

Speak Now Against the Day
Genesis 2:18-20a; John 20:11-16
Seventh Sunday of Easter, (May 24) 2020
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We speak now against the day when our Southern people who will resist to the last these inevitable changes in social relations, when they have been forced to accept what they at one time might have accepted with dignity and good will, say, "Why didn't someone tell us this before? Tell us this in time!"

-William Faulkner

I remember the first time I was ever asked to say a clear word about God and about Jesus. I'm not talking about conversations with my parents about God or conversations in Sunday School. This was different. This was a testimony. I was in Vacation Bible School and probably about ten years old, and we were on our way out of the church building, meeting our parents to go home for the day. Tim, a classmate of mine, who at age ten was already a full-fledged cowboy who lived on a nearby ranch and who helped his father every day after school to work cattle, came up to me and said, "I think I want to be baptized. Tell me about it. Tell me about God."

I had never been asked such a thing before. I already knew enough from church training to give the standard Southern Baptist answers: "God loves us. We're all sinners. Jesus died for us so we might be forgiven. All we need to do is ask Jesus into our hearts to be saved." I knew that stuff. Tim probably knew that stuff. But he wasn't asking for canned, marketed sentences. He was asking something deeper. I knew, probably for the first time in my life, that he was asking

deep and profound questions about God and he needed more from me than canned answers.

What would you have said? What would you say now?

Answering that is no easy task. Especially nowadays. Much more than when I was a kid there are plenty of canned answers to such deeply personal questions. Canned answers, religious marketing answers, God-talk, religious-talk, church-talk, spiritual-talk, political-talk, ... blah, blah, blah. It is constant on television, social media, and news stories of one kind or another.

It's not only that there is so much God-talk and religious noise, it is that much of it is contradictory. Two people on TV or in town can confess to being Christian and believe totally different things. You can hand two confessing Christians a Bible and point to the same Bible verses and get two very different interpretations of what they mean.

For a long time, I thought that Matthew 25:31-46, in which Jesus asks us whether or not we served the "least of these," was a sure-fire fact showing whoever read it, that our calling, no matter what, was to serve the least and those in great need. But I've learned that for many white Fundamentalist Christians, they see this as a reference to their interpretation of the book of Revelation, and the 144,000 remnant who will be saved out of Israel, and during the Great Tribulation Christians will be called upon to serve these 144,000 "least of these." In other words, for some Fundamentalists, Jesus words about serving the least has nothing to do with how we conduct our lives today but only about something, sometime out in the future.

Some say this and others say that. How do we know what to believe? What's true? What's reliable?

Wendell Berry says that the two great illnesses of our time, “the disintegration of communities and the disintegration of persons,” are closely related to the disintegration of language. Berry wrote, “My impression is that we have seen, for perhaps a hundred and fifty years, a gradual increase in language that is either meaningless or destructive of meaning” (*Standing by Words*, 1983, p. 24).

Right after World War II, George Orwell wrote in his novel, *1984*, of “newspeak.” Newspeak is about connection of the corruption of language, the corruption of thought, and the corruption of people and society. Newspeak substitutes one word for another, eliminates some words and alters others, changes parts of speech, uses language for political purposes (propaganda), and uses confusing and deceptive jargon. Orwell said that newspeak is about “words designed to diminish the range of thought.”

Nowadays we have “alternative facts” and “fake news,” and “super-duper” missiles. Rather than language that signifies what's true, what's real, and what's reliable, we get euphemism, and what Bonhoeffer called slogans, and catchwords which makes us “become a mindless tool” and we become stupid, “capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil” (*After Ten Years*, “On Being Stupid,” p. 23).

In the early 1950's, George Steiner wrote about language under the Nazis, “The language was infected not only with ... great bestialities. It was called upon

to enforce innumerable falsehoods, to persuade the Germans that the war was just and everywhere victorious. As defeat closed in ... the lies thickened to a constant snowdrift.... (*Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman*, p. 100).

So, what do we do? What do we believe? What do we say? Where do we begin?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together* that there is a silence “before the Word,” a silence that stands “under the Word,” and a silence that “comes out of the Word.” Before we speak, Bonhoeffer believed, we need to be humbly silent, listening, and learning to wait on God.

We touched on this last week. While self-quarantined let us use the time and space we are given, to be silent. To pray, to read Scripture and to listen to it, and listen for the Word of God to speak to us. Sooner or later we will be called upon to speak but before we speak, we want to have listened. Yet sooner or later, we will be called to speak. Sooner or later we will need to speak against the day. Sooner or later we need to say something, to speak up and speak out.

Part of our being still and listening is to ask, who do we listen alongside? To put it differently, when we read and listen to Scripture, who are our conversation partners who help us read and listen? Part of what I hope to do this summer is talk about some of our conversation partners from across Christian history who help us read and listen to the Word of God.

So, we begin by being still, shutting up and listening. But sooner or later we have to say something. Mark tells us that the women who were the first witnesses of the resurrection, “said nothing to anyone” (Mk. 16:8). Like them, we begin in silence. But like them, we eventually meet others who ask, “What do you know? What did you see and hear? Tell us about God.” And when they ask, we need to be able to say something.

Part of our work as the church, is learning how to speak Christian. Austin Heights Baptist Church is a language school teaching each other the new language of Jesus followers. We teach nouns and verbs, grammar, and syntax. Being Christian means learning new ways to speak, new ways to see, new ways to think, and new ways to live.

Our Scripture lessons this morning are from stories of Creation and New Creation. Both are about the importance of language. Of knowing what we believe – knowing what’s what, who is who, and why it’s important. Today’s readings are about nouns, knowing the content of our faith and of this world. Today we hear about names. Names tell us who we are and who we are to become. Names tell us how to interpret the world around us.

For example, it makes a difference if we name a plant “flower,” “weed,” or “fruit.” It makes a difference if we name a child, “Bookworm,” or “athlete;” “Sweetheart,” or “Dummy.”

It is fairly common for people to respond to babies, especially little girls, by telling them how beautiful they are. I made a conscious effort to tell our young daughters how smart they were. I read an article a few of years ago that talked

about telling small children how hard workers they are because if they only think they're smart and they run into an intractable problem – as they inevitably will – they won't know what to do if they can't solve it rather easily. But if they've been told, if they've been named that they're hard workers, then they're more likely to learn that when they run up against the difficult problem that they need to buckle-down and work through it, no matter how hard or how much time it will take.

Naming makes a difference. Naming has to do with narrating the world around us. To narrate means to tell a story, as in, “This is who you are, and this is how you fit into this world.” To use another term, naming frames us. It gives us a way to interpret who we are and what the world is.

In the Bible, naming is very important. Names were not simply labels; they were who the person was to become, or they told a story of a place. So, Eden, as in the Garden of Eden, means a place of joy and delight. Adam means earth or soil and Eve means “to bring life.” Abraham is “father of multitudes” and Sarah is “mother of multitudes.” Jesus means “savior” or “he shall save my people.” Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew Joshua. Beth is the Hebrew for house, so you get towns named Bethlehem – house of bread, or Bethesda – house of mercy. Names tell a story.

When we look at our world and all that is in it, do we name it “creation”, or do we name it something else? To name it creation means that we are all gifts of God. It means we are all connected with one another and with all the natural world and furthermore, we are to be responsible, loving, attentive stewards of all this creation. But to name it say, “natural resources,” means that it is something that we can exploit or make money from. Or what if name it like the old Fundamentalist

evangelist of the late 1800's, Dwight Moody, who said, "I looked on this world as a wrecked vessel... this world is getting darker and darker; its ruin is coming nearer and nearer" (cited, in Michael Williams, *The World is Not My Home: The Origins and Development of Dispensationalism*, pp. 41-42)? For many Fundamentalists, "this world is not my home, I'm just a passing through." So, is it Creation? Natural resources? Or a wrecked vessel? Names make a difference. What we believe makes a difference.

In Genesis Adam is in the garden and God gives him the responsibility of naming the animals. He must call them by something of who God created them to be. Their names must be rooted in the truth and reality of who they are. At the same time, not only naming their essential character, Adam is also giving them their calling of who and what they are to become.

In the familiar John story, also taking place in a garden, Mary is overwhelmed by the news of the empty tomb. She meets Jesus but does not recognize him. Then he names her. He says, "Mary." And in hearing his voice, hearing her name called by the resurrected Christ, the first fruits of the New Creation, Mary sees him for who he is. When Christ calls her by name, he is calling her into the New Creation and calling her who she is created to be and toward who she is to become.

Names are essential. Austin Heights Baptist Church is about learning the proper names of things. Like toddlers we point to this world around us and name it. We learn that he or she is brother or sister, and not "threats to our way of life," to be feared or hated. We learn that children in this town are "our" children, not "those people." We learn that this world is not a fear-filled place in which we need

to carry guns. We learn that the grammar of our faith must be rooted in the truth of who God is, so it makes a difference when we say “Trinity” and when we say, “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

So, what did I say to Tim when I was ten years old? I can’t recall everything, but I do remember this. I remember how I almost started crying because the conversation had suddenly become very deep and about God in a way different from any other conversation I had ever had. I said something about going to speak to Brother Southerland, our pastor, who was standing up at the front of the sanctuary. But I remember very clearly, that I did not say something about Jesus dying to save us from our sins. I said something about, “Being Christian means Jesus changes us.” For two ten-year-olds talking, that was a lot. It was enough to keep us thinking for another couple of years when we were both baptized. And I’ve been thinking about it ever since.

Old Testament scholar James Sanders, dedicated one of his books, to “Sisters Agnes and Iris and my sister Nell, women who told me the tomb was empty, and Ruth and Joe Brown Love, who told me my head need not be” (*God Has a Story Too: Sermons in Context*, p. v.).

I hope that’s what we’re doing: teaching you the tomb was empty and that your head need not be. Listen, think, and pay attention to your nouns. We’ll teach you about verbs in a few weeks.

In her memoir *The Whisper Test*, Mary Ann Bird tells that she was born with multiple birth defects and physical challenges: deaf in one ear, a cleft palate, a disfigured face, a crooked nose, and lopsided feet. As a child she suffered not only

the physical challenges but also the emotional damage inflicted by other children making fun of her.

One of the worst experiences at school, she wrote, was the day of the annual hearing test. The teacher would call each child to her desk and whisper some phrase like “The sky is blue” or “You have new shoes” while at the same time, the child would cover one ear or the other and then repeat what she or he heard from the teacher. To avoid the humiliation of failure Mary Ann would always cheat on the test by secretly cupping one hand over her one good ear so that she could still hear what the teacher said.

One year, Mary Ann was in Miss Leonard’s class, the most popular teacher in the school and the one whom every student wanted to be noticed. Then came the dreaded hearing test. When her turn came, Mary Ann cupped her hand over her good ear and Miss Leonard leaned forward to whisper. Mary Ann wrote, “I waited for those words, which God must have put into her mouth, those seven words which changed my life.” Miss Leonard did not say, “The sky is blue” or “You have new shoes.” What she whispered was “I wish you were my little girl.”

Her teacher gave her a new name. It changed her life. (cited in Tom Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, p. 86).

The Living Christ names us. We are called Christian and our job is to live into our new name. That’s what we do here.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.