

John 1:1-14

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.

“The Right Word”

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Words. We live in a world obsessed with words. In fact, according to the Dictionary Society of North America, this year alone, 25,000 new words will enter our vocabulary. I did an internet check on this, and came up with an article entitled "15 Words You Won't Believe They Added to the Dictionary." The article begins by saying, "The Oxford English Dictionary is continually updating, adding new words to reflect the vibrant changes in language and culture. Of course, this also means that as said cultures spiral toward a frightening oblivion, the good people at Oxford have been there to chronicle it." Well, of these words, let me just mention a few. One I already mentioned with the children. We now have the word "muggle" in the dictionary, as well as "webinar," taking a seminar on the Web. From the Webster dictionary, we have words that are perhaps more adultish. "Carbon footprint," "earmark." Now there's a word that we heard a lot last fall. "Staycation," a word that I think our economy has put into play. From a point of view of global perspective, "waterboarding" made it into the dictionary, as well as "webisodes" that we can watch TV now on the internet.

There are many others. A hundred, in fact, went into Webster's Dictionary, and many others were considered to be obsolete and were taken out. Words, they're important. Henry Nouwen, a priest and a Christian writer, in his book *The Way of the Heart*, says, "We have been inundated by a torrent of words. They form the floor, the walls and the ceiling of our existence." We love words. We love to talk, we love to mingle, we love to say a lot of things, and yet sometimes we speak a lot without much meaning. But at this time of the year, we hear from the Scripture that the Word, always capitalized, the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. It's the right word, it's the special word. It's the word that we're looking for. It's the word that

you want when you are on a job interview, right, that word that may sell yourself. It's the word that we're looking for when we can't seem to articulate our feelings, but we're looking for that word.

Many years ago, my husband and I had just been married, and he was looking to get into a PhD program, so he had to take his GREs. And because he was in humanities, the verbal score was very important. And so I recall, as we came up on two or three weeks before the exam, his dictionary was with us everywhere we went, and we kind of played a game. Whenever we would hear a word we'd never heard before or didn't know, we would look it up. And just a few weeks before he took the GREs, we went on a short drive somewhere for the weekend, and we came upon a historical grave. So I looked up in our travel guide to see just what the importance of this grave was, and I'm reading the description of the grave, when I come upon the description as this being a resplendent grave. Well, at the time, I didn't know what the word "resplendent" was, and of course my husband's in the car with his dictionary at the time, so I say to him, "Look up the word 'resplendent,' I don't know what it is." You all probably do, but I didn't. I look it up, and it means, 'shining brilliantly.' I don't know what it had to do with the grave. The grave didn't look like it was shining brilliantly, but I say to him, "What a great word for a student that's about to take the GREs." And so on the day that he went to take his GREs, I said to him, "Don't forget, you're resplendent!" Shining brilliantly. Well, later that day he came home and reported to me that of the billions of words that could have been on the GREs, he was given the word "resplendent." I would like to think that somehow I had just a small little bit of his success in getting into the program.

We search for the right word, don't we? We look for that which will express who we are about. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word dwelt among us. In this season, amidst the many waves of words that form the walls and the floors and the ceilings of our existence, we are told in Scripture that the right word has come to us. There is a proverb that comes from a Taoist philosopher that goes like this: "The purpose of a fish trap is to catch fish, and when the fish are caught, the trap is forgotten. The purpose of a rabbit snare is to catch rabbits, and when the rabbits are caught, the snare is forgotten. The purpose of a word is to convey ideas, and when the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten. Where can I find the one who has forgotten words? That is the one that I would like to talk to."

Certainly in Eastern religions, the idea of silence, the idea that words sometimes can mess us up more than they can help, is strong. But it's also strong in Christian traditions. I don't know if you're aware that if a person begins their path into a monastic order, even in today's time, but especially many centuries ago, one of the first things the person is asked to do is to remain silent, sometime for weeks or for months. The idea is that we so muddle our world with words that God sometimes has a hard time penetrating us, and so to be a monk, you are often asked to be in silence, to not be allowed to speak, so that God may come into your world. I would hate that. I don't know about you, I wouldn't make it very long. I've been on silent retreats, and while I value that spiritual practice, and indeed it allowed God to come closer and nearer, it's hard in our culture. It's hard to not say those words you desperately want to say. Or to say the last word, to get the last word in,

because our words might seem more important. But indeed, that's the irony, isn't it? The Word, God's word spoken at Christmas, ironically came as a baby. Babies can't speak. We enjoyed Andrew this morning. Andrew can't speak, but boy, did he communicate with us. His message was clear, and perhaps that's the message that we hear. The word or in the Greek, the logos, means God's self-expression. God's expression comes to us. But God's self-expression may not be in words, it may be in a baby, in a child that cannot speak. As Henry Nouwen puts it very well, "When the word calls forth healing and restoring stillness, few words are needed." Much can be said without speaking. In our culture, that always and often shows the importance of children to speak highly verbal, where it's important for the career-motivated person to work the crowd, God calls for a divine silence to be upon our hearts, that we listen as much as we speak. That we hug the person in need, more than telling them what we need to do about it. That we empty ourselves, as much as proclaim the answer.

As a child, I enjoyed my father's workshop. He had a workshop in our basement, and he was always making something. He was creating furniture, a cedar chest, a beautiful table. For me, it was a wonderful, place, usually of quiet. It was never said to me that you were supposed to be quiet when you were in the workshop, but you just knew it, because my father was so focused. You would kind of come in and you'd slip in next to him, and he would always hand me wood scraps and nails and a hammer and paint, and there we would just create until I would get tired. Rarely did we talk. Sometimes he would whistle. Occasionally he would put on music, and he would just hand me the things I needed, and there, when he would create the beautiful table, I would create some strange alien figure with lots of paint of all different colors, and there we would be. It was a sacred place where I never remember making a mistake, and it was a place where he was always present and next to me. It was a sacred space, and words were not needed, but the message was clear.

Today, I still receive much of his craft and parts of his labor. They mean more than just the object, because they're that sacred moment in which the message of love and care and acceptance are wrapped all around it. That's the message of the little baby, the message that they proclaim, all the children of the world. They can't speak, but there they are, giving us the message that grace abounds, that they need to be cared for and they will care for us, for sure. Christ's incarnation whispers, sometime perhaps screams, but usually whispers, and reminds us of Emanuel. God is with us. This Christmas is a time to hear the word spoken to us, for in the midst of all the celebration and all our words, and even beautiful singing, there's also a time for the silence, to bear witness to the Word speaking to us, to ask ourselves the question of how we will go into the new year with Christ speaking to us. The Word often speaks in silence, and in this one word we find our purpose and meaning.