

“The Power of the Word”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
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John 1:1-14

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. That’s a noble sentiment, and a healthy one that we sometimes manage to practice. When we refuse to allow the hurtful words of others to affect us emotionally, we deprive them of power over us, which is what mean people want more than anything. Taking away their power to drag us down and make us feel insecure is a very satisfying and liberating experience. But if we’re honest, most of us, at least some of the time, have trouble with it.

We might pretend that the back-handed compliments, the unconstructive criticisms, and the outright judgment don’t touch us, but we’re only fooling ourselves, and telling yourself a lie is never a good idea. In fact, that lie of “Oh, it really doesn’t bother me,” when quite clearly it does, just opens the door for those snarky comments to burrow into us like a tick. We absorb and internalize them, because we refuse to deal with them, and we begin to wonder if perhaps there’s some truth to the mean things people say.

So words can be harmful. Even at our best, it takes energy to deflect them. There are those, of course, who really don’t care what others think or say about them, but this group generally divides into two types: the saintly and the slightly sociopathic, and I think we all know which type is rare and which is all too common.

However, if words can hurt, they also possess the power to heal. If words can break, they can also make whole. Each of us has received and given kind words of comfort, sincere compliments, comments of praise and forgiveness, and those experiences reveal the potency of words. Certainly, the ancients knew this. To invoke the name of a god or demon was your best

bet of getting what you wanted through some supernatural favor, and even in Judaism, the sacred name of God was a closely guarded secret. Only the high priest knew how to pronounce it, and dared to say it aloud just once a year.

So words matter, there's no denying it. As the saying goes, mean what you say, and say what you mean. So unless we want to empty the world of much of its meaning, words must bear power far beyond mere hearing, and that's what John's trying to get at by calling Jesus the Word, with a capital "W."

Here he borrows a concept from Greek philosophy, probably attempting to translate the gospel of Jesus for people mystified by it. They'd heard the stories about his birth and miracles and death and resurrection, but those didn't make much sense for some. They wanted to know, "Who is this guy, and why is it that you think we ought to worship him?" So John went for something familiar, something they could relate to, and he chose Word. Ironically, what made the gospel easier to understand for them can be somewhat confusing for us.

Basically, Word, translated from the Greek *logos*, from which we get the root word for logic, means "the ordering principle of the cosmos," "the source and essence of all being," without which nothing would exist. John explains this in elegant prose and applies it to Jesus, making the claim that Word is more than a mere concept but is embodied in a specific person, always present, from before the beginning of time, but who has now come into the world as a human being. That would have been a fresh connection for the first people to hear what John wrote, inspired yet perplexing.

It is a radical vision of a cosmic Christ, an eternal entity who rules and sustains the universe by literally speaking it into existence, and if that Word ever went silent, even for a fraction of a second, all of it would collapse into nothingness: stars and supernovas; birds and

trees, you and me. Everything would go dark, literally, the light of life extinguished. That's the power of the creative Word, and it's a far cry from the Jesus we were singing about last night, the powerless infant cradled in a feeding trough, wholly dependent upon his parents.

Putting the two together gives us a little mental whiplash, and the temptation is to pick one over the other, but we can't, because both are equally true and necessary. The fusion of the eternal creating Word with created flesh and blood stands at the core of our faith. It is a mystery meant to unravel us, to free the imagination from the tight coils of what we think we know. Make no mistake. This is designed to mess with your mind. So if you don't get it and feel a little stupid about that, you're actually a lot smarter than you think.

But what does it mean to us, this Word that came into the world? It means that the One who made the universe, the one that gave it, also came to save it. It means that we mean enough to him that he went to tremendous trouble to fix what we broke, to heal what we hurt. It means that the mean, careless, sinful words used to disrupt harmony and split people apart at the seams are puny compared to the power of the Word that brings the blessings of unity and peace.

If that doesn't give you hope I don't know what will. That the Word, powerful beyond all reckoning, fearsome, unimaginable came here to be with us, to become us so that we might become more like him, reborn of God as children, full of grace and glory. What words of ours could possibly express the fullness of its meaning? I honestly don't know.

But the Word has shown us what we need to see, that we need to choose our words well, words of light and life, not darkness and death; words of witness that spark faith; words of humble acceptance that lead us to perceive without fear a new dimension of what the word Christmas means. And maybe that's enough, more than enough, to make this day more than merry, but truly astounding. Amen.