

## “Word”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church  
1-5-20 Epiphany Sunday  
Based upon Psalm 147:12-20; John 1:1-18

This will probably come as no surprise to you all, but I am not a “cool” or “hip” person. Do people even say “hip” anymore? I don’t wear most of what’s in style, don’t know most of the popular bands today, never saw an episode of “Breaking Bad” or “Game of Thrones,” and text like the middle-aged Gen X’er that I am, by writing in full sentences complete with punctuation. So, when I came across a list of the top ten slang word of 2019, (you know how all the lists come out as the end of one year, and the beginning of another?), I wasn’t surprised that all but one term was unfamiliar to me.<sup>1</sup> Among the words on this list were “tea,” which is spelled like the hot drink but apparently means gossip, “to beat,” which means to put on makeup, “snatched,” which is a compliment like “hey you’re looking snatched”, and “BAE,” which stands for “before anyone else,” and is used like SO or “significant other” used to be used.<sup>2</sup> Slang is funny. It’s a way of communicating which simultaneously encourages intimacy among some, while at the same time alienating others. It’s very regional and fluid.

Take for instance one of the few slang terms I do know, “word,” which a friend of mine used in response to an article I posted on Facebook the other day. “Word” has been around for decades so it didn’t make the 2019 top ten slang list I saw; but it continues to be used to convey all kinds of ideas. For example, when offered as a reply, “word” can mean “I heard you,” or “yes,” as in: “Are you coming tonight?” “Word.” It can mean “I agree,” or “You speak the truth,” when offered in response to a post or shared article online. It can mean “Really?” when offered to surprising or exciting news: “I won the lottery!” “Word?”; or mean “Pay attention!” when spoken to someone who clearly isn’t listening: “Word up, Dude!”<sup>3</sup> Add to those slang meanings the older meanings conveyed in phrases like, “I give you my word,” “Just say the word,” “What’s the word on the street?” and “Can I have a word with you?”, which make the term a stand-in for a promise, a signal, gossip, and serious conversation, and you get the sense that this single term is more than a means of short-hand communication; it also touches on something essential about the human condition. We are creatures of “the Word.”

The author of the *Gospel of John* believed this too. Opting not to include in his gospel either Luke’s shepherd-and-angel-focused birth narrative about Jesus, or Matthew’s scary one, filled with Herodian threats and infanticide, John instead begins his account of who Jesus was with a philosophical and poetic discourse on that intriguing and somewhat inscrutable term, “Word.” “In the beginning was the Word,” he writes, “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not

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<sup>1</sup> “Top Ten Slang Words of 2019,” <https://999ktdy.com/top-ten-slang-words-to-look-out-for-in-2019>. The only term I knew (which I used in my Christmas Eve sermon) was GOAT, which stands for “Greatest of All Time.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. “18 Slang Uses for the Term ‘Word’”, [Reallifeglobal.com](https://reallifeglobal.com), Aug. 2, 2012, retrieved Dec. 30, 2019 from <https://reallifeglobal.com/18-slang-uses-for-word>

overcome it.”<sup>4</sup> John never expressly explains the apparent contradictions in his poetry, how someone or something can be *with* God and *be* God at the same time, or how life and light can be used interchangeably. As a result, John confuses many modern readers before they even get to chapter two of his gospel. But in his day, his use of “the Word” would have been enlightening to virtually all of his readers, just in different ways.

In Hebrew, the word *dabar*, means both “word” and “deed.” It can be both a noun and a verb. So, when God *said*, “Let there be light,” according to *Genesis*, “there *was* light.” As the psalmist explains in Psalm 33: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of God’s mouth... God spoke, and it came to be; the Lord commanded, and it stood firm.” (Ps. 33: 6, 9). But as today’s psalm illustrates, from the beginning, Judaism has also understood the “word of the Lord” to refer to the wisdom of God as well as the creative power of God. That wisdom is conveyed in the Law of Moses, and the teachings of the prophets. In the *Book of Proverbs*, this same divine wisdom is personified as a lady called “Sophia.” (See *Proverbs* 8). Like “the Word” in *John*, Sophia seems to have been with God and be God at the same time. She worked with God to create the world. She also stands on the street corners calling to people to hear and pursue God’s teachings. She offers life and truth through her words which are God’s word. Consequently, any Jew reading the prologue in *John* would have said, “Yes, yes, yes. This is a poem about Sophia. God’s wisdom made all things including light and life. God’s word is the creative force in the universe. We know all about this.”

But for John’s Gentile audience, the same words would have conjured up a slightly different understanding. John wrote in Greek not Hebrew, and used a Greek word *Logos* for “the Word,” which was filled with meaning for the Greeks, Egyptians, and Persians. Heraclitus, a philosopher who lived in Ephesus several centuries before Christ was born, described the *Logos* as “the divine agency and principle by which order is wrought out of chaos and unity is created within flux.”<sup>5</sup> Building off that idea, the Stoic philosophers understood the *Logos* as the force of pure reason, “an active rational and spiritual principle that permeated all reality.” The Middle Platonists believed the *Logos* was both immanent in the world, and at the same time, the transcendent divine mind.<sup>6</sup> The *Logos* was an ideal to be sought, and a force which held the universe together.

John knew all of this, which is why he began his gospel by equating Jesus with the Word. “You know how the universe is organized?” his prologue says. “Yes,” the Jews and Gentiles would have said, thinking two different things at the same time. “You know the power, the ideal which gives us light and life and truth?” “Yes,” they would have said nodding. “We’ve spent our lives seeking and worshipping this Word.” “Well guess what?” the gospel continues, “The Word became flesh and dwelled among us full of grace and truth. We have seen his glory.” John began with something important and familiar to everyone, and then took it to a place that was inconceivable to everyone. Something so high, someone so holy, so *not* human, had become

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<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, in our Reformed Tradition, we typically capitalize “Word” when referring the Jesus, and keep it lowercase when referring to Scripture.

<sup>5</sup> As quoted in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible S-Z*, cf. “Word, The”, Vol. 5, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 896.

<sup>6</sup> *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, cf. “Logos”, retrieved Dec. 30, 2019 from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/logos>

human and dwelt among us. Some in his audience would have closed their minds immediately at the absurdity of the thought; but others wouldn't have been able to stop themselves from reading and learning more. The Word was enfleshed? Sophia. The Logos. How was such an amazing thing possible?

Ironically, the very thing that shocked them most, now shocks us the least. We are so used to thinking of Jesus as being God in human form, as a man who walked and talked, laughed and cried, lived and died, that this part of John's message is not a stumbling block for us at all. "Word" we can say to this point, in the "You said it bro!"-sense, not the "really?"-sense of that term. But whereas we are good at embracing John's bombshell conclusion, we are not as good as the Jews and Gentiles in his day were at appreciating the implications of what it means that "the Word" is who and what became enfleshed. We forget sometimes that this same Word, who we like to envision sleeping in a manger, was and is *God*, as in the one who made the whole universe, the one who brings order out of chaos, and the one whose wisdom and truth surpass all.

In our age, wisdom and truth, even logic and reason, are not particularly popular. Sociologists say we are living in a "post-truth" age when many people assign greater importance to their feelings than to the facts, and when we have taken relativity to the point of absurdity. Now, if you present one perspective, you must present the opposite one for fairness' sake, even if one is based on facts and the other on nothing more than wishful thinking. Now whatever you state to be true, someone will say it's "fake news." Now, wisdom born either of years of study or hard-won experience is dismissed as suspicious, irrelevant, or no more valuable than others' impulsive conclusions and inspirations in the moment. The lack of consensus about truth and wisdom in society in recent years has corroded our institutions, brought conflict into our relationships, crippled our problem-solving capabilities, and stunted our emotional growth. All sides are making unwise and unreasonable decisions; all kinds are embracing untruths.

I can't tell you how we can fix all that, unfortunately. All I can do as your pastor is warn you because our communal rejection of objective truth is not just a social problem anymore; it has become a spiritual problem as well. One pastor's experience I read about this week sums up the problem. He was trying to help a group of teenagers appreciate something Jesus' taught, and one of the boys responded with a shrug, "Well, that's just Jesus' opinion," as if Jesus were just another talking head on YouTube, not God.<sup>7</sup> Madeleine L'Engle saw the problem coming as far back as the 1990s. I'm paraphrasing a bit in the interest of time. But she basically said: "When was the last time anybody asked you, "Do I have your word?" Or when was the last time anybody said to you, "I give you my word," and you knew that you could trust that word, absolutely?... Words of honor are broken casually today, as though they don't matter." When people no longer honor their word, when they perjure themselves or deny the truth that is readily apparent, is it "any wonder that when God tells us, "I give you my Word," few people take [God] seriously?"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Vol. 1, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor Eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 143.

<sup>8</sup> As quoted in *Animating Illustrations*, cf. "Word", HomileticsOnline.com, (citing Madeleine L'Engle, The Rock That is Higher: Story as Truth (Wheaton, 1993)); retrieved 12/20/2019 from [https://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration\\_search.asp?keywords=word](https://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=word).

But this is exactly what God did in Jesus Christ. God said, "I give you my Word," and it wasn't just an empty promise from nobody special. It was a promise made by the Creator of the universe; it was, in fact, the Creator of the universe who we were given. God gave us Godself, God's wisdom and truth with skin-on. That means that if we want to follow Jesus, we need to make Christ's teachings and example our ultimate truth, not just one opinion we consider among many because his truth is higher, wiser and more reliable than our own.

This is tricky to do in two respects. First, we have to accept that Jesus knows what's best for us better than we do, which most of us do not really believe. We love Jesus, but find many of his teachings impractical or too extreme. Love your enemies? "No thanks." Sell everything and follow me? "Then what would we live on?" Become great by serving others? "Well that's not how to get ahead in the world today." So, before we can say "Word" to Jesus' wisdom, we first have to be willing to second guess our own. That takes humility, introspection, and courage; and it takes recognizing that Jesus' wisdom both made the universe and holds it together. There should be no higher authority for us because there is no higher authority in the universe.

The second tricky part to this challenge is even harder. We have to accept Jesus' wisdom as God's truth without either trying to control it, or relativize it into oblivion. Right now, Christians do not agree on what the Gospel truth is. If we did, we would be united politically and wouldn't have so many denominations. But we think we know what it is enough to feel proprietary about it. Some Christians even think they know enough to say, "We have the truth, and if you don't accept it, you're going to hell." That is neither helpful nor faithful, because the fact is that we don't *have* the truth. The power of the Creator and Redeemer of the universe is not ours; and God's truth is not the same as our doctrines. God's truth is Christ, who we can know to a degree, but never control. So, when we affirm that Jesus is the Word, we have no authority upon which to make that word be "condemned" for those who don't recognize him. But neither can we make his Word mean "it's all good," as if anything goes with God. God has shown us in Christ what is good behavior and what is not.

This is the Word, the truth that Jesus embodied: that God is real and loves Creation and all that dwell therein; that God's desire is to forgive and to heal, not to destroy; and that God has the power to redeem us and save us from the darkness we favor. Our Word teaches that we are to care for Creation, and to care for the poor and the needy; he teaches that material things and appearances do not matter nearly as much as how we treat others. Our Word calls on us to acknowledge the reality of sin *and* the reality of redemption in God's grace. Want to get a sense of how much Jesus wants us to know this Truth even if it isn't our own? Then read what Jesus says in the New International Version sometime. Although I have lots of issues with this particular paraphrase of the Bible, one of the few good things that it does is translates the Greek expression Jesus frequently used: "Amen, amen I say to you," which our NRSV translated "Truly I tell you," simply and clearly as: "I tell you the truth." Consequently, when you read Jesus' teachings, what you see and hear over and over again is Jesus saying to the people who were saying to him, "Really?", "Yes. Word. I'm telling you the truth. I'm telling you the truth. I'm telling you the truth." That's a powerful word for us to hear today.

As we head into the new year, into this election year which no doubt will be filled with conflict and people rejecting facts as fast as others can name them, it is critical that we as Christians know that Jesus must be the Word for our lives above all other words. We follow him because he is God, and therefore has the power to recreate both us and our world for the better. We serve him because he came into the world to serve us, and in so doing showed us the difference between God's truth and the world's. It is wonderful news for all of us that Jesus is with us, ready to comfort us, strengthen us, and forgive us. But if we want what is broken in our lives and our world to be healed, then we need to seek more than comfort and control. We need to seek and follow the wisdom and truth of God. Thanks be to God that we can, for in Christ, we have seen God's glory. Amen.