

“The Power of Words”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Psalm 29 and Matthew 3:13-17

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” It is a dramatic moment in the gospel of Matthew. Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptized by John, and the heavens open and a voice is heard. Blessings are important in the Bible. And here, at the very beginning of his ministry, as Jesus is coming up from the water, the very heavens open and a voice is heard, “this is my Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Our Bible passages this morning feature heavenly words. Powerful words. Now there is something interesting in this story of Jesus’ baptism. Each of the four gospels tells this story, though with slight differences. In Mark and Luke, the same heavenly voice speaks, but says “You are my Son, the beloved.”¹ This minor difference “you are my Son,” or “this is my son” begs an interesting question: who heard the voice from the heavens. Was it a private word of encouragement for Jesus, or heard by the entire crowd out at the river?

What is clear to me is that these words are important. In the story of Jesus’ baptism, there is more emphasis placed on the words heard from heaven than any of the physical details of the baptism. We don’t know if Jesus was baptized alone or with a crowd. We don’t know if he was held under water, or just had water sprinkled on his forehead. What the gospel cares about is the words spoken.

God’s words set Jesus’ ministry in motion. God’s voice sets everything in motion. But that is not really new for us. Do you remember how the Bible itself begins?

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. (Gen 1:1-3)

God speaks and creation happens. God’s word sets everything in motion. The Gospel of John, with another memorable introduction, starts, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

Listen again to the hymn of praise, the doxology that is the 29th Psalm.

The voice of the Lord is over the waters . . .
The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars . . .
The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.
The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness . . .
The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl . . .
and in his temple all say, ‘Glory!’

The voice of the Lord is subject of all this glory and the active agent that produces every effect.² God creates by the power of words. And here, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, powerful words are heard that will keep Jesus going. Right after his baptism, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. You think it wasn't important to remember those words he just heard at his baptism?

Think for a minute how important words have been in your life. Do you remember that old song, "sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me"? That might have been a useful thing to teach kids who were being bullied – the hard part is that it isn't true. Words matter. They do have power. Mean-spirited words have more power to bruise the soul than most any stick or stone. Some children are told you'll never amount to anything. Employees told that they are expendable. When have you been hurt by words? And when have you been blessed with words of love? We have a way of living down or up to expectations, don't we?

Tom Long, Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology, has written a marvelous book about living out the Christian life. In it, he retells the story of Mary Ann Bird who has written a memoir called The Whisper Test.³ She had been born with several birth defects: a cleft palate, a disfigured face, crooked nose, lopsided feet, and deafness in one ear. The worst aspect of her childhood was what she had to put up with from other kids. You can hear the teasing, can't you? School was, for her, a nightmare.

Worst of all was the annual hearing test, when the teacher would call each child forward. The child covered one ear, then the other and the teacher would whisper a simple phrase like, "the sky is blue," or "you have new shoes." Since she could not hear in one ear, Mary Ann did everything possible, including cheating, to get through the exam without drawing any further attention to her disability. She hated the whisper test.

One year her teacher was Miss Leonard. The day came for the dreaded hearing test. Mary Ann came forward, and cupped her ear. Miss Leonard leaned forward. Mary Ann remembers,

I waited for those words which God must have put in her mouth, those seven words that 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."⁴

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." And so the words we hear in this story of Jesus' baptism echo. And every time we baptize someone, we remind ourselves, that this person is a child of God. And the life of faith is a long process of putting those words into action.

A week ago, I watched my first debate of this presidential election cycle. I know, I know, there have been something like a billion debates already and they are important, but I finally tuned in for one. And I was struck by a bit of a skirmish on the question of whether words matter. Can words inspire or shape reality or are they simply empty vessels, empty

promises? I guess it is not a bad question to ask any politician or public leader – do your words matter? For we do know that sometimes words can ring hollow. Sometimes dreams can become empty promises.

Last week, as part of our offering, we wrote down dreams that we had for this church in 2008. I was really touched by the eloquence of your dreams for this church:

- That Central continue to grow in gifts as well as gifted people so that the church might come into its own as a flourishing, lively community full of people of all kinds and ages.
- To challenge one another to examine how we live out our faith in our daily lives
- God graces us with love, awareness and empathy
- That anyone looking for a loving community - a spiritual home, a family committed to doing good in our world – will find us.

More of the dreams we offered are in your bulletin, and we will find ways to remember and display all of the dreams we wrote down last week.

Now on paper, these are just words – and will take actions to live them out. But once voiced, they cannot be taken back. As Matthew Kelly wrote in *The Dream Manager*, “We all need someone who can help us articulate our dreams, determine the priority of our dreams, pull together a plan for the fulfillment of those dreams, and hold us accountable on a regular basis for the actions that help us achieve our dreams or hold us back from our dreams.”⁵

There is one other part of this baptismal story I find very, very important. Jesus came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Did you hear what happened next? The gospel records this bit of dialogue. John would have prevented him, saying “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matt. 3:14). When I read that, I hear the voices of Mike Myers and Dana Carvey on Saturday Night Live’s “Wayne’s World” who said “I’m not worthy.” How often is it that the somehow God’s voice calls us to do things to take words and make them a reality and we say, “I’m not worthy.” Or “there has got to be someone else,” or “I’m not good enough.”

Jesus doesn’t try to argue with John. He doesn’t let him off the hook either. Jesus doesn’t say “oh sure, I’ll just get baptized by the next wild-haired prophet who wanders by.” He just tells John, let it be so for now.” And John baptized him.

God’s words put things into action. And we can help make those words a reality for our lives and for those around us. Putting God’s words into action. That is what we are about. May it be so. Amen.

¹ Mark 1:11 and Luke 3:22. John’s account (1:29-34) of the baptism of Jesus does not include this saying.

² James Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation Commentary Series (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994) 136.

³ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian* (Jossey-Bass, 2004) 85-86.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Matthew Kelly, *The Dream Manager* (New York: Hyperion, 2007) 44. Kelly uses a fictional company for this book. See also www.thedreammanager.com for a link to Kelly’s company Floyd Consulting.