

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
January 3, 2010
John 1:1-18

“In the beginning was the Word...”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Our house on Columbus Avenue in Northampton is very near the downtown area and so when I have errands in downtown Northampton I often walk—it is easy and so pleasant. When I walk downtown, I often choose to go past the Smith College Day Care Center—it is on the way and I love to see the little ones when they are outside for their playtime. They are so adorable, seeing them always adds an extra delight to my day.

A couple of weeks before Christmas I walked into town past the Day Care Center and the little ones were out in their snow suits, tiny parkas, colorful hats and boots. One of the teachers was playing a game with the kids. The children were holding on to a long green garden hose attached to the building—they had it all stretched out. The teacher was dancing around, waving her hands yelling “Fire, fire!” and the kids aimed the hose at her (the hose that had nothing coming out of it) and the kids yelled “phish-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h!!!” The teacher would act doused and stop dancing—and the children would all cheer.

Two weeks before Christmas this was a very endearing sight...a teacher acting like flames dancing around in the snow, children aiming a hose with nothing coming out of it on her, making the sound of water, and squealing in delight when the fire was put out.

Now, since the rash of fires in Northampton on December 27th, when I reflect on that once-adorable scene, it is sobering and even scary. Because of the series of fires in Northampton just after Christmas, the children’s game seems frightening.

Think of the power of that one word: Fire! Think of how that one word grips us with fear since the fires in Northampton. Think about how that one word can empty an auditorium or a nightclub, how that one word fills us with dread. Words have power—tremendous power, power that should not be underestimated.

It is interesting to me that a couple of years ago the Hilltown Coalition to End Domestic Violence made bumper stickers that said: “Words Can Hurt or Heal.” So simple. So true. Words CAN hurt or heal.

But that is not the message I heard as a schoolgirl. When I was growing up, we were told: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” How UNtrue.

Names like “Stupid” or “Loser” can hurt a great deal.

Names can leave lasting scars.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can hurt as much...because words have power and force and leave an imprint.

Think of the power of a single word besides the word Fire...

Notice what you feel when I say:

Excluded

Bullied

Abandoned

Ignored

Now notice what you feel when I say:

Welcomed

Cuddled

Included

Loved

Words have power, they can hurt or heal, they have a force all their own.

Now think about how the Gospel of John begins and reflect on the power of words. Remember that John is the last of the 4 Gospels, and remember that the other three Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—all start with something about Jesus’ life....

Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Mark begins with these words, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah...” The Gospel of Luke begins with the story of the birth of John the Baptist the forerunner of Jesus who will announce Jesus’ coming.

Remember also that John was the last of the Gospels to be written and it is the most different from the other three, which are like each other. John is less interested in Jesus the man than in the risen Christ. Now listen again to the first words of the Book of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”

And a few verses later: “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.”

In the beginning was the Word....” those are the opening words of the Gospel of John. Not in the beginning was God’s light, or in the beginning was God’s breath, or God’s glory, or in the beginning was the wind or water (foreshadowing baptism). No, John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....and the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

John is telling us: Jesus is the Word, and Jesus existed with God from the beginning. The Gospel does not need to start with the birth of Jesus because Jesus always existed....back before Creation when only God existed, Jesus existed too. Jesus is the Word.

When we reflect deeply on the expression “God’s Word,” we realize that “God’s Word” encompasses three things: God’s action, God’s power, and Jesus.

Recall that in the Book of Genesis when God creates the world, God simply speaks and the world is created: “God said, let there be light and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). God did not build a power-plant or a light-generating apparatus but instead spoke light into being. And then God did the same for the sky, the land, the seas, the plants, the animals and even humankind itself. On each day of creation, God spoke a creative word and the world came into being. “God’s Word” symbolizes three things: God’s action, God’s power, and Jesus himself.

In the Book of Isaiah, the prophet, speaking for God, says “my word...shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I propose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11). God makes no distinction between deeds and words. For God, words are deeds. God’s words actually accomplish God’s goals. And God’s Word is also Jesus because, we are told, the Word was not just WITH God, the Word “was God.” The Word became flesh and lived among us. No longer limited to speech, God’s Word actually takes human form, becomes incarnate and walks among humanity as a living, breathing expression of God’s grace and truth. Word, deed, flesh and spirit all come together in Jesus. God’s Word becomes flesh, flesh filled with the spirit, and that human figure comes to humanity and reveals the deepest truth of God to us through his words and deeds. Word, deed, flesh and spirit all come together in Jesus.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The Eternal Logos was there at the beginning.

“Logos” is a Greek word usually translated as “word” but it is also meant to include the concepts of reason, meaning, and wisdom. Logos implies the CREATIVE work and word of God. In both the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation (19:13), Jesus is referred to as the WORD of God—meaning that the Word, God’s agent in creation, was then to be identified with the human person of Jesus of Nazareth.

God creates the world through speech, through words, and God’s Word becomes Jesus, the Word made flesh and sent among us. And so we see that the Word of God includes God’s action, God’s power and Jesus. And Jesus, during his earthly life, uses words to change the world. More than his healings, more than his miracles, Jesus uses his words to create community and transform the world. Think of the words Jesus used in his ministry: love, justice, poverty (he talked more about money and poor people than he talked about anything else except the kingdom of God), the meek, righteousness, mercy, turning the other cheek, peacemakers, the pure in heart, the salt of the earth, the light of the world.

Jesus used his words to preach the good news—the good news that another life beyond competition and greed, isolation and fear, violence and self-involvement—another life is possible, another world is possible, the inbreaking of God’s kingdom is possible, and we can create that kingdom, that community on earth. Jesus’ healings on the Sabbath infuriated the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus’ miracles amazed the crowds, but it was Jesus’ radical, disruptive, life-changing, revolutionary words that made people notice him, follow him, love him, cling to him, and eventually kill him.

“In the beginning was the Word...” In the beginning... those are significant words for us today at the beginning of a new year, a new decade, a new chapter in our lives. In the beginning of time was the word...

And in the beginning of this time, this year maybe we could find a word to frame our New Year...a word to guide us, to inspire us, to shape this fresh New Year. In the beginning was the word....

What word do we as followers of that fiery and gentle, loving and powerful, inspiring and courageous brother of ours, Jesus, what word do we choose to lift up at the beginning of this New Year?

What is our word for today, for this week, for this month, for this year? Maybe the word is healing...healing for a community that is angry and afraid.... Maybe the word is hope...hope that our world might bring an end to war...

Maybe the word is justice....justice being the first requirement for peace...

Maybe the word is love...that we may love and embrace all of humanity as our beloved sisters and brothers....

Maybe the word is faith...that our faith may grow deeper and wider with each new of this New Year.

Maybe the word is gratitude....I think that is my choice for a word for this New Year. Gratitude that God guides my life and does not leave me.

Gratitude for blessings each day to numerous to count but all felt, all felt.

Gratitude that my family is well and my Father is at peace.

Gratitude that a small Hilltown Church, with 15 people in the pews, met an outspoken pastor over four years ago and said, she'll do, we choose her.

Gratitude that a small Hilltown Church with a building in disrepair interviewed a minister who was an activist, intentionally unmarried, a long-time war tax resister, a person with a criminal record (having been incarcerated a dozen times for civil disobedience) and a wild Armenian and that Hilltown Church said, yes, she'll do, we choose her.

Gratitude that it is true...if you build it they will come and people came and joined and helped and contributed and the church was renewed.

Gratitude for resurrection.

Gratitude for everyday miracles.

Gratitude for community.

Gratitude for connection.

Gratitude for a church family as strong and committed as one could find anywhere.

Gratitude that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and lives among us, and we have seen his glory."

Amen.