

Word One

Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Richard Spalding
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Isaiah 50:4-8; Matthew 5:3-12

Finding common ground.

As usual, the Session has discerned a theme for this year's summer sermons that rises out of our current human predicament like a *cri de coeur*, or maybe a sigh too deep for words. If there's a more apt or more urgent name for the work we had better be about—as Christians, as citizens, as children of God—I don't know what it is.

At first I thought that, being this summer's first speaker, I might be able to get away with blessing you at the start of this reflective journey without giving any particular directions: "Godspeed to you", as opposed to "go down the block, take the first left, the second right, and then go seven days until you see the sage perched at the corner of next week, and do whatever s/he says". But no, as I thought about it, it seemed important to actually start the search. If finding common ground is the goal, where might the looking begin?

The gospel writer to whom we've given the name John begins at the beginning this way:

In the beginning was the Word –

*and the word was with God,
and the word was God.*

The Word was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through the Word,

and without the Word not one thing came into being.

In Word was life – and the the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

We don't know much about the writer of those words. A sage, perhaps, an intimate of Jesus probably, something of a mystic certainly. But a poet, too, surely and for that perhaps we can grant him poetic license to pay what must have seemed to him the highest possible compliment to God by envisioning the Eternal Divine Mystery as *word*. Of all the gifts this John could have offered back to the Divine, the holiest one he could find to give was *words* from the heart of his heart.

And actually of course the story we've been telling about beginnings, reaching back right through the New Testament and into the mists of time, begins with God *speaking* the universe into being. "In the

beginning,” the book of Genesis tells us, “God said...” and the words “Let there be” were as much magic as God needed in order to create. And when, after a bit, God looked around at each of the emerging pieces of creation: “the spacious firmament on high” and everything beneath its cosmic canopy, God said “it was good” and that word stuck not just on the page but on our retinas, in the living tissue of our hearts, even on the craggy and complicated Velcro of our intellect. God *uttered* realities into existence and stuck the powerful, indelible word “good” to the beauty, the integrity, the hope that creation contains to this day.

So we look around at the best of what there is to see: at the ingenuity of a tree, at the way the morning light falls on the side of an old house, at beloved faces around us that bespeak so much of our history, at works of art that tell the truth. We look around and before critique, before analysis, before comparison, the word “good” is hovering there: *making things is good*. And so in the words we wield as we navigate our way through this creation: the words we speak, the words we think, the words we sing or pray, the words into which we whisper what we hope, in those, *our* words, we discover that we share some small part of the Divine power to speak things into being: our common ground with divinity and with each other. We see the world as we are, each of us: as poets, perhaps; as sages rarely; as struggling humans always. We see the world as the characters we each are in the story and we speak back our gifts from the heart of our hearts in the likeness of what we have been given: the poet, words; the faithful, prayers; the parent, hopes (and worries); the public servant, policies; the artist, truth; Presbyterians, good order; the human, love. Word is like breath to us, like air, like water and light and blood—one self-evident truth that we hold, each and all, for better and for worse.

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There are of course other ways of using words. Back in the time when the divine Word first became flesh and dwelt among us, when it was still a baby, Augustus Caesar issued a word that all the world should be taxed, logged into his ledgers so as to milk as much of its goodness as possible into the empire’s coffers. And when, a tiny bit later in that beginnings story, King Herod had a visit from three starry-eyed sages carrying odd presents who stopped in at the palace to ask for directions, Herod took a chummy tone with them and asked them to bring “word” back to him about what they found and where so that he could sharpen that imperial word for infanticide. And near the end of the story, when Pontius Pilate was looking for a way to corner Jesus, he polished up his imperial words with power and posted them above his dying victim on the cross: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews—neither the first nor the last political label to be wielded as a lethal weapon. If we’ve learned anything about words, it’s that they have edges that cut both ways: if they can create, bless, recognize, they can also distort, dismember, destroy. The words that come out of our mouths and minds, like the actions that issue from our limbs, have real power to ruin us if they are not the words of compassion and justice. Even the silences that come out of us that sometimes speak even louder have the real power to distort us beyond recognition when they are silences rooted in failures of courage for the telling of hard and costly but necessary truths. Reading the writing on the wall is sobering; it matters what we say. Our words coalesce in the grammar of both life and death; the common ground of our worded-ness is a place marked by both blessing and curse.

The words of the prophet that we heard a few minutes ago seem to me drenched with a poet’s tenderness and an activist’s resistance about the speaking of words. “The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught,” Isaiah says: the learner’s tongue that speaks the language of humility in the voice of discovery, wonder, creation, “so that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.” Oh, the word that

the learner speaks certainly does land in a dire world full of those who scorn and shame and contest and wound; there are other kinds of words, other ways of speaking. But the poet-prophet says, so tenderly, “morning by morning God wakens, God wakens my ear” and what power it has to say two words twice in that verse, “morning by morning, God wakens, wakens...” as though just to speak the name of the stubborn power of God to make it all new again as the fresh light that falls on the side of the old house is enough to hold its own amid all the other kinds of speech that there are. With ear awakened to hear as those who are taught, the courageous one will not be confounded because in such hearing and speaking God is near.

When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, part of what people came to revere was the power to create in the words he spoke to people. The first reported words he spoke to us were blessing: Blessed are you, even in your poverties and blessed in your struggle to try to get living right and blessed in your work of mercy and of peace and blessed even in your mourning because it speaks of love and blessed even when they hurl those other ways of speaking at you: labels and taunts and manipulations and lies, because *nothing* can erase the goodness that was designed into you in the beginning. The words Jesus spoke may not have been Genesis words to set planets spinning or cause the seas to swell with creatures but they brought worlds into being nonetheless for the people who heard them and hear them still. Jesus himself, the *mot juste* of God, spoke the right word in the ripe moment. “You are forgiven.” “Come unto me.” “Peace I leave with you.” “Your faith has made you well.” “Blessed are you poor.” “You are the salt of the earth.” “Rise and walk!” He spoke blessing and it stuck. He forgave and life began again. He uttered healing into the open wounds of people’s lives. He named the forgotten back into being. And his cries for justice and compassion still echo down the corridor of centuries.

That anonymous John, the gospel wordsmith, wrote: *Word became flesh and dwelt among us*. And so it goes with creation by word: We speak our best selves into being over and over again—or not. We en flesh with words the truest things we know, the truest things we are—or we don’t. And, God help us, we have to dwell together in the midst of the architecture of the truths we speak.

So morning by morning, and again today, Word is born—and lands, en fleshed, among us. *In word is life* (says the poet) *and the life is the light of us all* because the power of Word to create travels like light. This morning, again, under the spacious firmament on high, word speaks and we meet on the common ground of our powers of speech to learn again to speak with the learner’s tongue: to own the towering power of our words and to acknowledge the responsibility to speak in such a way as to sustain the weary with a word and so as to bring peace and to seek healing and to widen understanding. To speak so as to create. Morning by morning, the first words, “let there be” are becoming the next words, “let *us* be”. Today is, again, the feast day of embodied word: in the beginning, word, all over again: a new creation.

So let there be words among us. Let them be good and honest and true, let them be graceful. Let our words be for creating life, not ever for distorting it or mocking it or for the dismembering of the body that we are. Isn’t our common ground today surely that each of us is carrying some word that needs to be spoken, somewhere, somehow, from the heart of your heart to open some new door, to heal some old wound, to put something right, to strike some new spark? Jesus, the Word made flesh, dwells among us to teach us to listen, carefully, as those who are taught and to wield our words like light and to find the words we need to change the shape of the world because words can do that; we’ve learned that.

So let one piece of our common ground be our high calling to speak the words of new creation: words like “I promise...” or “I will be there” or “Don’t be afraid...” or “I forgive you...” or “I’m listening” or “I wonder...” And let our words tell the costly truths we have to tell sometimes: words like: “This must change” or “I am responsible” or “This is unjust” or “I was mistaken” or “Something is wrong here.”

Morning by morning, the writing is on the wall for all to read. Today, in this fresh light, it says, indelibly, *you are a beloved child of God*. It speaks tenderly; it says, *Comfort, comfort, O my people*. Staring down the empires of this world, calmly meeting the gaze of the Herods and Pilates of this world, standing up to every power to distort or injure or humiliate, Word speaks again in us.

It says, *Love is stronger than death*.

It says, *the arc of history is bending toward justice*.

It says, *Let us be the people we need*.

It says, *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*.

It says *Alleluia!*

Amen.