

Proper 19 Year B

The Word that Sustains the Weary

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Last week, we made sure to end the Vestry meeting early so that we could all get home to watch the presidential debate. I'm not a big debate watcher, to be honest. Even in better decades I would find it kind of exhausting trying to find the truth in the spin, the substance from the empty promises. I have often been disappointed by candidates from my own party, because I often felt they weren't going far enough in the direction of peace and justice that I longed for. In fact, there have been few candidates whose word I really trusted, because I've been around the block long enough to know that what is promised in a campaign is meant more to appeal to the polls than the common good.

The work of holding an elected official to their word, or changing their mind entirely, is not the act of voting, but the hard and long-term work of advocacy – the Hill visits, the letters, the phone calls, the marches. Still at this moment, in these months, our vote is very, very important. And to cast that vote it's important to be able to tell the difference between the truth and a lie.

So I watched the entire debate this time. Because I was curious what form the spin was taking. And to be frank, I wanted to see what shape the lies were taking at this moment. It wasn't hard to spot the really big ones.

I bring up the elections and the debates in the context of today's Scriptures because I think they immediately come to mind when you hear these words proclaimed. Did anyone else go there today? We have been plunged into a time where we are being hit with an onslaught of untruths and it is very difficult to move people from their committed belief in them.

And so our Scriptures today ask: What's the most powerful muscle in the body? And the answer is: the tongue. And our times bear this out.

Isaiah in our Hebrew Scriptures points out that the well-trained tongue is a Gift of God. The Apostle James, writing to his Jewish-Christian community, says the tongue can also be set on fire by hell.

This is because the Word – which is a powerful force in shaping who we are and what we believe -- is released by the tongue.

Just the other Sunday, The Epistle of James was telling us to be doers of the Word. This week he is saying that the tongue that utters the word is not to be trusted: "it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing."

Now sometimes the current day example of this kind of tongue is so egregious that the very stones seem to cry out against them, and the condemnation that our Scriptures have for deceit and for

oppression and hatred seem to fly off the page. Ah, we say, the Scriptures have been proven, this is who they've been talking about all the time!

But let's just stop to remember, that James, the brother of Jesus and the head of the Church in Jerusalem, wasn't addressing the Roman Empire with his words, he was talking to his audience of Jewish Christian congregations. The advice that the Scriptures give us is mainly to prompt the repentance and transformation of the faithful, the people of God. And so before we take the easy shot, we must sit with our own limits, our imperfections, our own sinfulness – the power of our own Word.

We must ask ourselves what kind of training have our tongues received, and how do we put it into practice? We must ask ourselves how well our Word reflects the Word of faith, of discipleship and how much it is shaped by a culture that has a pretty dubious relationship with the truth.

Because we are hugely shaped by branding, by curated social media platforms, by the ability to pick and choose our sources of news, and the information and entertainment we prefer. We pick our neighborhoods, our churches, I dare say. And all of those have very different ways of managing and expressing the Word. How are we to know what is true?

It's ironic that James in his letter to the congregations says: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes." Any teachers in the pews? Given the abuse that teachers are receiving for teaching uncomfortable truths about our country, for reinforcing science and empirical inquiry, for holding up standards of academic diligence, this is another Scripture that seems to jump off the page and into our current context.

Here James isn't talking about high school social studies teachers in Chester, like my son Jesse, but more about people like me – preachers, rabbis, those responsible for passing down God's Word, getting it accurate and not infusing it with our own sinful opinions. So it's me who should be shaking in her shoes.

The Word of clergy and religious leaders faces understandable scrutiny, because we have power of interpretation and moral suasion, and we are sought out by the vulnerable. We are easy marks for accusations of hypocrisy. I also detect in James' words a tiny appeal for mercy, but I might just be reading into things.

Still the vocation of all disciples –our great commission – is to Go and proclaim the Word of Christ. Telling people who Jesus is – that's our primary call. So the answer to Jesus' question: Who do you say I am? is really important. And woe to those who profess to be Christians and are ashamed of Jesus and his Words, or who twist them to remake Jesus in their own image. Peter manages to get it both right and wrong all in the same paragraph. But that's how Peter learns. That's how I learn too.

Still, there's plenty of woe left for the truth-teller, both then and now.

In today's Gospel from Mark Jesus points out there are great consequences to telling the truth, for using that tongue to proclaim the Kingdom of God, to share the words of Jesus. Even before his death and resurrection, Jesus is talking about the cross – about picking up this instrument of torture and following

him. To follow Jesus is to lay down a past story and to tell a new one – and that will get you in trouble. Good Trouble as the great Saint John Lewis said. But Trouble nonetheless. I would call that trouble with resurrection attached.

Trouble notwithstanding, there is a bit of comfort in this as well. Often we think that there is very little difference that our Word as people of faith can make in a world marked by so much vitriol and hate and greed. But consider the power that our Scriptures give to our Word. Consider then the power of the well-trained tongue.

Isaiah reminds us that it has always been a gift of God that “can sustain the weary with a word.” Just call to mind your own experience of hearing a Word that sustained you in your weariness. Who said it? What did it sound like? What impact does remembering it now have on your own weary soul? That’s the power of the Good Word. It sticks in our fleshy tissue and remains when we need it.

Isaiah also suggests that the gift of the Well-Trained Tongue also has some attachments – ones for the ears. *Morning by morning God wakens-- wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught, says Isaiah.* So the gift of a well-trained tongue comes with a wide-open ear.

And consider the power of that in our own life – recall a time when you were listened to, deeply heard, lovingly understood. How transformative was that in your life? Consider that power let loose in our bitter world today. What change would that bring – to listen as those who are taught?

There is another gift that goes along with the well-trained tongue, the wide-open ear, and that is well-honed courage – courage to lay down the whole body for the sake of the Good News that is proclaimed and the people who long to hear it. In first-century Palestine, this meant the courage to face martyrdom, physical death, and pain. Today, it still requires a great deal of courage to speak up – to speak truth to power, disagree with an employer, strain relationships with friends or family members.

Consider all these three together – a well-trained tongue, a wide-open ear, well-honed courage – and you have a picture of what empowers the Body of Christ. This is what we followers of Jesus bring into this election cycle, this age of the bald lie and the empty promise, it’s what we bring to our citizenship and to our world.

That we may know how to sustain the weary with a Word.

Amen.