



Life Changing Words

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Baptism of Our Lord ~ January 13, 2019*

Isaiah 43:1-7

Now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Psalm 29

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| 1 | Ascribe to God, you heavenly beings, *
ascribe to God glory and strength. | 7 | The voice of God splits the flames of fire;
the voice of God shakes the wilderness; *
God shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. |
| 2 | Ascribe due honor to God's holy Name; *
worship the Most High in the beauty of holiness. | 8 | The voice of God makes the oak trees writhe *
and strips the forests bare. |
| 3 | The voice of God is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders; *
God is upon the mighty waters. | 9 | And in the temple of the Holy One, *
all are crying, "Glory!" |
| 4 | The voice of God is a powerful voice; *
the voice of God is a voice of splendor. | 10 | God sits enthroned above the flood, *
enthroned for evermore. |
| 5 | The voice of God breaks the cedar trees; *
God breaks the cedars of Lebanon; | 11 | God shall give strength to the people; *
God shall give the people the blessing of peace. |
| 6 | God makes Lebanon skip like a calf *
and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox. | | |

Acts 8:14-17

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. –

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Each of the Gospels tells something of the story of Jesus being baptized. Mark and Matthew get into it and give a lot of details, Luke mentions it, but seems to feel a little strange about it because he doesn't actually have John the Baptist at Jesus' baptism, and John mentions baptism but skirts around any details. Today we have Luke's telling of the story, and Luke seems much more focused on the Holy Spirit than the act of baptism, and definitely more interested in what happens after the baptism than on the event itself.

As is the case with the other Gospel writers, while we don't know many of the nitty gritty details of Luke's life, we get a good window into who he was through his writings. Tradition tells us he was a physician. Which means Luke knew what it was like to be with people who suffer, knew what it was like to see and participate in healing, and to feel helpless when whatever you did fell far short of a cure. But more than that we know that he was all in as a disciple, he was a dreamer of God's dreams and a partner in God's work. We know that above all else, Luke believed with every fiber of his being that God, Holy Eternal Majesty, had become flesh in Jesus and that because of that, no matter how rough things get, life will never be the same again—will never be finally lost again. We know that even though he was a physician, once he had been baptized, just like those of us who have come after him, he had a new identity: disciple.

And what a disciple he was—without Luke we would never have heard Mary's fiercely gentle song of a world turned upside down by God, never hear old Simeon thanking God that he had lived to see Salvation, never know the parable of the Good Samaritan, or the Prodigal Son. As a good physician, Luke told these stories of healing, not just body, but soul, because he knew their power. Rather than abandon his previous life of physical healing, Luke carried on, he just changed the vehicle. Rather than poultices, ointments, and potions, Luke prescribed stories that had the power to heal lives and mend hearts. He carried a bag with words: weep no more, stand up your sins have been forgiven, and do not be afraid.

Luke knew, because Jesus knew, the healing power of words. In fact, you might say that Jesus' ministry was one of words. Jesus was anointed by the Spirit to preach, to proclaim the good news of release, recovery, sight, and liberty. His ministry was as much about saying as it was doing: saying what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do. Everything that happens in Jesus' ministry happens after his baptism and his proclamation that he has been anointed to preach good news, all of it happens because the speaking of God's word is how the world came into being and it is how it goes on. And Luke knew that too. Once he had heard, believed, and been changed, he wrote his Gospel to make sure others heard the life changing word, the life changing story, too. He told the story so others could know it and tell it. Pass it on from parent to child, friend to friend, witness to witness. Which, I would hazard a guess, is how each of us came to be here. Someone, maybe a parent, a friend, asked us to come to church, told us a story, or prayed with us or for us. Odds are someone said something to us, soothed us, intrigued us, or angered us—something that brought us back for more. This has been true for the church since 2000 years ago when a Galilean preacher became known throughout the world. Because people talk. People talk and word gets around, People talk and other people are made whole.

The word for this sort of talk is evangelism. I know—it conjures up images of preachers with perfect hair and teeth, or of people falling out in the aisles of an auditorium as they are slain in the Spirit. But it is a word that applies perfectly to Luke and the sort of medicine he was offering. It is a word that means preacher of good news, bearer of good tidings. Sounds different when you think of it that way. And here in the Episcopal Church, every time we baptize someone and we all renew our own baptismal vows, one of the promises we make is that we will be evangelists. Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Jesus Christ? And we answer, "I will, with God's help". And with that answer we join with Luke, Paul, George Herbert, Madeleine L'Engle, CS Lewis, JS Bach, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Joel Osteen, Oscar Romero, and the man on Broad Street roaming the streets yelling "Repent and be saved". There are almost as many ways to share the Good News as there are people. And we sell God short when we forget that and think we have to fit a narrow mold or be silent. Once in a while we might be called on to make a public proclamation of faith, but usually our evangelism is of the more quiet kind; telling the truth to someone who asks it of us, reading psalms to a friend, ending a fight with words of forgiveness, listening to someone's story, writing a note to someone we know is lonely, inviting a stranger in. These are all ways of proclaiming the good news—all words of invitation and hope.

And the thing about this good news is that saying it is doing it—it immediately effects what it proclaims. You are my beloved Son, says God. And so he is. Even when the beloved Son is hanging on the cross. Blessed are the poor, and that is immediately true too, even though they don't actually have more than they did yesterday. You are the light of the world, Jesus says, and so we are, even when there is a bushel basket squashed firmly on our heads, because the word of God does not come back empty.

You could say it is all just a bunch of words: Weep no more. Do not be afraid. Your sins are forgiven. Stand up and walk. Saying them might seem futile—like trying to cure a broken leg with an aspirin. But when we proclaim them as Gospel, we say that they are words that belong to someone, and that when we speak them someone is present, speaking them with us and through us, so that we never speak them alone and they never come back empty. And, because they are Gospel, they effect what they proclaim: tears are dried, fears are quenched, and sins forgiven. Every time we speak them they make true the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. And when we do, we take our place in the ancient relay race of faith. Passing on the Good News from one person to another, one generation to another. Just as William is now taking his place and picking up the baton. Joining us in learning the story, living the story, and telling the story—sharing the most powerful medicine there is with the world. And so to William who is about to be baptized, and to each of us who are about to renew our promise, I have a word to say, a prayer. May the God who has given us the will to do this thing give us the grace and power to perform it, restoring the world to health one blessed word at a time, if need be, until the whole world can join us in saying “Amen.”