

“PEOPLE OF THE WORD”

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 John 1:1-5, 14

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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When I returned from my first sabbatical seven years ago I held up this clay pot and said, “This is what I produced on my sabbatical.” I don’t have a clay pot this time and in fact, I don’t have anything really concrete to show you except for this pile of books on the communion table. These books represent the 35 books I read while enjoying my Sabbath rest. I have to say my sabbatical was not productive but it was fruitful. And that is the best kind of sabbatical to have.

The purpose of a sabbatical is to give the pastor, every seven years, a chance to stop **doing** and start **being**. It is a chance to step away from the responsibilities of this wondrous calling to ministry and listen more closely for the voice of God. It is a chance to study and to rest, to pray and to play, and to stop and take a deep breath.

Being away for nine weeks has given me a new appreciation for who we are as a congregation, for what we have and for where we are going. It has given me a new appreciation for what I have to offer you as your pastor. You know as well as I do that time away helps us appreciate home even more. All pastors and all congregations can get stale and taking time for Sabbath rest helps to renew and refresh us in ways that are hard to put into words. Sabbatical time also gave you the opportunity to hear a different voice in the pulpit and it gave me a chance to worship in other churches and be fed by the nourishing sermons of others. I am so grateful for this gift and I hope you know how much it means to me as a person and as a pastor. I figure anything that is a blessing to me will also be a blessing to you as I minister with you.

The focus for my sabbatical was Faith and Writing. I wanted to look at writing as a spiritual discipline. To think about the meaning of words in our life of faith and what it means for us to say we are people of the Word. I immersed myself in the world of words and writing. So I read, voraciously- several books at a time, books with titles like: “Writing the Sacred Journey,” “The Soul Tells a Story,” and “Novel Preaching.” I read memoirs- one about a family living on a remote island off the coast of Alaska and how their faith influenced their lives. I read another by a woman who was raised in a very conservative Mennonite tradition, how she turned away from her faith and one day it found her again. You will love the title, “Mennonite in a little black dress.”

I read essays written by writers about the craft of writing. I read fiction and of course, my favorite, mystery novels. I read newspapers and magazines. I read everything with a new eye- looking at how a particular writer puts a sentence together, how they draw you in- or don’t. Above all, I wanted to see how people of faith are influenced in their writing by their relationship with God and how they capture that relationship in words.

I attended two terrific conferences- the Festival of Faith and Writing at Calvin College in Michigan and the Festival of Homiletics in Nashville. At both I was surrounded by people of faith who love words, books, and writing. I was inspired and a bit intimidated by the wealth of talent all around me.

Marty and I spent two weeks in Maine where we hiked along the ocean and in Acadia National Park, ate fabulous seafood, collected rocks, of course, and I read. I have 300 photos if anyone is interested in seeing lighthouses, rocky coasts, and a porcupine in a tree!

At the Festival of Homiletics, writer Lauren Winner, who wrote a memoir of faith entitled, "Girl Meets God," said "Working pastors do more writing than almost anyone else." I never thought of it that way but I think she is right. Not only do we write sermons, we also write worship resources, prayers and children's stories. We write bulletin announcements and newsletter articles. We write sympathy cards and letters of recommendation. Words are the currency of our profession. And not just any words, but dangerous words, the words of faith.

I don't know that we could be Christians without words and especially without the Word of God. In the beginning, the book of Genesis tells us, God spoke the world into being. With a word chaos became creation. "Then God said," and it was so.

In the Old Testament God sent priests and prophets, kings and foreigners to speak the word of life to the people. They would listen to the word of God for awhile and then they would take off on their own, abandoning the word of life and love; abandoning God's invitation to relationship. We read in Deuteronomy of the importance of the words of God. "Keep these words in your heart." Don't just hear them but take them into your very being so they become as much a part of you as breathing. And don't keep these words to yourself, teach them to your children and make them such a part of your daily lives that everyone else can read them too.

In his commentary on Deuteronomy, Patrick Miller suggests that the words of God are a "kind of companion in life." They are to lead and guide us, comfort and challenge us. And more than anything else they are to lead us into a deeper and richer relationship with the One who created us. But you know how people are, we get lazy and we forget. The words slowly lost their meaning and the people once again wandered around trying to figure things out on their own.

So the next step was to put flesh on the words. After all, how can you ignore the Word when it is standing right in front of you? As "The Message" puts it, "The Word was first. The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood (our neighborhood)." At the preaching conference, Jim Wallis said, "In Jesus Christ, God hits the streets." The opening words of the Gospel of John contain some of the most beautiful and mysterious poetry in the Bible. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

I think what it means, quite simply, is that Jesus is the messenger, the word-bearer of God. In Jesus, human beings could read God's words, hear God's words and literally, follow God's words down the road. They could see God's very heart beating. Through the incarnation, God became human, so we could not only hear the Word, but we could touch the Word, be fed by the Word, healed by the Word. Jesus came to touch and feed and heal. He came so that we could see what God looks like and experience God's love up close and personal. Through the person of Jesus of Nazareth we see that God's words aren't just good theory or doctrine, they don't just tell a compelling story, they are living actions of love that changed and continue to change lives.

Preachers stand in the pulpit with no foundation other than this Word, without the Word made flesh we have nothing to say. Without the Word made flesh, you have nothing to hear.

In some ways Jesus is God's memoir writ large on the face of the earth. He is God's autobiography telling us, "This is who I am. This is where I am going. I would like you to come too."

John's opening poem tells us who Jesus is and why it matters to us. And it tells us who we can be if we listen to this Word. It tells us that we can become God's Word too. Through Jesus the mind of God became a person. And through us that Word can still speak loud and clear today. The Word of God became flesh so that our flesh might become God's Word.

During my sabbatical I embarked on a journey of discovery that I will continue to travel. I feel as though I have prepared the ground for planting and now, in our life together as a family of faith, I will watch for the seedlings to grow. On this journey I will try to articulate, through words and writing, the sights I see along the way.

In an essay on the importance of writing, Robert Siegel shares this insight. "For Christians writing is incarnational. As in Christ the Word became flesh, so we hope our own best words become flesh. We trust they will incarnate the beauty, terror, and glory of this world even as they lift the reader's gaze in hope beyond it. We believe the incarnate Word, or Logos of God, is the transcendent element in every word. Above all we wish to honor God." (1)

Vinita Hampton Wright believes "the whole point of the incarnation is that we understand finally and with clarity who we really are- made in God's image and possessing gifts with which to express God's very self to the world." (2)

I agree with the late author, priest and theologian Henri Nouwen who wrote, "In writing I come in touch with the Spirit of God within me and experience how I am led to new places. Writing is a process in which we discover what lives in us. The writing itself reveals to us what is alive in us. Writing is indeed a form of prayer." (3)

What I have learned is that because Jesus is the Word of God, we should not take our own words lightly. Psychologist and writer Mary Pipher calls us, through our writing, "to create a grammar of hope and a syntax of salvation." She believes in the power of words to change the world. And so do I.

Our words and our writing express just how seriously we take the Word of God, Jesus Christ. With our words we can both: hurt and heal; cut and cure; wound and welcome.

With our words- spoken or written we: crucify and cleanse; accuse and affirm; ruin and revive; break and bless.

Our words can invoke chaos or creation.

Our words can be hateful or hopeful.

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

My dear holy family, may our experience of the Word not be productive, may it be fruitful. Amen.

End Notes:

- 1- A SYLLABLE OF WATER, Emilie Griffin, ed. Paraclete Press. 2008.
pg. x
- 2- THE SOUL TELLS A STORY, Vinita Hampton Wright, pg. 12
- 3- SPIRITUAL DIRECTION: WISDOM FOR THE LONG WALK OF FAITH,
Henri Nouwen, Harper San Francisco, 2006. p. 99.