

Merry Christmas. What's the Good Word?
Christmas Day, 2022

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Year A

Years and years ago, when I first met my husband in college, he had this intriguing way of greeting people, which utterly charmed me. He'd say "Hey, what's the good word?"

It would stop me every time. Because it's not a greeting with an easy answer. You can't say fine or all right to a question like that. And whenever he said it, I'd find myself stopping to search for the actual answer to the question. I loved it. Perhaps that's why I married him.

It's a particularly appropriate greeting on this Christmas morning, when we proclaim the glorious hymn that begins the Gospel of John: *In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.* In the beginning, just before the creator spoke everything into being – the sun and the stars and the earth and the seas and the life that teemed over it and quite late in the story, humanity, -- right before that beginning there was the Good Word.

Because for John the story of God's wild, incarnate and self-sacrificing love for creation doesn't begin with a decree from Caesar. There's no angelic visitation, or a stable – though those are all important motifs depending on who is telling the story. John begins at the very beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth. And it begins with the Word.

Linguists will remind us that a word is inherently relational and creative. Words make reality. They not only inform and communicate, but they shape worlds. We are people made of words and stories – spoken and heard, written and read, passed down, made up. In this hyper-wordy information age it has become almost impossible to trust words. It's hard to find truth in them. And yet we cannot avoid their destructive force all around us.

Rather than *what's the good word*, we might find ourselves saying *where's the good word?*, as we perch on the edge of a new decade.

I don't know about you, but I find myself longing for a Word that truly creates a new world, that brings the peace it announces, that heals my frozen imagination.

I want a Word that sings a new song in me, that restores my soul. I'm longing for a Word that strengthens me.

And so I think this morning that I'm in the right place, here with you, in this sanctuary away from the rest of the holiday. Here it's just us and the Word. It's just us and the Word made flesh and dwelling among us. It's just us and the word dwelling within us. IF all goes well we'll leave with the Word as well.

Because if God from the beginning is Word, then we from the beginning were created to be receivers of that word. We were made with ears to hear it. We were made with eyes to see it. And with voices to proclaim it. We were made to receive a word so utterly creative it could press itself into the stuff of our existence, and come out the other side as Jesus, as Word made Flesh, as today's Scriptures proclaim.

So how shall we receive Jesus the Word of God, on this Christmas morning? How shall we make a space for the Christ in our Word-weary brains? When our ears are ringing, and our eyes are fatigued.

I say we make room for the Word on our very breath. Because ears and eyes are just organs, and they can get tired and distracted, they can give out. But as long as there is life within us, there is breath within us. And that breath is inherently relational – breathing in we receive something outside of us. Breathing out we give away something that was within us. I think that this is the place in us where Jesus the Word of God truly resides.

So I have a Christmas gift for you. A little prayer practice to make room on our breath for the Word of God. It's called appropriately enough a breath prayer. And just as the act of breathing air brings precious oxygen to every cell of our body through the genius gift of human respiration, so in the genius act of prayer does the spirit of God reach every place in us that longs for the Good Word.

And it does that in as few as two breaths, one in one out, another in and another out. Though really you can use as many as you need. The key to breathing is don't stop.

Here's how you do it:

As you breath in, imagine yourself calling upon the Word of God by name – whatever name you use to get God’s attention.

Breathing out, hear God replying with your name, the name you love to be called, the name that is used by one who really gets you.

Try that – breathing in call upon the name of God, breathing out hear God call you by name.

That’s the first breath.

Now in the second breath, hear the Word of God ask you – what do you long for? Let the question go deep to all the places in you that need the love of Jesus. Because the question essentially means: Where do you most want the Word of God to dwell in your life? You can take a few breaths to ponder this if you need to. Or a lifetime. And because we change all the time, our deepest longing may be different from prayer to prayer, breath to breath

But ultimately, on the final breath out, you answer God’s question. What is your deep longing this Christmas? Where do you want God to dwell in you? What needs saving, or celebrating or sending?

And that’s the prayer.

It’s just a tiny reminder of the great, Glorious gift of the Christ that we celebrate on Christmas. Of a God so deeply present with us as to ride on our very breath. Because from the beginning, God’s longing is for a relationship with humanity that is as regular and as natural as breathing. So with each breath in we might recall our need for God with Us. With every breath out we might proclaim the presence of the Christ among us.

And that’s the Good Word.

Amen.