

"The Way of Jesus: Living Words"

How perfect that today's sermon is on the Word of God. Quite literally, words that have been attributed to God for millennia. It's ideal because I have been working on my Doctoral class on scripture in the past few weeks, and we've recently done an intense dive into exegetical work. That's a fancy word for a detailed understanding of scripture. But just what is scripture? What makes something—in this case, a collection of words—sacred? Is it simply because we've always been told this? Or is something else going on here? What is scripture? Today we're going to spend a few minutes exploring this: The Word of God. We're going to see what happens when the institutions of the Church and the closing of the Biblical canon, which was supposedly set in stone just a few thousand years ago, come up against a new way of thinking that was emerging on the European continent: Reformation. An uppity priest, Martin Luther, was filled with despair and anger at the Roman Catholic church's doctrine of salvation. He found that the Church taught salvation by works and not by faith, and we know how Luther felt about faith. He said: "We are saved by faith alone...", we rarely hear the rest of that line, though, which reads: "but the faith that saves is never alone." "We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone."

There's an old saw that goes like this: "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it." There is so much to unpack there—whose God is speaking? What does it mean when you say you "believe" these words? And why do you get to decide when our conversation is done? I still have a few things to say! And the first one is this: Christianity is the living Word. We are the living Word. Let me explain: When Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to that church door in Wittenburg, he started a conversation. He initiated a debate about salvation with other scholars and theologians. He posited that the "old" Church had failed. For Martin Luther, the old Church failed because it lost its focus on the Christ. It wasn't Christocentric. For Luther, everything in our faith revolves around Jesus Christ, whom he also calls, The Word.

What happened here, in my opinion, is that the theology of the Church had become static. It had failed to adjust to the times. Many will argue that this monolithic faith survived the Dark Ages BECAUSE they were static. The Church provided a source of security—of permanence—untold knowledge was protected by the Church through its many monasteries and cathedrals. The world was beginning to question things—everything in fact. At the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, we find that the medieval Church was indeed failing. We have letters from the time that illustrate how bitter the local clergy had become about the financial burdens of the Church and the questionable morals of the clergy. The more things change...

Desiderius Erasmus was one of the first Europeans to grasp the true power of words. He is credited with saying: "When I get a little money, I buy books. If any is left, I buy food and clothes." Erasmus had the audacity to point out that for over one thousand years, the Church used a bible that contained mistakes. Most notably was Matthew 3:2, where John the Baptist cried out to the crowd: "Metanoete (met-an-o-ite)," which church father Jerome had translated as "Do Penance."—a translation that supported the medieval Church's system of confession and penance. The word "metanoete (met-an-oh-ite)" actually means "repent." There is a big difference in repenting of behavior, which only requires the offender and the offeree, and "doing penance," which requires both of those mentioned above, plus a priest, and a church, and a confessional, and doctrines of salvation, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera (to paraphrase a famous Siamese king).

For Erasmus to attack Jerome was to attack the "understanding of the Bible which the western Church took for granted." Erasmus called for the Bible to be translated into local languages. "Would that the farmer might sing snatches of Scripture to the tune of his shuttle," Erasmus wrote, "that the traveler might lighten with stories from Scripture the weariness of his journey." He even hoped that women would read the New Testament for themselves. Farmers, weavers, travelers, and women picked up the Bible and read it for themselves. How dangerous! And when others could not read the words themselves, their neighbors made sure that they HEARD the Word.

Theologians and scholars began to turn to scripture with new lenses, new eyes. They began to look at the written word differently. By 1650 literacy rates reached as high as 80 percent among urban males—rural literacy around 30 percent—and as literacy increased in Europe, these "words" gave the faithful power to remake their world. A re-forming of the world was underway, and the Church would re-form with it. Martin Luther would provide a path for those who wished to walk, what Luther believed, was the authentic Way of Jesus. We should probably call that the "Way of the Christ," though, because we can't forget for a moment that Luther believed fully that Jesus was God. For Luther and other Reformation scholars, theological thought became dynamic—powerful—, and the idea that God, the Word, speaks, again and again, became a central part of Luther's work.

According to Martin Luther, even though the word of God could be read in scripture, the ultimate Word was found in the person of the Christ. Luther took to heart the words of the Gospel according to John: 1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life,[a] and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

In that beautiful collection of words—that scripture—the words of Christianity make the claim that Jesus as God existed long before the world. This movement opens up theological thought for a different interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. As Diane Butler Bass, whose book I'm using this summer, reminds us: "In many ways, the sixteenth century was an extended argument over words—the meaning of words, whose words had the greatest power, the role of words in faith, and the political impact of words."—(157)

The Gospel of John was written much later than the other three Gospels. Churches had been successfully planted in numerous places, thanks to the world-changing work of the apostles, and the burgeoning faith needed a story that not only told of the Gospel message but also told of the need for the Church. In the Gospel of John, we begin to see a move away from the teachings of Jesus and towards the doctrines of the Church—capital C. And we see a movement towards a divinity of Jesus. Where before he was understood chiefly as God's emissary, in the Acts of the Apostles, we see the seeds of this creation of Jesus as God, and it moves simultaneously through the ages to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 where the Church proclaims Jesus as God unequivocally. What we will see is this: The institution is going to become more important than the man.

One other crucial philosophical development during the sixteenth century was the idea that words could change the world. A contemporary theologian who specializes in Martin Luther said: "When you 'really have it,' as Luther said, there is no fundamental discrepancy between your identity and your interpretive acts. You are what you read." The people of the sixteenth century would have understood that as they loved words and they had seen how words could change things. They discovered that words have meaning beyond their mere appearance—they can be spiritual—they can be political. To the late medieval mind, words were more than just rhetoric. Words contain "power which could be used actively to change human society for the better." Words will open radical new ways of loving God and neighbor that rocked the world and continue to do so today.

Theologian Fredrick Herzog once queried: "Is not the Church always in need of Reformation? Are we not heirs of an 'unfinished' reformation?" I believe we reform the Church each time we gather. There's never precisely the same congregation in this building every Sunday. There are constant movements within the faith from people's opinions regarding where they stand in relation to their faith. Christianity is dynamic and ever-changing. It is reformed for each generation, each new community that encounters it. Each time a human has a close encounter with the Living Word through a Christian.

Many have commented on the similarity between our present age and the 16th century. Matthew Fox, that uppity Dominican friar who was ejected from the Catholic Church and landed at the Episcopal doorstep, cites four historical forces of

the first Reformation: The invention of the printing press; The rise of Nation/States; The corruption in religious institutions; and the emergence of an educated elite. Fox argues that we see corresponding changes in our modern communications, politics, religion, and scholarship. These changes frighten many, but Fox says: "We can start anew, that a New Reformation for a new millennium is upon us." To prove his point, he traveled to Wittenberg to post his own set of ninety-five theses for a new age. Fox says we need to return "to the spirit of Jesus and his prophetic ancestors." Our eighth Century Jewish prophets who called us back to right relationship with God and neighbor then, and who continue to call us back into right relationship with God and neighbor now.

Phyllis Tickle, longtime religion editor at Publishers Weekly, along with many other modern theologians, agrees with Fox and believes we have entered a new Reformation. She sees worldwide renewal in Christianity, and she attributes this to what she calls "the great emergence." An integration of religious and spiritual insights across the entire spectrum of Christianity. Even conservatives are getting in on this idea of change: Rick Warren of the Purpose Driven life fame says: "I'm looking for a second Reformation. The first Reformation of the Church 500 years ago was about beliefs. This one is going to be about behavior. The first one was about creeds. This one is going to be about deeds."

Diana Butler Bass reminds us that the 16th-century reformers did not divide words from works. We are doing so. For our forebears during the Reformation, deeds without words were dead, and words without actions were moot. Western Christians were beginning to equate words with our mental capacity. Probably the most critical insight from the Reformation was this idea that words did more than prove faith. Words enliven and enhance faith. Words embody the Holy Spirit. Words speak to the whole person, allowing those who really heard them to be changed, thus enabling hearers to transform both the Church and the world. People experience words." (155)

Many of us are searching for an authentic Christian experience. We want authenticity (truth?) in our spirituality and religion. We want experiences and communities where our words and our actions align—interweave—"where Christianity is both proclaimed and embodied congruently and cogently. As Butler Bass reminds us: "Part of the problem of contemporary Christianity is that it has not been what it says it is. In the West, it seems hypocritical and phony; its words and actions collide. A new reformation would find old wisdom in the sixteenth century living-giving practices of the word." (156)

Thomas Paine, in his classic treatise, the Age of Reason, wrote: "The continually progressive change to which the meaning of words is subject[ed], the want of a universal language which renders translation necessary, the errors to which translations are again subject[ed], the mistakes of copyists and printers,

together with the possibility of willful alteration, are of themselves evidences that human language, whether in speech or in print, cannot be the vehicle of the Word of God. The Word of God exists in something else." I believe that scripture inhabits each of us: I find strength through scripture. I find solace in the 23rd Psalm. I find wisdom when Paul instructs his churches. I encounter God when I read a Gospel that encourages me to love my neighbor, even when my neighbor is unlovable, even when my neighbor shoots off fireworks at 2 a.m. when I get up at 5.

I think that scripture is a living testimony to the power of words and how those words then change the world. You change the world. Our governments, our policies, our fears, our fights—these do not change the world. You change the world incrementally, step by step, belief by belief, word by word. We build our lives on the bricks of words, and if your word is not impeccable, then the resulting structure, your life, is built on shaky ground. Impeccable words are words that, when you utter them, they are authentic, they are loving, and they are words that are filled with care. Take good care in the words you speak for as the old saying goes: "Watch your thoughts, they become words; watch your words, they become actions; watch your actions, they become habits; watch your habits, they become character; watch your character, for it becomes your destiny."

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther posted some words on a cathedral door, and we haven't been the same since. His words opened up our hearts and our minds to new ways of thinking about God—to new ways of thinking about the Way of Jesus—to new ways of thinking about our lives—the gift that is our lives. Luther wrote, "The secret of contentment is the realization that life is a gift, not a right. Next to faith this is the highest art - to be content with the calling in which God has placed you." Your life is a gift, and that gift is you. Your life is a text, and the scripture is you. You are the living, breathing Word of God, and you will walk this earth today. You are the sacred, beloved Word of God. Be the Word in all that you do. Be alive with God's love. Be filled with joy that you have the Word, you are the Word, and that the Word is good. AMEN

RESOURCES USED:

Diana Butler Bass. *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2009.