



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: January 31, 2010

The Power of The Word Made Flesh, Robert B. Culp

Luke 4:14-21

Some time ago, I shared with you a story, perhaps apocryphal, about President Abraham Lincoln that took place in Washington D.C. amidst some of the darkest days of the Civil War. He was visiting the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church for a mid-day service, which had become a respite for him during the difficult years of the horrible war that was taking place between the states. President Lincoln would slip in by a side door, and then sometimes leave early without being noticed.

One day, when he and his aid visited the church, the president lingered in his private corner long after the other worshipers had left. His aid finally asked, “Mr. President, what did you think of the sermon today?” Mr. Lincoln slowly replied, “I thought it was eloquent, well thought out, and powerfully delivered.” “Then you liked it?” the aid continued, trying to fill the silence. “No,” the president said. “The sermon failed. For it did not ask of us something great.”

In Jesus’ first sermon delivered to his hometown folk in Nazareth, he asks of them (and of us) something great. Jesus asks something great of his listeners by taking these words of liberation and salvation from the prophecy of Isaiah, and embracing them as his own mission and identity. As God had used Isaiah through these words to comfort the afflicted and to place hope before a besieged and dislocated people as they were languishing in their Babylonian exile, so Jesus directs his words to minister to those in need. And they are words that strike deep resonant chords these days, especially among those in Haiti who are struggling to find hope amidst such despair and destruction they have known.

But really, such words are for us all. As Langston Hughes tells us:

“I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars,
I am the red man, driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek ...
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.”

(We could add, “I am the Haitian child, wearing the crushed dust of despair, wondering about mother and father and where they could possibly be.”)

Far too often, we too know what it's like to feel crushed, oppressed, bent down under a heavy load of care and despair, on the underside of a smothering and unfair social order. But the words of Jesus are directed to us as words of comfort, hope, and even "resurrection power" such as these poetic words of Maya Angelou: "You may shoot me with your words, You may cut me with your eyes, You may kill me with your hatefulness, But still, like air, I will rise."

A bit further in Luke's narrative we read about how Jesus' message is ultimately and angrily rejected by his hometown audience. And Jesus then goes on to say something about local prophets not being accepted in their own hometowns, especially if they ask their listeners to move beyond their narrow parochialism and settled systems. Sadly though, sometimes being provincial or "well-liked" takes the prophet right out of us preachers. And instead of asking something great of our listeners, we often only ask of them something mundane.

In this regard, I think of a snapshot Garrison Keillor provides of the fictional Lake Wobegon's religious life. He writes, "In Lake Wobegon, car ownership is a matter of faith. Lutherans drive Fords, bought from Bunsen Motors, the Lutheran car dealer in town, and Catholics drive Chevies from Main Garage, owned by the Kruegers. Years ago, a Lutheran named John Tollerud was tempted by Chevy ownership until Pastor Tommerdahl took John aside after church and told him that as his Pastor it was his duty to point out that Fords got better gas mileage and have a better trade-in value. And the Pastor went on to say that he knew for a fact that the Kruegers spent a share of their profits to engage in nefarious proselytizing programs in Asia and Africa. So, John purchased a new Ford Falcon, which turned out to be a dud. The transmission gave out after 10,000 miles, and the car tended to pull to the left. However, in a town where car ownership is determined by one's faith, a person doesn't complain about these things, and John figured there must be a good theological reason for his car trouble, which perhaps he would understand more fully someday in the great hereafter."

As followers of Jesus Christ, you and I are called upon to share something more than the mundane. We can do that in great society-shaking, universally-acknowledged, and award-winning ways. But we can also do it in quiet, everyday kinds of ways. In fact, sometimes we can share words of healing and liberation, or words that restrict and imprison, without even knowing it. That's the case in a brief scene from Ann Tyler's *A Patchwork Planet*, in which she introduces us to the fictional business, "Rent-a-Back." This is a company that provides younger helpers with strong backs to help older folks get some needed things done around the house ... such as putting up storm windows, tidying up cluttered attics, running errands, picking up needed supplies, and so forth.

In one part of the book, one of the Rent-a-Back workers has brought in a Christmas tree, carried the decorations down from the attic, and then decorated the tree so that when this older woman's children come for their Christmas visit, they will sense that their mother is getting along fine. The older woman has gotten all dressed up in anticipation of her children's visit, and when she enters the room, the young worker says, "My, Maud May – you look beautiful." Maud May's face brightens up, and she responds, "I do?" She seems to straighten up in pleasure and some measure of pride, and says softly, "I look useful?" "No," the young worker says. "You look beautiful." "Oh," Maud May says, and she noticeably sags in disappointment. Ah ... the power of words.

In his ministry, Jesus invites us to join him in the messianic mission, and to deliver the

message that even the humblest among us are not only beautiful, but also useful to God. But these are not just words to Jesus. When Jesus concludes his sermon with “Today these words are fulfilled in your hearing,” he is telling his listeners that these words from Isaiah are not only descriptive of his mission and his identity, but they are also words that have power to transform and create.

Indeed, these words tell us ... amidst difficult and tragic times, as well as joyful and exciting moments ... that God is with us, that God has not left us, and that by these very words we are constituted as God’s people, that we will be preserved and will survive. The Word of God reaches out to touch us, to grasp our lives and redirect them. And the Word that is enfleshed by those following the way of our Lord enlivens and empowers us along the journey of faith.

In the Nazi-attempted decimation of the Jewish people in World War II, when they took over Prague, they rounded up all the Jews. In one of the synagogues, before they torched it, they found an old rabbi sitting in his study, working on his sermon for the next Sabbath. To utterly humiliate the old man, they forced him to take off all his clothes and to stand up in his pulpit naked, clad only in his rabbi’s hat.

“Say something in Hebrew for us,” they taunted. “Yes, preach to us, preach what you were going to say in your next service. Preach, old man. Preach.” The old rabbi stood there quietly. And then he began to speak in the Hebrew language which none of the Nazi tormentors could understand. He spoke the words that time and time again had constituted Israel. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Power suddenly shifted from the cruel Nazis to the old rabbi in that moment. In speaking the words, just in speaking those words, the rabbi was assaulting and dismantling everything that the Nazis believed. A new world was being claimed, re-claimed really, for God. And nothing those Nazis could do, not even their reign of death, could defeat the ultimate triumph of the Word, nor negate the Word’s transforming way with the world. Indeed, that is always the way of God, and God will always have the last Word.

George Linbeck, who taught at Yale, notes that the church defeated the Roman Empire in less than 400 years, using none of the props by which Roman institutions constituted themselves. Assaulting family, gender, race (which was so dear to Roman hearts), social class, and economic status, the church formed a people on nothing more than the Word ... the intrusive Word which plowed through Roman institutions and values, creating as if *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) a new people where previously there had been none.

The Baptist preacher Will Campbell once said that the Word is our first offense as preachers, and it is also our last defense. Our task as pastors and as church leaders, he says, is to create congregations that are bold enough, trusting enough, courageous enough to hear the Word of God, without killing the preacher for speaking it! Every time the scroll is unwrapped and the Bible is opened, and the godly words come forth, the adventure begins, and the Word of God is given freedom to roam about in our lives. In those moments, we as God’s people are reconstituted ... and the Word becomes flesh ... again and again and again.

Do you remember the words spoken by Henry Fonda as Tom Joad in the movie adaptation of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*? They are powerful words, and they reflect what Jesus is getting at in his synagogue message, what that old Rabbi knew in Prague, and what our

great calling is as God's people in this place and time, as we ourselves are called to enflesh and make real the words of God's love and peace, mercy and justice. Tom says ...

"... a fella ain't got a soul of his own, just a little piece of a big soul, the one big soul that belongs to everybody. Then ... then it don't matter. I'll be all around in the dark. I'll be everywhere, wherever you can look. Wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready. And when the people are eatin' the stuff they raise and are livin' in the houses they build, I'll be there too."

"And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us."

Let us pray:

New every morning is your love, great God of light, and all day long you are working for good in the world ... speaking forth your words of love and healing, mercy and justice. Stir up in us, dear Lord, the desire to serve you by speaking such words ourselves and by living them out in our daily lives as we seek to bring good news to the poor, bring release to the captives, and let the oppressed go free; in Jesus' name. Amen.