is founded upon the Judeo-Christian ethic, as are many others. But unique in all the world, it also has the gift of intimacy to give power to our daily living.

God's Word can bring life to virtually any moment.

When I read Psalm 100, *"Make a joyful noise,"* I actually feel a surge of joy.

When I hear, *"The Lord is my shepherd,"* peace washes over me.

When I speak aloud Micah 6:8: *"Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly,"* a sense of profound purpose takes over my spirit.

When I turn to Romans 8: *"All things work together for good,"* I believe deep in my heart in God's power to bring good out of any situation. I really believe it. Ever since I was 8 years old.

It took me through my parents' divorce.

I was living in Teaneck, New Jersey at the time. It was an old, spooky house – haunted the neighborhood kids would say. There had been a fire in it, so we got it dirt cheap. It was cavernous, with 5 bedrooms, a sun porch, a full basement, and a massive attic. One day, I noticed my father was sleeping in the library with all the books. Soon after that, my mother told me they were separating. I

cried a little bit. I didn't really know what to think, to tell you the truth. My mom read the Bible to me. I don't remember the exact verse. But it was about God's love, God's care, and God's power to get us through whatever we face in this life.

And when she read it, I believed it. And though it was hard, because of the power of the Word of God, I got through it without too much difficulty (or too many personality defects, though I am sure Matt and Liz could count them off for you).

In fact, in some ways I think I am sadder today than I was back then. Sadder for them than myself. Because I know what a joy and wonder and support it is to have someone to walk through life with.

If you keep God's Word at the center of your life, it will be there for you, and for you, too, it will be as if it was coming directly from God's mouth to your ear. Amen.