

“The Power of Words”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Luke 2:15-21

On the first day of each New Year, after the parties and the late night vigil to see the crystal ball drop in New York City’s Times Square, we awaken – many of us sleep-deprived and struggling to recover from the festivities – completely unaware that the day dawns on one of the Church’s great and ancient feasts, that of the Holy Name of Jesus. Except for every seventh year, when January 1st falls on a Sunday, and we celebrate this special occasion in worship.

It is also the 8th day of Christmas, and on that 8th day after Jesus’ birth, Mary and Joseph, in accordance with the Law of Moses, brought their baby boy into the sacred covenant God made with Abraham by having him circumcised. This was, and remains today, perhaps the most important moment in a Jewish person’s life, a time of joyous celebration, very much like a Christian’s baptism.

It’s also the day when a Jewish person officially receives their name, in this case Jesus, which translates from the Hebrew as “Savior” or “Deliverer.” Unlike now, when parents carefully and sometimes creatively reflect and debate on what to call their child, an angel told Joseph in a dream to name their son Jesus, and while the names we give our children carry great meaning for us, we need to remember the much higher regard ancient people placed on the power of words and on names in particular.

In the creation story of Genesis 1, God spoke creation into existence. He said, “Let there be light,” and there was light, revealing the performative power of words, the idea that words really matter because they shape reality. Or consider the name of God, which we pronounce as

Yahweh. It was considered so holy, so powerful, that only the High Priest knew how to say it correctly, and only said it aloud once a year in the Temple.

In biblical texts, it's written without vowels, just four letters, known as the Tetragrammaton, to honor the mystery of God's identity and to conceal its proper pronunciation as a way of safeguarding people from the danger of using it wrongly. Some authors of scripture feared the power of God's holy name so much that they didn't dare to use even that abbreviated form, but instead wrote Lord in its place.

In the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus cast out the demon torturing the man at Genessaret, he first asked for its name, a common practice both then and now for people who deal with demons or other spirits, because it's believed that knowing the name of such a creature confers the power to control it. Once the demon revealed itself as Legion, Jesus quickly exorcised it and set the man free.

Think of the many name changes in scripture: Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah; Jacob to Israel; Simon to Peter; Saul to Paul. All of these marked decisive shifts in a person's life, when God altered their identity and purpose radically. In the Bible, words, especially names, bear tremendous power. They call life into existence. They reveal the sacred, liberate the captive, and change people profoundly.

By comparison, we show relatively little concern for words. We throw them around rather loosely, often without much thought, apparently oblivious or uncaring as to their power, how they can create or destroy, and how they shape reality for us and others. We even repeat the saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," when we know that's not true.

All of us have suffered from cruel words. All of us have experienced healing from kind ones. When we make vows or take an oath, we feel a sense of responsibility, of obligation, and when someone agrees to “take us at our word,” it is meant as a great compliment, a badge of integrity, but one that must be honored. It is a challenge to do our best to meet our commitments and prove worthy of trust.

We know that lies can deceive, mislead us from reality to fantasy, and eventually deliver us into the hands of Satan, the father of lies and illusions. We know that words of accusation spawn suspicion and conflict and compromise the basic trust that upholds our social contract, crippling cooperation and causing order to collapse into chaos. We know that words of truth, uncomfortable as they may be, will, as scripture says, set us free from sin and evil and bring us peace.

So in 2017, as we make our resolutions to eat right, exercise hard, lose weight, pray more, or whatever, we might be wise to remember and strive to follow the example of our ancestors, who took words and especially names much more seriously than we tend to do. We might be tempted, in our modern arrogance, to see them as simple-minded and superstitious when it comes to the power they ascribed to words, but we can resist that temptation and keep this particular New Year’s resolution if we think and speak and hear the Holy Name of Jesus often enough.

You’ve probably heard people say, “What’s in a name?” Everything, when the name is Jesus. That name wields power beyond our imagination. Jesus came to fulfill the meaning of his name, to save and deliver us from ignorance to knowledge, from foolishness to wisdom, from falsehood to truth. Jesus came to free us from our slavery to sin so we can be reconciled with God and with other people in love. He came as a humble infant so that we might be reborn as a

new creation, rather than devoured by the evil that hungers for our final destruction. Jesus wants to heal our hurt, give us a sense of sacred purpose than transcends mere survival, so that we can be transformed.

As the New Year begins, we wonder what it might bring, how it will unfold, whether catastrophe or blessing will emerge, and exploring the possibilities that lie ahead is a worthwhile endeavor. But as we wonder, as we project our fears and hopes into the future, too often we do so with a passive attitude. We assume a demeanor of helplessness. We assume that what will happen, the events that will benefit or victimize us, lies beyond our influence, much less our control. And to a certain extent that's true. But if we stay passive, if we deny the power brought into our lives by the Holy Name of Jesus, then we will deprive ourselves of the freedom that powerful name gives.

Jesus makes us free to make holy choices, to utter words of healing and hope, words of truth that reveal deception, resist the proud, and restore God's world. Choosing the right words takes care, the discernment brought by prayer, nestled within a compassionate community of faith whose shared wisdom in the Word brings accountability and understanding and the courage to serve as active agents of God's purpose on this Earth.

We have been given a voice by the eternal and Incarnate Word that brought creation into existence. So speak. Speak the name of Jesus, and you will have a Happy New Year. Amen.