

April 15, 2018
The Third Sunday of Easter
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I believe that words are important and powerful. Not in a magical way, but in their ability to name and declare something for what it truly is or might be. I think this is especially true in our life of faith. And so we need to pay attention to which words are used and why they are being used. What is it that a particular word is doing? How do the words that are spoken or read function and behave in that particular moment?

This idea has gnawed away at me all week long. I have pages of notes and little quotes from various sources. But rather than inspiring me to great writing, I've been stuck.

This is a preacher's greatest fear- being stuck and not having enough words. I have friends who look at the word count on their computer to determine if they've "said enough." If they haven't hit the magic number, they just keep writing until they hit their goal.

Last night, at 10:49 my computer crashed for the second time and took with it the approximately 800 words I had managed to generate. I crawled into bed and hoped I would find the right words for this morning.

What I have for you is exactly five words- my five favorite words from today's texts.

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The first one is see and for me, much of its power comes in the way it is read.

See, what love the Father has for us that we should be called children of God, and so we are! It's the attention getter in chapter three of first John. See! Look! Listen! Examine this thing! Do you know? Do you understand? God loves us so much that we are called God's children- and so we are. **See!** We have been named Children of God and that is who we are. It isn't just a name for us. It is the truth of the way that God understands our relationship. **See!** You are a child of God.

If you dig into this particular text you'll find some adoption language. And for those of you who have experienced adoption- it's important to understand that first century Roman culture saw this as a very different process than we do today. In that context, adoption wasn't about caring for children, it was about inheritance and family name. It was about money and pride. And so an adult man could be adopted by a family that had no heir. Everything about his past was erased. His debts were entirely forgiven. For a poor man or a man in financial trouble, adoption was a way to wipe the slate clean and start over. It was as if his previous life had never existed. He broke all ties with his family of origin and took on the heritage and the wealth of his new family.

What this means is that when John says, "**See!** Who we are?" He is proclaiming that all of our sin – all of our debt to God, has been forgiven and erased. Our past has been changed forever and our future has been declared secure, for we are God's children now, because God said so. His word makes us new people.

The second word is Beloved.

See what love the Father has for us that we should be called the children of God and so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. **Beloved**, we are God's children know; what we will be has not yet been revealed.

Beloved- there is a tenderness and emotion within that particular word that never ceases to warm my heart. Through time and space, John calls to us – his twenty-first century readers- and names us his beloved.

It is a term of endearment and is not the kind of word that I would use lightly. It is a reminder that even if the world thinks we are nothing- we are still beloved.

Rabbi Yehuda Berg wrote, "Words are singularly the most powerful force available to humanity. We can choose to use this force constructively with words of encouragement, or destructively using words of despair. Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate and to humble."

The truth is that sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can hurt something inside of us that can take much longer to heal than a shattered arm or leg. Inversely, words can build up a reservoir of strength that can help us withstand the words that might tear us down. And so we need to collect them and hold them tight.

I have two files- one lives on a flash drive and the other is paper. And in each of them I have collected words that help me to remember the truth of who I am and who I have been. They are little things- notes from my mother. Cards from Matt and Katie. Thank you letters from people I've worked with. Pictures that remind me of people I love and who love me back.

And like so many of the Bible verses that have stuck with me over the years, they remind me that I am beloved. And some days we really need to be reminded.

See! You are beloved!

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The third word is peace. Or really it is **shalom**. It shows up all over stories about Jesus, a lot of times it is said when people are frightened. "Shalom. Peace, be with you. It's okay. Don't be afraid."

Jesus says it when he appears in the various Easter narratives. ***Shalom***. And it isn't just a greeting. It isn't a biblical "aloha" - good for wishing someone both hello and goodbye. Instead it is a prayer of sorts wishing more than just a peaceful end to conflict or chaos or war. The concept of shalom has to do with being safe in mind and body and spirit. It carries with it a sense of completeness or fullness. There is a sense of tranquility and well-being. It is a kind of wholeness that encourages the receiver to give back. To pass on that which they have received.

"Shalom," Jesus says. "Peace be with you." But here's the powerful thing- Jesus doesn't just say it. He creates it. Jesus says "Peace be with you" and he breathes the Holy Spirit into the disciples. And they experience true shalom.

With Jesus- saying it, makes it so. Shalom.

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Now, here's a little detour that is all about the fourth word- **fear**.

Jesus brought peace to the disciples because they were afraid. And their fear manifested itself in disbelieving. And so Jesus shows them that he isn't a ghost. In that time, it was believed that certain tests could prove whether or not you were talking to a live person or a ghost.

New Testament Professor Mark Vitalis Hoffman writes, that among the tests one might use to determine if you were seeing a ghost you could:

1. You could check extremities where bones were evident (namely, hands and feet).
2. You could make sure that a person's feet were touching the ground.
3. Check to see if they have teeth and
4. Did they eat food?

So in addition to wishing them peace, Jesus demonstrates that he can in fact, pass all four of the ghost tests. Luke wanted us to understand that Jesus' resurrection was real. He wasn't a ghostly apparition. He was really alive. He really was the fulfillment of scripture. And he understood the fact that the disciples were afraid.

Jesus gets that we are scared sometimes- that in the face of all that God has done for us and promises to do- we still get scared.

We can experience wonder at the gloriousness of it all and disbelief because it seems almost too good to be true.

See! We are God's **beloved** children. **Shalom!** Don't be **afraid**. The God of all peace is with you.

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The last word is **witnesses**.

Before he heads out to Bethany for his ascension into heaven, Jesus says, "These are **my words** that I spoke to you while I was still with you- remember, I told you this before - everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."

It is written that the Messiah- the chosen one of God, is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

You are witnesses of these things.

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You are witnesses. Jesus doesn't say, "Could you do me one last favor and be my witnesses?" It's not a request or an invitation. It is a declaration of fact.

You are witnesses.

As important as it might have been for the disciples to confirm that, just as scripture had foretold – Jesus wasn't a ghost but was a really alive - what is more significant is that they (and we) understand that Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection are the clearest way that God had to help us understand what he had been up to all along.

In the reality of Jesus, God's plan is revealed. If you want to understand God- then pay attention to what happened on Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

See! Beloved, you are God's children. Shalom! Don't be afraid.

Look, listen- take in this incredible story of what God has done, is doing and will do in the future.

And remember, you are witnesses.

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It isn't enough to just understand the story. It isn't enough to know all the right words. Being a witness for Jesus isn't a passive activity.

Jesus declares that his followers are witnesses which means they are to move forward and testify as faithful witnesses to what they know to be true about this Jesus of Nazareth.

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Words are powerful things.

In our gospel last Sunday, we heard John's version of Easter evening. He says that Jesus breathed his Spirit into the disciples and then said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." And so, when we proclaim the forgiveness in Jesus' name, it is real and true. Our words can have real power.

When we baptize someone, we proclaim the good news that this person has been forgiven of sin, redeemed from death and blessed with eternal salvation- but it isn't the water that does it.

In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther says, "Clearly the water doesn't do it, but the word of God, which is with and alongside the water, and faith, which trusts this word of God in the water.

For without the word of God the water is plain water."

It's the words that make the difference. THE word - the Word of God in Jesus Christ.

It's the same with Communion. It's not those little crackers or the concord grape wine. It's the powerful word of God that transforms the ordinary into an incredible means of grace.

See. Beloved! Be not afraid, but bear witness to the peace of God. And in saying the words, it will be so.