

Psalm 19

James 3: 1-12

Mark 8: 27-38

Storm Words

Have you ever been the recipient of someone else's hospitality in a storm?

We were not living in North Carolina when Hurricane Fran struck,

but the year we moved to Durham, 2002, was the year of the epic December
ice storm, when power was out in the city for a week,
and the relentless cold brought everything here to a grinding halt.

We were new in town: Hedge had his call at Mt. Bethel; I was working for Hospice
at the time, before starting my ministry here at this church.

And we were living in a tiny, tiny rental house in Northgate Park,
with Stuart, our youngest son, Hessie, our cat and Kiwi, our bird.

The ice storm struck during the night, as most storms seem to love to do;
and I remember the power flashing and flickering, the heat tapering off,
and the frightening sound of tree branches cracking
and trees crashing around our house all night long.

We had very few options other than to snuggle up, and gather round the gas
hot water heater, which was the only source of heat in our tiny house.

We felt totally powerless in that moment!

And then, low and behold, two of Hedge's church members,
showed up unannounced the next morning at our doorstep,

offering to take the three of us to their home to stay
until the power was restored.

Don, the engineer, owned a generator, so their home was toasty-warm and their refrigerator was stocked and working, as were their TVs and phones. So off we went, for what we thought would be for a night, or two, at the most, and we had some truly lovely, meaningful conversations with Don and Pam while biding our time together.

But after day two, I told them that I had to go back to our tiny house, to make sure that our cat and our bird still had food.

"What? A cat and a bird?" they said. "We didn't know you had a cat and a bird. We'll go and get them and bring them here, too."

So we wound our way through felled trees in the Durham streets to our house, and retrieved our bird and what was by then a true scardy-cat, with all their accoutrements, including the litter box, and brought them over to Don and Pam's house with us; so that now there five of us impinging upon their generosity.

It was nice enough that Don and Pam Shirley took in Hedge, Stuart and myself; but it was a true labor of love that they also took in our squawking bird, our cat, AND her litter box.

And when it was all over a week later, we thanked them profusely, we could not thank the Shirley's enough!

But what language did we borrow to thank these dearest friends? Did we use the language of the streets, which is certainly adequate, to express our deepest gratitude: kudos, hats off, indebtedness, appreciation,

couldn't have done it without you?

Or did we use our God words to express our thoughts: words like compassion, hospitality, providence, grace, gratitude, generosity, mercy, and love?

Jesus, himself, is certainly no stranger to storms, or to human powerlessness, and to the powerful emotions they stir up.

Time is marching forward, and Jesus is needing to clarify his mission and the breadth of its implications for his companions, so they will have the right understanding of who he really is, and the ensuing words to speak about him in order to bind their growing faith community together, as his identity will beget theirs.

"Tell me," he asks them, "who do *they* say that I am?

"What kind of stories are *they* reading into my life, and my mission, and my connection to God and to God's people?"
As if he already didn't know...

And the disciples unpack all of the dueling comments one is likely to hear about Jesus.

"Oh, some say you are John the Baptist, a contemporary prophetic figure preaching a message of repentance and forgiveness; or they say you are Elijah, a prophet who didn't die, but was taken in a chariot of fire, caught up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2,:11), and who, according to Malachi 4:6,

will return to "turn the hearts of parents and their children to each other", and begin the process of reconciliation before the Day of the Lord's return;

or they say that you are one of any of the prophets, come to bring God's liberating word to bear on Israel's immediate plight as an occupied nation."

But the one word which *they* fail to say is the key word which Peter supplies:

Messiah. "You are the Messiah," Peter proclaims:

God's anointed, God's appointed One,
the highly-favored, empowered One, the delivering One,
the inspired One of God's own choosing, not losing, One.

That is Peter's understanding of Jesus and his mission at this pivotal point in their days together.

But Jesus shhhh's Peter, and begins to teach them a new meaning and new understanding of the word, *Messiah*,
as they march forward together with him,
in preparation for the time when they will march forward
together without him, in the days to come.

Jesus reaches back into Isaiah's playbook to enlighten his disciples as to the kind of Messiah that he truly will be: one who is going to suffer supreme powerlessness and humiliation; one who will be dissed and dismissed; and one who ultimately will be killed, yet rise again after three days. He says all of this quite openly, quite shockingly, to them.

To which Peter equally-openly expresses in his binary way of thinking

that one of them obviously must be wrong,

because the "they say" and the "you say" are not matching up.

We have to love Peter, because he reminds us that when we speak about Jesus

on a road trip, or while sheltering in place, we must do so with

the absolute humility and caution that comes from an awareness

that although we may be using all the right words, and all the right language,

we may not fully understand its meaning or implications!!!

Religion and culture writer, Jonathan Merritt, has written a book called

Learning to Speak God from Scratch, in which he posits that we, Americans,

are losing the language of faith, "the sacred words

that are containers that carry information about deep

and often invisible realities...words that allow us to whisper

encouragement over the God-loved downtrodden, and to pray and preach

and praise..." words that help us describe, albeit imperfectly,

what we believe.

"When we stop speaking God," Merritt says, "the future of the Christian religion

itself hangs in the balance."

(Merritt, Jonathan. *Learning to Speak God from Scratch*, p. 50)

He notes that Jesus' early followers traveled to ever corner of the globe

speaking God to all who would listen.

Jesus himself, as today's text testifies, could hardly keep them quiet:

he sternly tells his disciples not to tell anyone about him,

or about his Messiahship.

But even he could not stop them from talking constantly, about him, about his mission, about his calling, and about his connection to God and to God's beloved people.

Whenever they were instructed to sit down and shut up, they replied unapologetically,

"We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard."

(Acts. 4:20)

But, Merritt asserts, we are at risk of losing our cherished language of faith:

that source of our identity; that glue which binds our community together.

Usage of religious words and moral terms have significantly declined, he says,

some by a staggering 74 percent, over the last 100 years:

words like grace – declined; mercy – declined; wisdom – declined;

faith – declined; honesty – declined; evil – declined;

use of compassion words, like kindness, dropped 56 percent;

gratitude words, like thankfulness, down by 40 percent. (Merritt, p. 17)

No wonder it is difficult to speak with neighbors sometimes;

no wonder it is difficult to run a stewardship campaign when our culture is losing

its language of gratitude and thankfulness;

no wonder it is difficult to teach Confirmation to our youth, when

speaking across generational lines as well as across

cultural lines of learning is akin to speaking to them in Gaelic, a dying

language, or in Latin, a dead language.

So, how do we as Christians keep speaking about what we have seen and heard
to each new generation?

For Jesus, any crisis can be an opportunity with those around him

to have *a personal conversation* where he instills new meaning
into old language.

"You say that I am the Messiah, but I am neither the powerful conquistador
that your words convey, nor the gentle Jesus, meek and mild,"
he insinuates.

"I am the Anointed One of God, who will subsume my identity into the powerlessness
of humanity, to the point of suffering death, only to rise again to
claim the whole world for the goodness of God.

And my Messiahship will become your discipleship,
if you are willing to take up your cross and follow in my way and my words."

Part of our discipleship, friends, involves using our God words
to engage the needs of a disillusioned and distrusting world.

But for me, here is the most amazing re-imaged God words in Merritt's book.

Listen to this!

He lifts up Erasmus, the 15th century Dutch humanist and biblical scholar,
who chose to translate the God-words of the prologue to John's Gospel,
"in the beginning was the Word",
rather creatively in this new way:

It all arose out of a Conversation, a Conversation within God.

In fact the Conversation was God.

*So God started the discussion, and everything came out of this
and nothing happened without consultation... (John 1: 1-3)*

*The subject of the Conversation, the original light, came into the world,
the world that had arisen out of his willingness to converse.
He fleshed out the words, but the world did not understand.
He came to those who know the language, but did not respond.
Those who did became a new creation (his children),
they read the signs and responded.*

*These children were born out of sharing in the creative activity of God.
They heard the Conversation still going on, here, now and took part,
discovering a new way of being people.
To be invited to share in a conversation about the nature of life, was for them,
a glorious opportunity not to be missed. (1 John 1: 10-14)*

(Merritt. p. 200-201)

Keep talking, friends. Keep speaking God, even in the face of a terrible storm.
Keep using your sacred words to pray, preach and praise.
Keep talking about Jesus and the people whom Jesus most loves.
Keep walking in his ways and using his God words.
Keep having those conversations about who Jesus is for you,
even if it is awkward, uncomfortable and embarrassing.
Because what is true of any conversation, whether in class, or in line,
or in checking on our neighbors during the hurricane,
is also true of our journey to speak
and share The Sacred Conversation with those whom we meet.

It all begins, in the beginning, with a Conversation, and with a glorious opportunity
not to be missed. Amen.

Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

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