

“The Word Did Everything”
Sermon at Brown Memorial Park Ave.
October 15, 2017

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

John 1:1-18

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. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 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.

A few years ago, when I was gearing up for my first guest sermon, one of my former professors told me I should “preach like I won’t be invited back” - which was fine advice as I drove to a small congregation in Arkansas. Once they realized that I wasn’t Mr. Lewellen, there wasn’t a lot I could say to get invited back anyway. But it’s an entirely different thing to preach somewhere when you have to sit in the pews the next week. And so this morning, I am grateful to you and Andrew for your trust and for your warm welcome.

I’m finding myself more and more these days bracing for the next breaking news alert. By the end of this week, in part because I was tired and in part because I knew I’d be standing here talking about whatever flew across my phone screen, I was so anxious with each alert that I actually shouted “That isn’t breaking news!” when The Food Network sent one about pumpkin spice waffles.

The world is too full right now for pumpkin spice waffle alerts. Too full of disasters and disastrous responses. Too full of old wounds that are still raw. Too full of surprises and overwhelm. Too full of breaking news alerts. There’s too much. And it struck me this week that most of the too much are words - threats, apathetic shrugs, tweets, bullying, old hymns of white supremacy stirred with the song of toxic masculinity.

In light of all that’s swirling around in the world, on this second Sunday of our series leading to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, I wanted to spend a little time with Martin Luther’s thoughts on words - on the Word and language. It may seem unhelpful to think about more words when our problem is that we have too many already, but I think Luther offers us something helpful and opens up a simple but important question.

There’s plenty to say about Luther and language, but I want to start with the word most closely associated with him - the Word of God. Or as he writes in many of his translations, “the speech of God.”

After the Reformation, when theologians sat down to synthesize all of the teaching that had spilled out, they formed categories like *sola scriptura* - the idea that scripture is the only infallible rule to guide faith. But before these doctrines were made into clean categories, they were the messy tirades and teaching of a German priest.

Luther was hardly the first or only person to say that scripture formed the heart of the Christian faith, but still his writing on it signaled a shift in his moment of history. It gets lost in the weeds and in more conservative factions’ insistence that Luther championed strict adherence to

“biblical truth.” But a second glance shows us that Luther was a champion of biblical literacy, not biblical literalism. He had some real questions about whether the book of Revelation was helpful, and on a number of occasions, attempted to oust poor James’ epistle from the New Testament.

That Luther wrestled with the Word is a helpful reminder, but it’s his understanding of the Word’s purpose and position that was really important. Luther turned to scripture and saw that when God spoke, what God spoke happened. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God’s Word became light and bread and wine, all woven together in the world. Creation is made and shaped and moved by the Word of God. If that is true, Luther claimed, then all people, even and especially those given highest authority in the church, have to answer to the Word.

This was radical. It made leaders accountable to something everyone had access to. Decisions had to be made with the Word in mind. Questions like, “Will this solidify the economic stability of the church?” or “Will this follow tradition?” became secondary to the question “Does this resonate with scripture?” It transferred power from a select few in political and religious offices, to anyone who heard the Word and understood it. The final word was not with a cardinal or a pope or a pastor or a general presbyter. It was with scripture, and all those who listened.

In a moment when some in the church sought to capitalize on people’s fear by building a system that offered a greater sense of security to those who could pay for it, Luther’s message rang out: do not trust the speech of churchmen to be the final authority on matters of faith. Put your trust instead in God’s speech, in God’s word.

This is Protestantism 101. Calvin carried on the tradition, teaching that scripture formed for the Christian a way of seeing the world as God sees the world. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God. And so we wrestle with its mystery and hold it with awe and curiosity.

His thoughts on God’s speech are clear. But then there’s this business of human speech. Luther found God at work in creation through the Word. But as evidenced by his own language, he couldn’t find the same power in our words.

When I first started studying theology, I read about Martin Luther, but I didn’t actually read his writing until a few years in. And as soon as I did, I understood why. What a collection of foul-mouthed spite and snark! In language I wouldn’t dare use in a pulpit, he preached entire

sermons to publically curse people who opposed him. “You sharp-eyed bats,”¹ he declares at the beginning of one paper. “You poisonous loudmouth!”² He grew fond of calling people the devil, pigs, cows, donkeys, and idiot children. He penned something called *Why the Books of the Pope Were Burned*. He repeatedly told leaders that their actions were so reprehensible that if the Antichrist showed up, he would have no work left to do. He even worked an insult into an essay about baptism. “There you are, like butter in sunshine,” he growled.³

Every once in awhile in school, one of us would be particularly frustrated with a paper or professor, and would write something we could never turn in, but that was cathartic nonetheless. “How much of this can I use in the final draft?” we would ask each other. Sometimes a paragraph could be salvaged. But if a comment came back that “we had gone full Luther” we knew the whole of it had to go and would start over.

Luther cursed a fair amount, but he also actively refused to claim the weight of his own words.

Late in the winter of 1522, five years after the 95 Theses were circulated, Luther paid a surprise visit to Wittenberg. He had been away, hiding in a castle in Eisenach, some 135 miles west of Wittenberg. He made the two day journey through the cold, rainy German winter to give a fiery sermon series. This time, his words weren’t directed at a pope who had irked him, but at his own friends and colleagues, those who had been left in charge of the city during his absence.

His writing and speaking on the Word had sparked some important and good changes in the church, but it was also creating some new problems. If the Word was the way to God, then images and sacraments and incense and music were getting in the way of hearing God. People in Wittenberg were swept up in a wave of riots spreading through the region led by those who thought these new reforms could only be carried out once evidence of all the old theology was gone. Churches were left utterly empty. Luther’s parish lost its windows, art was torn from the walls, and the sanctuary was gutted. The violence became so intense that schools closed and the university there nearly collapsed.

In an attempt to stop the destruction, Luther preached a series now known as the *Invocavit Sermons*; on the second day he stepped into the pulpit, and claimed something fairly remarkable. He *insisted* that this wave reformation had required no action on his part.

“I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the

¹ From “Against Hanswurst,” pg. 205 of Luther's Works, Vol. 41

² From “Against Hanswurst,” pg. 242 of Luther's Works, Vol. 41

³ From “Concerning Rebaptism,” pg. 252 of Luther's Works, Vol. 40

papacy that no prince or emperor even inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.”⁴

He elevated the Word of God, but stripped human speech of its power. In his sermon, he essentially says that the Word of God was so forceful that he had been napping or drinking the whole time reform was taking root. “I did nothing; the Word did everything,” he said, while he stood in the pulpit to stop violence his words had helped instigate.

Luther said, “I did nothing.” But as he spoke, reforms were changing the social, political, even architectural landscape. Pulpits moved to the center of the space and were elevated so the Word might fall down on the listeners. Marriage policies for clergy changed, radically shifting social expectations of church leaders. Some bibles circulated more widely, but it was hymnal sales that skyrocketed as reforms took root. Printing presses opened and stayed in business. More people learned to read. His words had sparked a revolution.

Luther said, “I did nothing.” But as he spoke, the world as it had existed before was melting away. Concentrated power in the church was crumbling. Anxiety rose. Violence broke out. Political leaders converted and declared that all those within the boundaries of their domain had to convert or leave sparking migrations that settled new groups of people together.

It was undeniable that a new order, a whole new thing was happening in the world. His words were taking on flesh around him, and they settled in. Words that Luther wrote and preached and taught remained through decades and centuries. They persisted through history in small ways, and in earth-shaking ways.

In the 1930s, an essay was circulated at a Nazi Rally in Leipzig. It was called “On the Jews and their lies” and advocated the burning of synagogues, homes, Talmudic literature, and the expulsion of Jews from the country. At the close of the Second World War, there were no Jews left in Leipzig. Their absence is marked by a memorial of 140 empty chairs on the site of the old synagogue. The essay was Luther’s, the last of his works published in his lifetime.

“I did nothing; the Word did everything.”

Set against the backdrop of history and all of the bodies that became tangled up in his language, Luther’s insistence that he did nothing sounds less like a humble redirecting of praise, and more like a relinquishing of responsibility. Reading his words now, and listening to the deluge of

⁴ The Second Sermon, *Invocavit Sermons in Wittenberg*, Lent 1522.

language being spoken at and over us from every direction, I know that Luther's elevation of the Word is important, and, know that he has missed something we cannot afford to overlook.

Our texts for the day and Luther's writing show us how God's Word moves in the world. In Jeremiah, God tells us that words given to the prophet will "pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant." In John's gospel, the Word becomes a body, and light, and later, bread and wine and vines.

God's Word becomes flesh - it turns the world and shapes us. But while words knit into legislation deny particular bodies access to health, while petty and spiteful words turn us closer to a war, while legacies of fear and segregation and misogyny still haunt us, we cannot claim that words are empty or that talk is cheap. Words are weighty. And as we see anew every day, talk is costly.

God's Word becomes flesh. And, for better or for worse, our words become flesh too.⁵

That our words will be recorded not just in the hallways of history but in skin is unsettling and daunting. It is also the good news this morning. At the very heart of the gospel is the hope that God is speaking new possibilities into being. At the very heart of the gospel too is the truth that we have the capacity and responsibility to listen and join in.

For better or for worse, our words become flesh.

What kind of world will we speak?

⁵ See Mayra Rivera's book *Poetics of the Flesh* for a much longer exploration of language becoming flesh.