



SERMONS THAT WORK

Christmas Day Selection III

Beyond Words

[RCL]: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12); John 1:1-14

Words fail.

Stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon. Feel the wind rising off the canyon walls. See the light dappling in the crevices of the great chasm. Then try to describe this in words. For those who have stood there for themselves, your experience will bring back their own. But tell of feelings felt so deeply on the edge of the Grand Canyon to someone who has never been outside the confines of the cornfields of Iowa and words alone will fall flat.

A mother holds her newborn baby, seeing for the first time the child that has been growing in her womb. Those perfect hands touch her own. She counts and recounts the ten tiny toes—flesh of her flesh. We only have the power to evoke the faintest shadow of the vast ocean of emotions felt by the Virgin Mary as she held Jesus. Yes, words are powerful and can be life-changing, but some moments in life are beyond the power of language to contain.

One can craft tasty sentences that amuse, arouse, or anger. Yet language falls short of the breadth of human experience. Wittgenstein studied language deeply as an important philosopher of the last century and he found that words are not up to a task so simple as describing the aroma of a cup of coffee. He noted that if we can't describe a cup of coffee, how much more difficult is it to portray God with words.

Yet portraying God with words is the task of scripture. Inspired by God, the Bible's authors gave us moving passages of great depth of meaning, knowing that God is still beyond words. With soaring language, John's Gospel begins with a poetic passage placing Jesus in eternal context:

*"In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being.*

*What has come into being in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not overcome it.”*

On this Christmas Day, John takes us back to the beginning: the “In the beginning” of the Book of Genesis. He reminds us that the story of Jesus started before the world began, when the spirit of God hovered over the waters in creation as chaos swirled into order. There before the story of humanity was Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Word of God creating the world.

John uses poetry to point to the triune God beyond all language. In doing so, John uses words laden with meaning. He calls Jesus the “Logos,” a word from Greek philosophy, which meant much more than the basic unit of a sentence. Logos is the idea or concept behind the words of language. The Logos is the eternal pattern, the perfect ideal the word tries to express. So, the word “square” means a shape equal on all sides. Even if we can never draw a perfect square, the word square still refers to that perfection. Jesus is that perfect Word, that Logos.

John also tells us that this perfect Word dwelled among us using a word that literally means “pitched a tent in our midst.” For Jews, this would naturally bring to mind the idea of the tent where God’s glory dwelt with Israel during the Exodus from Egypt. This was the same glory of God that dwelt in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. The poetic words, “God pitched his tent among us,” say that in the same way that the very glory of God present to the Hebrews in the Exodus and the Jews of the first century in the Temple is present in Jesus. In dwelling among us, however, Jesus is out among the people, rather than contained within the Temple.

In this poetic way, John pointed to so much more than he said. For the Temple was the nexus—the meeting place—of God and humanity on earth. Jesus becomes that place of connection between God and humanity. In Jesus, the glory of God became visible on earth.

This prologue then sets us up for all that follows. When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well and he accepts her, showing her the loving care others did not, we see the heart of God lived out on earth. Again and again, in John’s Gospel, we see signs that point to Jesus being God among us. In his life, as well as in his teaching, Jesus reveals more about God than we could learn otherwise.

I could go on showing these connections, but John’s Gospel does it so well in two verses. In verse 18, which is just beyond our reading for today, John writes, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” Then at the end of chapter 20, John writes, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

While all the words in the world could not contain the Word made human in Jesus, the words John chose are written so that we might believe and have life. John knew God's own glory had pitched his tent among us in a stable in Bethlehem. Then God gave the Holy Spirit as a first gift to those who come to believe. The Jesus who was the Word made flesh would always be present with those who heard John's Gospel. This is why Christians have always emphasized reading scripture, as the words convey God's own heart.

In sharing *The Way of Love: Practices for a Jesus Centered Life*, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has offered this church patterns which have nourished Christians for centuries. Captured in the words *Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest*, are practices proven to move one over time toward a life more like Jesus. *Learn* is reflecting on Scripture each day, especially on Jesus' life and teachings. There are many ways to live into this practice and each makes the eternal Word Jesus more present through the words of the Bible.

The same Holy Spirit who inspired John's Gospel inspires you as you read and reflect on scripture. It is that inspiration for the reader as well as the author that makes the Bible more than words on a page.

The God whose presence dwelt in fullness in Jesus of Nazareth is also fully present in your heart and here in our worship in both Word and Sacrament. Jesus was present in our readings and as we come forward to receive the Eucharist, our triune God present in creation is here with you.

If you have never stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon, my words would fail to convey that experience. You may never be that mother first laying eyes on the child that has been forming inside her, so my words could fail to explain the depth of feeling. Words fail to convey the presence of God in your life, but God's presence is every bit as real, and even more vital, than all those experiences in your life that are beyond words.

While words can and will fail, Jesus, the eternal Word of God, never fails. Amen.

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