

The Rev. Kate Byrd

12/31/2023

The Word

Growing up, my father always emphasized the importance of understanding the English language and using it well. Say, for instance, something less than desirable or edifying came out of my mouth, my father would say “Katherine me darling, the English language is a powerful tool, use it.” Or my all time favorite, “try engaging your brain before you engage your mouth, kid.” And, now as a mother I am witnessing the power of words with my own children. For example, our son Patrick’s new favorite phrase is “stop me!” Which you would assume means try and prevent me from... (insert undesirable action here). But, what he actually means is “stop it” or “leave me alone.” Which is why he gets so frustrated when he says “stop me” to his older sister Libbe, and in turn she says, “ok I’ll stop you!” Like my father said, the English language is a powerful tool. And, even more so are the words that make it up. Which is why we make vows with words when we enter into marriage, instead of simply sealing the deal with a kiss. And, how parents can always tell you their child's first word. Or why we promise to be true to our “word” (interestingly enough, not to our actions). Even animals understand their impact, I can’t say W A L K without my dogs running to the door waiting to be leashed up. Words create meaning in all we do. Even as our culture becomes more and more engaged in social media platforms like instagram and tiktok, it is still the words associated with these pictures and reels that give them life and significance. Words have the power to create and to destroy, even in 140 characters. We learn this in Genesis as God speaks the world into being in our creation story; and in the story of Noah’s Ark as God holds true to word, destroying the wicked with a great flood.

Words are an integral part of our humanity and our being. Language is a living, moving, changing part of human culture, continuously working to keep up with the needs and demands of the times. Even though your English teacher may have tried to teach you otherwise. Which is why, in his book *Words on the Move: Why English Won’t and Can’t Sit Still (Like Literally)*, John McWhorter helps us understand the importance of a non-static language, as he delves into popular slang and acronyms used by Millennials and Gen Z to emphasize how these changes are good and fun, not bad and scary. Although the more I hear foreign words like lit and turnt, which a younger generation has helped me realize I am too old to use, the more I think it is just plain terrifying. So here’s hoping this sermon isn’t ratchet.

Today we hear John’s famous prologue to his Gospel and our Christmas story: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” A few years ago, when I was leading a children’s pageant, one of our youth was rehearsing his lines, as he said aloud, the names for Jesus; “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.” Until he stopped himself, and asked aloud, “But, Jesus isn’t God, Jesus is God’s Son, so why are

we calling him God?" What a beautiful question I thought, one that is at the root of what we believe and who we are as Christians. It was this exact question that brought together the Council of Nicea, and has fueled the work of many theologians throughout the centuries. But, if there is anyone who has most clearly assuaged our wonderment on how Jesus can be both God and Son of Man, bringing clarity to mystery, it is John, our Gospel's author. As he tells us that the Word (John's expression for Christ) has always been, and is still now God. The Word being God's action from the beginning of time, as he birthed our universe into being through speech. The Word, being what gives our life meaning and purpose, that ever changing never static necessity of human relations and existence. The Word, being a part of our everyday lives, coming forth from our lips, and entering the atmosphere as vibrations that go on for eternity.

In the book I mentioned earlier, *Words on the Move*, McWhroter tries to help us understand not only the complexity and fluidity of the English Language, but how this enhances the beauty of words. As he states: "One of the hardest notions for a human being to shake is that a language *is* something that is, when it is actually something that is always *becoming*. They tell you a word is a thing when it's actually something going on." There is a reason why the Old English of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is a foreign language to us, it is of a different time and place, words have changed in meaning, pronunciation, and relevance. It is too, why when I learned French in school and then traveled to Paris, the grammatical rules that helped me pass my writing assignments and exams in class proved useless when I tried to jump in on a conversation with my host family, only to sound like (exactly what I was) a complete foreigner. Language is living and moving, it surrounds us, and bends as we grow and change. It is specific and responsive to its location and community. Which is why McWhroter compares language and words to a parade, "We do not watch a parade and wonder why those people don't just stand still." It is the same with Christ, John's naming of Christ as the Word helps us to see who and what Christ is, an ever present, never stagnant, integral part of life. Christ is the Word, that is God, the creator of our universe, Jesus, the redeemer of our history, and the Spirit, the sustainer of our salvation. Christ is the Word, because he has been present from the beginning, as God spoke the universe into creation, he was the Word. At the incarnation, as the angel's proclaimed his coming to Mary, he was the Word. As John the Baptist proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, he was the Word. After his resurrection and ascension, as the Spirit came upon the lips of the Apostles he was the Word. As we stand together at the communion table, and celebrate the taking, breaking, blessing, and giving of his body, he is the Word.

The Word is always with us, on our lips, and in our hearts. As we enter this New Year may you find the Word in all you do, share it with those you meet, as you participate in the work of Christ; the Word who was and is and is to come.