

Jan 2, 2011
Christmas 2A
Pastor Tim Koester

Forget the Sticks and Stones... It's the **Words** That Matter

*Begin with a large blank piece of paper. Ask, "What is this?"
At the top write, "this page intentionally left blank" then ask "What is this now?"
A paradox.*

Let me give you another paradoxical statement, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me". Why do we say that to children? Isn't it in response to the very real 'hurt' caused by thoughtless or cruel words?

A paradox portrays a truth that defies logic. A page is blank... and yet it is not. Words seem harmless... and yet possess the power to define our reality for better or worse.

For John, the birth of Jesus can only be described as a paradox. No shepherds. No angels. No journey to Bethlehem and no visit from wise men. John seems to be unconcerned with a historical account of the nativity. [Instead he wishes to inspire a faith birthed in the ultimate paradox:](#)

The Word was God –

God the source of life, God who has no beginning and no end, God whose infinite transcendence cannot be seen.

...and yet **the Word became flesh –**

Flesh like you and me. -Flesh that can be touched and smelled and seen. -Flesh that is temporary and vulnerable. -Flesh that suffers and dies.

What kind of sense does that make? You certainly don't see many children's programs based on John's Christmas story and yet it is the paradoxical words of John's gospel that communicate the essential reason for the Christmas season. Jesus is the Word of God because...

Jesus communicates the character of God to the world.

The church understands the phrase "word of God" in three inter-relating ways. First and foremost, the [Word of God is the person of Jesus Christ](#). Think of Jesus as the interpreter of God. Jesus, in his own words and deeds as a human being, reveals the essential nature of the one true God in ways we can comprehend. God is giving and good. God is grace and truth. God is healing and forgiveness. God will give up everything to save you and me.

Secondly, the [word of God is just that, spoken words](#). Right now, by God's grace, the Word of God is being spoken in this place. Preaching is not simply informative speaking. It is a proclamation of what God has done and its goal is to elicit the response of faith in the lives of those who hear. And it's not just preachers who are called to speak God's Word. You too are given the opportunity to bear God's creative and redeeming Word to all the world. Not that any of us do this by our own power or ability. Rather God is always the source of the light. We simply reflect what God has already done, and is doing, in the world.

And finally, the ['word of God' is contained in the canonical scriptures](#) of the old and new testaments. The bible is **not** the word of God because it is some kind of divine answer book or infallible set of rules. The bible is the word of God because it tells us the story of Jesus. Luther called the bible "the cradle the bears Christ". [The bible is the word of God because of what it does](#). It literally births faith -and faith has the power to re-create and re-define our lives.

That transformation is at the heart of the Christian paradox. We are **sinners**, one and all and yet through faith in Jesus and his saving work, we become **children of God**, and bearers of life and light to the world. Martin Luther said we are at the same time, both **saint and sinner**. Some may think that being "Godly" is about obeying the rules but John subordinates the law-keeping of Moses under the grace and truth offered through Jesus, the Word made flesh. In Jesus, the true character of God is made known to the world in a way no law could ever communicate. God's heart, God's essential power to give life, is revealed in the **love** Jesus shows for us.
-A love that ultimately takes him to the cross for us.

That love creates another kind of paradox. On one hand, **we are completely free** from every religious obligation, and yet on the other hand, **we are completely captivated** by love for God and our neighbor. When written as words on a page, the Christian life is a paradox of opposing personalities but when lived out by living and breathing persons, the Word of God continues to be "enfleshed" and made real for people of every time and place.

That is the true miracle of Christmas. Not only did **God put on the clothes of humanity**, and become vulnerable flesh and blood, but through faith all of **frail humanity is transformed into a cradle that bears God's creating and redeeming Word**. We are not the Word. We are not the light, but God's very Spirit gives us the power to speak the Word and reflect the light so that good news is heard, light shines in the darkness of suffering and death, and hope gives us courage to face whatever comes our way.

Words are empty and meaningless until they are acted upon. Concepts like compassion, and mercy, justice and love, forgiveness and reconciliation, never become real, never become flesh, until someone acts on them. ¹ That is what we are called to do. St. Francis of Assisi once said, "Preach the gospel always... and use words if necessary!" Our actions "speak", our attitudes "speak", our priorities "speak", and even our building "speaks" God's Word to the world.

Our prayer must always be that our speech is in harmony with God's. **That is why church matters**. That is why we gather together on cold mornings and throughout the week to pray and sing and study. A church is not just filled with people doing jobs and sitting on committees. A living and breathing church is one filled with people putting skin on the Word of God, of people involved in a ministry and a mission that makes a difference.

Sticks and stones can indeed break bones but words contain the very power of creation. May God's Word, made visible and touchable in Jesus Christ, continue to be born in the world through our frail human words and deeds so that all people might know grace upon grace and be transformed by God's power of love. Amen.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor wrote an excellent sermon using this concept.