



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

A World in Need of a Word

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ DECEMBER 26, 2021

GENESIS 1:1-3

New Living Translation

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.

³Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

JOHN 1:1-5, 14

New Living Translation

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God.

²He existed in the beginning with God.

³God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him.

⁴The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.

¹⁴So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

The Living Word

A girl named Helen Keller was born in Alabama in 1880. When she was less than two years old she contracted a horrible disease (most likely a bacterial meningitis) which cost her both her sense of hearing and her eyesight. Condemned to a cave-like existence without sound or vision, Helen was a lost and miserable child. Her parents were at their wits' end. They visited an expert named Alexander Graham Bell. He ultimately led them to a young woman, herself nearly blind, who had just graduated from the Perkins School for the Blind. This young woman, Anne Sullivan, was invited to live with the Kellers in order to try to reach young Helen.

Anne's efforts at first seemed fruitless. She tried to teach 7-year-old Helen to finger-spell. Helen would imitate Anne's spelling into her hand, but as she later said, "I did not know that I was spelling a word, or even that words existed." Finally, a breakthrough came. One day, as Anne poured cool water into one of Helen's hands while spelling the word into her other, something clicked. Helen remembered:

Somehow the mystery of language was suddenly revealed to me. I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool liquid that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light and hope, and set it free!

Helen Keller, incredibly, went on to learn to speak, to read books in Braille, to graduate from Radcliffe, and to become a world-famous speaker and author. It was the power of words that changed her life.

The Power of Words

We traveled back a few minutes ago, through the pages of Scripture, to the very beginning of our world. In poetic form the author of Genesis describes an empty and unformed creation. And what started the miraculous process that made the amazing planet we inhabit? A word from God. Into the void, God spoke: "Let there be light" [and there was light]. And then His creative word continued all the way to us.

The ability to comprehend words is one of the characteristics that most sets us apart from other creatures. While birds call, dogs bark, and lions roar, they are not able to form the complex sounds that become words and communicate abstract thoughts and ideas and emotions. The ability to use words is what allows us to have a personal relationship with the Supreme Being who created words. It is words that allow shapeless thoughts to become crystallized and communicable. If there were no words, we would be as lost and isolated from one another as Helen Keller was.

We are thinking together this morning about the power and impact of words. And on this day after the celebration of the coming of Christ, it is perfectly appropriate that we reflect on words because of the lofty title given to Him in the fourth Gospel. Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago, was actually the very Word of God wrapped in human flesh. “The Word became human and made His home among us.” Let’s explore what this means.

The “Logos”

In the centuries before Jesus came, some of the ancient Greek philosophers had enough insight and wisdom to discern that a great power was behind everything we could see. Many more primitive people through the centuries had worshiped man-made images of natural forces like the sun, the sea, and the mountains; ancient paganism was very much in darkness. But glimmers of true reality began to break through the clouds of superstition, and men like Plato and Aristotle and Socrates discerned there was something more than nature. They coined the word “Logos” as their concept of the unifying power behind creation. Some thought of it as a “life force” (a bit like the George Lucas-invented “May the Force be with you”). Others saw it as not just power but intelligence—the brilliant mind that invented everything. Thus, by the time of the New Testament, the word “Logos” came to mean “Word” or “Truth.” We have imported this ancient word into English. Our science of **biology** is about the truth of life, and **geology** is the truth of the earth.

When the Apostle John wrote His biography of Jesus, intending to open the eyes of both Jews (who were steeped in the Old Testament and knew the opening verses of Genesis by heart) and also Greeks (who had been told that a word or a truth lay behind everything they could see), he chose the opening words of his prologue brilliantly. “In the beginning [an obvious echo of Genesis 1] the Logos [or Word] already existed.” The One whose earthly life he is about to describe, John says, is exactly the One who spoke the Word of creation in Genesis and who is the Truth behind and undergirding everything.

The Words of God

The words of God are all around us. He has written in sky and in mountains, in water and in sand, expressing His creative genius. He has further spoken to us through the complexity of life. Plant life and animal life is staggeringly complex. He has revealed His vast intellect by writing a software code called DNA in the proteins that reproduce life. He has brought forth life on a planet so uniquely and perfectly suited to maintain it, with the right size, the right atmosphere, and the right distance from our star. Nature is filled with God’s words of self-revelation, there for all who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Beyond the words of nature, we have the words humans use to relate to each other in profoundly personal ways. Without words we wouldn’t be able to shape our thoughts or communicate them to each other and to God. Without words we couldn’t truly share in each others’ experiences. It is words that cement relationships. When a man and a woman come to me with a marriage license, I cannot sign it and make their mutual covenant legal until I hear them say the words to one another, “I do.” Who gave us the capacity to form our thoughts and feelings into words and then express them to each other through our lips and our fingers? Our gracious Creator, of course.

And beyond nature’s words of witness to their maker and our words to one another, God has been communicating to us for thousands of years through the men and women He has chosen to carry His revela-

tion. The prophets of old did not make up fiction when they wrote the Bible; rather, they were inspired and guided by God's Spirit so that the words they spoke and then wrote down to be passed on to subsequent generations had the imprint of divine authority and truth.

The Ultimate Word

In all of these forms the Word of God has come to us. But it was on one particular night outside a small Middle Eastern village called Bethlehem that the ultimate Word was spoken. When you look at a crèche or manger scene, or when you see it portrayed in art or drama or hear it described in song, realize that you are reading the greatest Word of all from your Creator. He loved us and wanted a love relationship with us so much that He actually became one of us. The child in the manger was the greatest gift of all. Look in that manger and know without a doubt that you are loved and precious, that you matter to the universe.

So, let's get very real and practical. What does our text mean to us personally? In particular, what does it mean to you that "the Word became human and made His home among us" (John 1:14)? One renowned Bible scholar states that he personally believes this is the most important verse in all the Bible, even more so than John 3:16. God becoming a man, he says, changed everything.

The Word became Human

How might my life be different if I truly understand that the Eternal Word of God, the Creator and the Ultimate Truth, became a human being at Christmas? Two thoughts I will leave with you:

- (1) If God fully entered into the life we know, it means **He totally understands everything we think and feel and experience**. He is not some distant and removed monarch of the universe, uninterested or unable to relate to His little subjects down here on earth. He has been here! And He is still here in His unlimited Spirit. So whatever we are going through, Jesus knows it. He has

felt all the joys and the pains of humanity. He is absolutely one with us. As another book of the New Testament assures us: “He Himself has gone through suffering and testing, and is able to help us when we are being tested” (Hebrews 2:18). And also, “He understands our weaknesses, for He faced all of the same testings we do, yet He did not sin” (Hebrews 4:15). Why should we try to keep anything from Him, or hold anything back? Why should we try to face our trials in life alone, when we have such an understanding Helper and Partner to travel with us?

- (2) We were created uniquely to be able to receive, understand and communicate in words—unlike any other earthly beings. God intended for us to have that capacity precisely so that **He could communicate personally with us, and so that we could learn from Him and be guided by Him**. We are incomparably blessed to have His actual words. We can hear them every week when we gather for worship. We can read them for ourselves every day. We need the Word of God. It shows us truth and helps understand what is right and wrong. It comforts us and reassures us. It gives us perspective to deal with the challenges of life, and it is our guaranteed promise of forgiveness of sins and life everlasting.

Don't try to live your life without the Word. Let it become part of who you are. If you try to go through life without the Word of God, you are spiritually like Helen Keller before she learned words—you will be blind and deaf to what is most important.

We're a few days away from the official start of a new calendar year, but this could be your most important New Year's Resolution for 2022: to make the Word of God a part of your daily life. ■



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