

“Word Power”

John 1:1-5

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This is the fourth Sunday after the Festival of the Epiphany, which was celebrated January 6th. Epiphany is one of the best-kept secrets of the Christian year, probably because most of us were so exhausted by celebrating Christmas and so put off by the thought of a long, almost endless Lenten season that we use this period in between the two to catch our breath. As I have been saying, Sunday by Sunday, Epiphany means manifestation or revelation. It falls on the twelfth night after Christmas, a night in Christian tradition when the wise men arrived in Bethlehem.

The kings of the then-known continents (Africa, Asia, and Europe) come to bow before Jesus Christ, the king of heaven and earth. As it stands written by the prophet Isaiah, *Kings shall come to the brightness of your rising*. The kings, representing earthly wisdom, arrive to bend the knee before Christ, the Wisdom of the

ages, the man for all seasons. Now angels sing and stars shine. Now heaven and nature sing “Joy to the world, the Lord is come; let earth receive her king.”

Now Psalm 19 takes on fresh meaning. *The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.*

This Epiphany, this manifestation, is proclaimed throughout the world. The Word goes out. It is time for the Church to get the Word out. It is a time of proclamation, of evangelism. It is a good Word, Good News, Gospel. That is word power, and we are people of the Word!

The word in its earliest and most primitive sermon form was known as *kerygma*. That is a Greek word meaning proclamation. It is so simple, so elementary, it is almost creedal. It is a thumbnail sketch of the faith. One example

of where kerygma, which has five elements, may be found in the New Testament is I Corinthians 15:1-11. The preaching of the gospel begins, not with Jesus' birth, but with his death. So, the kerygma declares Christ was:

- (1) crucified for our sins, according to scripture,
- (2) buried
- (3) raised on the third day
- (4) appeared to Peter and the Apostles.
- (5) The fifth element, sometimes added:
"And he shall come to judge the living and the dead."

Kerygma, proclamation, just the simple story, the old, old story. That is Word Power! And we are people of the Word!

Something is new here, yet utterly consistent, contiguous, and congruent with the way life has always been from the beginning. For: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the*

life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Thus begins the Gospel According to John. This prologue is an echo of Genesis 1:1-5, where God creates everything that is with a word. Ten times in in the first chapter of the Bible, "God said" is repeated. Word power, the power of words to create.

Isaiah 55 underscores the power of the creative word: *For as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and return not thither, but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.* God's word is a good word. Seven times in Genesis 1 God pronounces creation "good."

Yet, there are also bad words in Genesis. By

Genesis 11 we have already witnessed the fall of humankind, the filial fratricide of Abel by Cain, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, a world-destroying flood, and a confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel. That confusion of tongues has left us babbling to this day. Language barriers persist.

I have witnessed it in my inability to verbally communicate with the Mazahua Indians of Mexico and a Romanian church custodian. I continue experience an inability to communicate well from time to time with family members, friends, and colleagues. So difficult is English for me that I sometimes consider it a second language. What power for good and ill there is in words! And we are people of the Word!

No wonder, then, our fascination with words! We have talk radio, TV talk shows, word processors, computers, and fiber optics to generate, transmit, and store our words, phrase-makers, wordsmiths, and authors in such proliferation that 600,000 to one million books a year are published in America alone, many of them self-published!

We have hot words; those are fighting words. We have cool words: "in" words, hip, street-smart, faddish words. We have eloquent words in the mouths of the silver-tongued. We have wrong words in the mouths of those with hoof-and-mouth. We have good words; we ask "What's the good word?" And there are bad words, of course, those four-letter vulgarities. We have magic words: "Yes, ma'am, no ma'am, thank you, please." And then there are black magic words, "knock-on-wood" words that shield us from evil we wish to avoid.

Author James Carroll speaks to the incredible power that words exercise upon us. I want to read something from one of his lectures.

We encounter the Other in words, stories, and the void. Silence yields blindness; saying yields seeing; voice yields vision. Words without silence is babble. Yet nothing is more terrible than the silence of God. Silence may be collusion with the forces of evil. God comes as a word, as the Word. "Is there any word from the Lord?" (Jeremiah 37:17) There is, but the Devil quotes scripture too and deceives with a

word. We are people of the Book.

Our service of Holy Communion follows the Service of the Word, where the Word is given and expounded. Then we come to table. But even the elements from the table are served with a word. Communion is given and received with a word. Says the pastor, "The body and blood of Christ." Responds the communicant, "Amen." When the Word is spoken we become a people. Congregation is created by proclamation. There is no absolution or transubstantiation without the speaking of the Word.

If we think about the history of words, of language, which is the oral and written word, written language is only 5,000 years old, the printing press less than 600 years old. But spoken language is much older. It had the advantage, for ancient human beings, of giving them the ability to communicate in the dark, when they couldn't see each other; or it freed their hands for other things while they communicated.

The word "language" derives from the Latin *lingua*, which means tongue. And we still speak of languages as tongues. There are, in the world today, about 6,500 languages and innumerable dialects. One hundred of them are major languages. Three-quarters of the world's people speak languages derived from Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan tongues.

It was Rene Descartes in the 17th Century who was the first to suggest a Universal Language. To date, more than 600 have been attempted. Three have succeeded to one degree or another. One of them is devoted to scientific writing; and the best known is Esperanto.

Christians know that it took Pentecost to unravel the confusion of tongues created at the Tower of Babel. Modern Pentecostals have speaking in tongues backward. For scripture says that each person heard the gospel in his or her own tongue! That's cosmic communication! Word power! And we are people of the Word!

What is the Word to us? The Word is Christ, God's Word made flesh, dwelling among us!

Christ, a word that for us means love! Love is
The universal language, as it was in the
beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world
without end. Amen!

In Christo—in Christ—we do not **have** a Word,
we **are** a Word. In Christ, you are God's word
to me and I am God's word to you. We are
bearers of the Word—Christ-bearers,
Christophers.

Do you love somebody? Tell him or her today.
Bear that word. Are you at odds with
someone? Don't let the sun go down on your
wrath. Do you know someone who needs a
word of encouragement? Well, then give a
good word! Is a bitter or hasty word on your
tongue? Swallow it! If someone has something
against you, you offer a word of reconciliation!
If you need encouragement, encourage
another! If you are verbally attacked,
remember the word from Proverbs that a soft
word turns away wrath! We are people of the
Word! We have WORD POWER!