

“The Trajectory of Hope” GPPC 11-13-16
Isaiah 65:17-25, Luke 21:5-19

We who speak and write deal in words. Dealing in words is part of what it means to be a human being. And what we speak and *how* we speak reveal something important about our humanity.

Now maybe God could have created us differently, so that we did not rely upon words, or that words did not matter. But facts are facts. We depend upon words and they do matter.

As you know, depending upon the situation or context, we use different kinds of words, and words strung together in different ways. “I am going to the kitchen to make a ham sandwich,” has a different quality from “My love is a rose.” One is a simple declarative sentence. The other is poetry.

Words actually shape our reality as well. The other day a life coach wrote in the newspaper about the affect our word choices have upon who we are. For example, she said, “Notice the difference between these two statements: ‘I am struggling to find a job.’ ‘I am excited about my next opportunity.’ How does each statement make you feel? Which one

Jeff Paschal

do you want to hear more about? Which one do you think a potential employer would be more attracted to?” (Lucy Wellmaker, *The News & Record*, October 21, 2016.) We’re not suggesting that people simply deny their feelings, but positive or negative, the words we use make a difference.

When I was growing up we were taught, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” And that’s not true, is it? Insults and slights damage us in ways that physical violence doesn’t. As we go through life we have to learn how to protect ourselves and others against the damage wrought by insults. Holy Scripture consistently calls us to pay attention to the words we use and the words others use, because words can hurt and words can heal. Words can cause despair and words can bring hope.

The two Scripture readings today use a particular kind of words, a form of poetic biblical literature, what might be termed as “apocalyptic” and “eschatological” language. Apocalyptic means to reveal or unveil, especially in the sense of revealing something about the end of the world. And eschatological means having to do with the end of time. The

Jeff Paschal

readings from Luke and from Isaiah contain apocalyptic and eschatological words and themes.

Retired preaching professor Tom Long says, “The fact that [Jesus] speaks in apocalyptic language means that he is in effect saying, to his disciples and us, ‘Look, you want to know about the end of time. Well, it cannot be described in ordinary speech. You have to reach for it out on the edge of your faithful imaginations, and even then you will not grasp it. But let me give you these images, these parabolic pictures, to help you along.’” (Thomas G. Long, “Sometimes there’s God so quickly,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, November 23, 2015, 12.)

This morning we look at these strange pictures in Isaiah and Luke. And just as our parents taught us, we have to eat our vegetables before we can get dessert. So we start with Luke’s painful and challenging story before ending with Isaiah’s glorious vision.

In Luke, we see Jesus at the temple this morning. The widow has just put her two small copper coins, all that she has, into the treasury. Yet the people around Jesus are more impressed with the temple, its

Jeff Paschal

beauty and adornment. “Wow! Check out those stained glass windows and massive stones!”

But Jesus says to the people, “Don’t get too impressed. It’s all coming down. This place is going to be flattened.”

And the people ask, “Teacher, when and how will we know this is coming?”

And Jesus says, “Be careful not to be misled. Lots of folks are going to say, ‘Here I am! I’m Jesus who’s come back! It’s time!’ But don’t go with these imposters. And when you hear about all sorts of terrible things—wars, revolutions, don’t be frightened. These things have to happen, but they’re just a prelude to the end. It’ll be even worse—wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues, scary signs from heaven.

“And before that, you’ll be arrested and handed over for interrogation because of me. And here is your opportunity to testify before the authorities. But don’t get your arguments ready, because I’ll give you the words.”

Don’t get ready? Why? As one scholar points out, “Then, Jesus says, then you will have them right where you want them. They will

Jeff Paschal

have to listen to you. Just when everything looks so dark... ‘I will give you words.’” (Patrick J. Willson in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4*, 311 and 313.)

“Just when everything looks so dark...I will give you words.”

Jesus ends this section by saying, “You’re going to be betrayed by family and friends. Some of you are going to be killed. You’re going to be hated because of me. But not a hair on your head will perish.”

And we think but if we’re dead, how does not a hair on our head perish? Maybe Jesus is simply saying that even in death we will be utterly safe with God.

Wars, earthquakes, plagues, famines, interrogations, and even death, this is not exactly an appealing picture, is it? And when being disciples gets hard, we might be tempted to give up, right? We might get discouraged or scared and not want to continue to follow Jesus, right?

But Jesus says, “Don’t do that. The darker it gets, the closer I am. The scarier it is, the nearer it is finally to being over. By your endurance, by your hanging tough, you’ll gain your souls. You’ll hang on to the true and better selves that you actually are. You’ll remain the faithful disciples you’re truly meant to be. So don’t lose heart. Don’t give up.”

Jeff Paschal

That's what Jesus says. Do we hear him?

Of course, if anybody might have been tempted to give up, it was Israel. We remember that Israel had suffered first under the domination of the Assyrian Empire. This was followed by the cruel Babylonian Empire's control and Israel's exile. And then by the time of the reading this morning, the Babylonian Empire was being replaced by the Persian Empire. At this moment one scholar says, "Many Judeans had returned from Babylon to their homeland, the temple almost certainly had been rebuilt, but the future of the people was by no means secure. In addition, there is evidence of sectarian conflict within in the community." (Gene M. Tucker in *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year C, Lent, Holy Week, Easter*, 143.)

It was hard enough to try to build and rebuild their shattered homeland with its neglected infrastructure, but it was even tougher with so much division within the community. We can imagine the discouragement the people must have felt. "What's the use? This place is a shambles. Injustice, inequity, violence, and suffering have been our lot for so long that it's hard to imagine anything else. And we can't even get along as a nation because we're so divided." We can see why the

Jeff Paschal

people, God's people, might have been disheartened, tempted to give up and give in to cynicism and despair, right?

Right?

But then God speaks a different word, a word not anticipated, a word that breaks from the reality the people had lived and had expected to keep living. God speaks this word. "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating..."

God is about to create. The Hebrew word for create is found in the Old Testament only with God as the subject. God is the only one who can create; people just fashion and shape what is already created by God.

And God is about to create a new heavens and a new earth—a new universe. And the things that went on before, as hard and painful as they were, will be forgotten because this new heavens and new earth will be that wonderful. So be glad and rejoice forever in what God is creating.

But what's so great about this mysterious new heavens and new earth? Are there any details? Yes.

There won't be any crying there.

Jeff Paschal

Babies won't die after a few days, because infant mortality will be a thing of the past.

People won't die when they're young. Heck, says God, if you don't make to at least a hundred people will think there's something terribly wrong.

And folks won't build houses just so other people can live in them. And they won't plant vineyards just so other people can eat. No. Everybody will have decent housing. Everybody will have enough to eat. We won't labor in vain, work in unfair conditions for unfair wages. We won't have children just so they can suffer from fear, abuse, and calamity.

In fact, God says of God's people, "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear." And who does this sound like? A parent, the best parent who knows and loves her children with an amazing maternal intuition. A parent, the best parent who listens with attentiveness that hears beyond the mere words that are spoken in order to know the words written on his children's hearts.

Jeff Paschal

But God is not content to stop just with humanity. God even has something to say about the natural order, God is creating something new. God says, “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy...”

We say, “Well, the wolf and lamb may eat from the same trough, but the lamb is going to keep one eye open!” But in truth what God is going to create is a new environment unmarred by pollution, and no longer based on survival of the fittest, kill or be kill—no longer. What is coming is a creation not of deadly competition between animals or between human beings, but a world of holy, interconnected peaceful existence. God’s perfect peace. God’s shalom. That’s what’s coming.

If this all sounds like a dream, it is. But it’s *God’s* dream. So it will come true one day. It will come true. So we must not lose heart.

Just like Israel and just like Jesus’ first disciples, we will face all sorts of disappointments, frustrations, suffering, angry resistance, and finally even death. But while we live on the earth, our calling is to keep the faith. “By your endurance you will gain your souls.” Our calling is to

Jeff Paschal

be good stewards of our lives--our time, abilities, and money—and to live into the trajectory of hope. Speak truth to power and truth to counter lies. Feed the poor, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and lonely, protect the weak, fight for justice, just as Jesus and the prophets tell us over and over in Holy Scripture. Live into the world that is coming, surely coming, not because we are so faithful but because God is faithful and finally irresistible.

History does not end with weeping but laughter. Not with division but with unity. Not with destruction but with the creation of a new heavens and a new earth.

So we must not despair. Now is the time for God's church to be on the move. Now is the day to be about God's justice and mercy for all people. Church of Jesus Christ, let's go! Let's go! Amen. ©Jeff Paschal