

Sermon: January 10, 2021, first Sunday after Epiphany. John 1: 1-18
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Words are powerful. Words can build up or break down, they can inspire us to see things in new ways and challenge us to new heights, or, as we saw last Wednesday in Washington DC, they can draw out humanity's worst, most selfish instincts, with the catchphrases of derision, words of division and unfounded claims sowed by the hour for four long years, blossoming in violence.

In your experience, you have, no doubt, experienced the power of words: words that have harmed, words that have healed. Can you think of a positive, inspiring word, or perhaps a phrase, a quote, a line of poetry or song lyrics, that has shaped and continues to impact who you are? Are there "words to live by" that you carry deep within, that act as your creed, mantra or safety guide? Or are there words of judgment and belittlement that still ring in your ears from growing-up years, or abusive workplaces... or angry words spoken or restorative words left unspoken, that have changed some relationships forever?

The Bible has always understood the importance of words: not just because it is a book full of words, over half a million of them in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic, but because words have the power of bringing things into being. If we reach back to the beginning of Hebrew Scripture – the first chapter of Genesis – declarative statements by God, words such as "let there be light" or "let the land produce living creatures" are all it takes to create light, or populate the globe with insects and reptiles and mammals. God spoke, and it was so.

Today's gospel reading from John, talks at length about "the Word." And what was this singular, capital-W Word up to? Well, as mentioned already, the Word was present at creation: using John's phrasing for it, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God....Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being." (John 1: 1,3) And then, John says this (John 1: 14): "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

While Luke begins his account of the life of Jesus with angelic interactions with Elizabeth and Mary and the Shepherds, and Matthew begins with Jesus' royal genealogy and learned visitors from afar, John starts his gospel, his story of the life, ministry and meaning of Jesus, by weaving a philosophical tapestry that is academic and spiritual and intricate. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

To academically-inclined, spiritually-trained first hearers of these words, this notion would have already been familiar. In Greek Stoic and Hellenistic thought, The Word or, in Greek, LOGOS, was regarded as "a divine reason inherent in things" (Britannica), a cosmic logic that held everything together. And, as already mentioned, this idea of the Word *or words* of God having the power to bring life into being, was already well-established within Jewish thought.

But John's objective, in starting his gospel this way, wasn't just to impress the scholars back at the academy. John wanted his listeners – including us – to be drawn closer to

Jesus, the human expression of God's own wise, loving, creative impulse. John reminds us of the powerful role played by the Word at creation then says, "you know, that same creative Word that invoked everything you see, lived among us as Jesus Christ, son of Mary, child of God." John, both structured and spiritual, wants for us the same thing that Matthew, Mark and Luke hoped for: to be drawn closer to God-in-Christ, our source, our destination, our fellow traveller on the road. So John starts his story of Jesus by telling us about a creative word *so powerful* that it brought earth out of nothing, a creative word *so personal* that it has shaped who you are. John starts his Jesus story by telling us that this Logos, this Divine, coherent Word becomes flesh, and dwells among us in the person of Jesus: Mary's child, Son of God, teacher of parables, welcomer of the shunned, healer of the broken, restorer of hope, embodiment of love.

Mystical, intellectual John calls me to recognize that the same Divine impulse that shapes my life, is just as deeply invested in the well-being of all life. The song sung by God the singer, that brings me to life, also inspires harmony in the earth and sea and skies. The Word that imagined the diversity of creation, also walked the shores of Galilee. And the Christ whose glory we celebrate at Christmas, is the same creative Word that was present in the very origins of all that we see and know and experience.

In his book, *The Universal Christ*, Father Richard Rohr speaks at length about this connection, between the Christ, present at the origin of all things, and Jesus Christ, "who personally demonstrated God's radical unity with humanity". In Father Richard's theology, the irresistible power of God's love is something that pulsates in and through all of creation; and Jesus visibly, humanly embodies exactly this same love. "Love" writes Richard Rohr (pp.70-71), "which might be called the attraction of all things toward all things, is a universal language and underlying energy that keeps showing itself despite our best efforts to resist it.... Love is constantly creating future possibilities for the good of all concerned." As Fr. Richard notes, humanity does a pretty good job at resisting this inherent goodness, with the brokenness of human life regularly expressing itself as the hatred, prejudice and greed that make life a misery for many living beings on this planet. But that doesn't change the love-infused nature of all that is: as stated in the beautiful, metaphorical story of creation, everything was spoken into being by the holy, imaginative word and all of it – every last bit – was immediately declared to be good-to-the-core.

What I find so important in Rohr's work, is that it does not set up human life on planet earth as something that needs to be escaped in order to experience the holiness of God; on the contrary! All that we see has a holy origin and the holy presence of the Christ. The earth, the sea, the skies, all living beings, all expressions of love and life and light, are places where we experience God's own delight. In Jesus we learn so much about how we humans are to connect with that Christ-light within us, to receive and own the belovedness of God shining in us, how to shine God's light for others even when we are under threat... and when we embrace that flow of love, we will come to realize that this world we live in is neither a foe to be feared nor a possession to be exploited. All the world expresses the glory of a creative, present, amazing God.

As we leave Christmas behind and move into this season of Epiphany, I give thanks for the nativity narratives of Luke and Matthew: so much about God's love is brought to light by Mary and Elizabeth, Joseph and Gabriel, Shepherds and Magi, a star that

illuminates our path and an Angel Choir that calls us away from fear toward universal, joyous blessings. But I also give thanks for this other way, John's way of exploring Jesus, the Christ: the concept that the Christ-energy that had been creating and enriching life from the moment that it was just a holy thought, in Jesus started to move and breathe and make choices and decisions, as all humans do. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" and continues to do so, each breath we breathe, each choice we make, each time we experience Christ's loving word inspiring and cajoling and directing us toward goodness, mercy, advocacy, courage, justice. The life of Jesus Christ expresses God's always-present desire for respectful treatment of this earth and all living beings – and experiences, in heartbreaking fashion, what happens when *forces other than love* seize power. In Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, we touch base with the foundation of all that is and all that will be and maybe, just maybe, come to recognize the holy, wonderful ways in which that foundational power has touched our deepest selves.

As we step away from the manger, may this next season, of Epiphany, show us and teach us, renew us and surprise us, enlighten us and redirect us, as we examine how the Word, enfleshed, lives within us and between us and beyond us. May that powerful love guide our world in these days of pandemic, may they guide our neighbours to the south and keep them safe as they prepare for inauguration day. Thanks be to God, eternal, ethereal and indwelling. Amen.

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