

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

March 4, 2018
Third Sunday in Lent, Year B

The readings this week:

- Exodus 20:1-17 ◦ Psalm 19
- 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 ◦ John 2:13-22

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

Words

I have an almost two year-old friend, Azalea, who is stringing sentences together into increasingly complex stories. A most recent tale that Azalea tells involves Muppet, her cat, sitting in Azalea's yogurt. Said story is followed by a big little-girl grin, not only because she gets tickled recounting it, but also because she has learned that she can evoke a similar response in other people. She looks for her audience to understand and react to what she says, and she delights in it. It's a lot of fun to be a part of her conversation.

Although she can't put words to the concept yet, Azalea is quickly learning that language is power. Words shape reality and emotion. Deployed well and with care, words are a means of grace that create and foster connection: making possible conversation, defining the contours of experience and feeling, offering the ability to acknowledge vulnerability, make commitments, name and address injustices, admit wrong and heal wounds.

Such is the power of words that the early church designated the 40 days of Lent as time necessary to prepare catechists to understand and respond to the words/questions that would be asked of them at their Easter baptism.

Regardless of whether people employ the language of praise or pleading, the Psalms move from people's mouths toward God's ears. Within this trajectory, the author of Psalm 19 declares that humans aren't the only actors on stage with a speaking part. Non-human creation joins the ensemble with their own voices that speak to/of God: the heavens tell, the firmament proclaims, day speaks to day and night declares to night. The Psalmist notably uses the same words for heaven and firmament as found in Genesis

The middle of Psalm 19 – an outpouring of gratitude for God's law – feels like an abrupt thematic change at first, but is inextricably tied to the opening. The Psalmist develops his implicit reference to God's original utterance with explicit praise of God's life-giving law – no less than the continued movement of God's words toward the world.

Conveniently located in the lectionary's Old Testament selection, the preeminent example of law-giving is the Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue or the Ten Words. Appropriate. God provides law as a mechanism by which Israel can respond to the way "God has ordered life" in creation to make "coherent and peaceable" our

interconnected reality: life with God, other humans and the rest of God's creatures. (Spirituality of the Psalms, Walter Brueggemann, p. 23). Rather than being one-way declarations that stonewall a response, God's law is an invitation into conversation. Law is God using words like Azalea to evoke within Israel a response that mirrors God's character.

Having extolled the world's speech to God and God's words via creation and the law to the world, the Psalmist closes by asking that his own words be acceptable. With this lovely twist, he holds up heaven and earth as exemplar pray-ers and links himself to fellow creatures in a conversational posture oriented toward the One who spoke them into being.

The lectionary picks and pairs a pericope from the Gospel of John, which sets up the entire book with this fantastic turn of phrase, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). The Word is enfleshed in the body of Jesus (1:14).

Jesus' body not only recapitulates the entirety of God's speech to the world, but ultimately redeems/shores up our end of the conversation when it's lacking, absent, irrelevant or otherwise unacceptable. Jesus is the bi-directional movement of creative speech between Creator and created. Jesus is perfect conversation. And we've got an invitation to join in the banter; Jesus creates space for us.

Both the Gospel narrative and Paul's letter to the Corinthians make plain as day that we will not always understand what is going on in this definitive communing. That which God attempts to evoke in us by inviting us into God's conversation with Israel doesn't always make sense in the moment (John) or in our context (Corinthians). Nor are we capable of holding our own, but that doesn't matter because Jesus speaks on our behalf.

Words are power. Words can be grace. We are called to discern how to participate in this cosmic dialogue such that we co-create realities and redemptive possibilities informed by the Word.

~ an excerpt by Anna McDonald Hobbs,
[Ekklesia Project](#)



Reflecting on the Word

Word



___ 1st Reading: [Exodus 20:1-17](#)

How do you think the average non-churchgoer would describe the Ten Commandments? In the few weeks before this, the Israelite people had come out of a 400-year-long period of slavery in Egypt. What had been their purpose and their identity before now? How do you think their sense of purpose had changed up to this point? What kinds of “laws” do you think the Israelites had while living in Egypt? In comparison, do you think God’s Law felt oppressive? What other ways might God have framed these Laws? Why is it important that God gave them in this particular way? Look down the list of the commands. What does each one teach us about the God who gave that command? How, then, did this kind of Law give Israel purpose and identity? What kind of “pattern” is drawn for how God’s people are to live? Why do you think there is so much controversy over the use and application of the Ten Commandments today? How do these Ten Commandments give purpose and identity to us, God’s people today? [Faith Element](#)

___ Psalm Reading: [Psalm 19](#)

What is the most amazing thing you have ever seen in nature? What did you conclude about God as you gazed at his creation? Who wrote this Psalm? What do you know about this man? Why would he write about how the heavens reveal God to man? How often does creation reveal God? Where does creation reveal God? Is there any place or any time that creation does not speak to God’s existence? How is God revealed through Scripture? What has he told man about himself through the written word? Why is nature alone not enough to help man fully understand God? David says that the Word of God can lead to blessing in our life when we follow it. What two things does he specifically say the Word of God will do for man? How has God demonstrated his steadfast faithfulness to you? Can you say, along with David, that God is a Rock? [Eagle Christian Church](#)

Praying Toward Sunday

Truth be told, Jesus,
There are lots of tables that need overturning
in our lives;
Beneath the veneer of respectability
the tidy rows and neat regulations
hide dark addictions and angry judgements
hungry greeds and heartless rejections
We know the pain—and so do those around us—
of keeping up the facade;
What a relief it would be to have it all
upset, smashed, scattered, destroyed
So, perhaps, Jesus, today you could pay us a visit
and help us to radically rearrange
the furniture of our lives
Amen.

~ John van de Larr, [Sacredise](#)

*Do you not know that your body
is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you,
which you have from God?*

~ 1 Corinthians 6:19

Today we seem to have lost a sense of the role and place of our bodies. Many of us are not aware of the sacred space within us, the place where we can reflect and contemplate, the space from which wonderment can flow as we look at the mountains, the sky, the flowers, the fruits and all that is beautiful in our universe, the space where we can contemplate works of art. This place, which is the deepest in us all, is the place of our very personhood, the place of inner peace where God dwells and where we receive the light of life and the murmurings of the Spirit of God. It is the place in which we make life choices and from which flows our love for others.

~ Jean Vanier, Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John, via Suzanne Guthrie, [At the Edge of Enclosure](#)

___ 3rd Reading: [1 Corinthians 1:18-25](#)

Why is the message of the cross foolishness to unbelievers? How is the message of the cross the power of God? How have I seen this power unleashed in my life? How has God’s power infiltrated my marriage, family, and work? When have I seen God make the wise people of this world appear foolish? Does this actually happen? What does this look like? Is God opposed to intellectual pursuits? Why or why not? How can God use brilliant people? Why is salvation a matter of being called and believing in Christ? What is the most foolish thing about God, from the world’s perspective? What is the weakest thing about God, from the world’s perspective? How do these two attributes or works actually showcase God’s wisdom and strength? How does this relate to my own life and experience? When is it that my greatest weaknesses are my greatest strengths? [St. John’s Lutheran Church](#)

___ 4th Reading: [John 2:13-22](#)

Jesus desires the people to worship the Father and not financial gain. Can you recall another instance in Scripture where God has been angered by His people’s worship of material things? How do our acts of worship reflect how we view God Himself? How does convenience affect our spiritual walk in today’s culture? What are concessions that are often made for the sake of convenience? Were Jesus’ actions in the temple out of character? What is the difference between anger and righteous anger? Consider the moneychangers, taking advantage of the pilgrims, and the pilgrims’ choosing convenience. Can one sacrifice “unto the Lord” and do it sinfully? [Prestonwood Baptist](#)