

“Formed by the Word”

Reading: Psalm 1; John 18:1-11

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Every one of us is acutely aware of the power of words. You’ve felt the very real sting of an unkind word aimed at you by someone you loved or respected or trusted. They may not have stuck a literal knife in your back, but their words betrayed you just as completely. Or maybe you’ve been on the other end, and you’ve discovered the incredible power you wield with your words, and you’ve been the one doing the wounding. We all bear the scars of words we’ve heard in the past; some of them were intended to hurt, while others were simply careless or ignorant or spoken in anger. Words are powerful things. You could well argue that our words are some of the most important things setting us apart from the rest of God’s creation; scientists are discovering that many animals communicate with one another, some in very sophisticated ways, but so far as we know we are alone in our ability to use words.

Maybe that’s part of what the Scriptures mean when they speak of God giving us His image. We are intended to be God’s image-bearers, and that can mean a variety of things, but maybe one of them is our ability to speak. I say that because God is so often revealed through His words. In fact, in the very beginning one of the first things we see God doing, one of the first actions we have recorded, is God speaking. “Let there be light,” He said, and there was light. And then His words, His commands, begin to give order to the light and the darkness, and we begin to see that power in action. He creates by speaking; His word is active. The word of God causes things to happen.

And then of course as the story goes forward, it’s a story made of words. That seems like an obvious thing to say, maybe, “a story made of words,” because what else would a story be made out of? Of course we use words to tell a story, but more than that, God’s story with us progresses through His words spoken to His people. “Go to a land I will show you, and all people on earth will be blessed through you,” He said to Abraham. “Let my people go,” He said to Pharaoh. “You shall have no other gods before me,” He said to Moses and the people of Israel. “This is what the Lord says,” He said through the prophets. “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call Him Jesus,” He said to Mary. These crucial moments in history hinge on the word of the Lord, because the word of the Lord is what moves history.

We could go on and on and on; the Bible is so full of God’s words that we refer to it as the word of God. And in fact these words keep speaking to us and changing us; He continues to speak through the same ancient words. The story is made up of word after word after word. But there’s a nice summary in Psalm 1, the introductory song in the great songbook of God’s people. “Blessed is the person...whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on His law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.” That commanding word of God that called forth the light is not inherently harsh or demanding; it is in fact nourishing and creative and growth-causing. It is, after all, the voice that created the very good universe.

But again, words are powerful, and they are just as often used to harm as they are to heal. God’s words are far from the only words in our lives. The story of the Bible is made up of God’s words throughout history, but we make up the stories of our lives out of all kinds of words that have

impacted us. It's well known that the stories we tell and the stories we hear change and shape us; a story transports us to another place, another time, another perspective on the world. Researchers are learning how a well-told story engages your mind so much that in effect it prevents you from analyzing it too much; you become so engrossed in the story that you may not notice a hole in the plot. Maybe you're like me: when I watch a movie about superheroes, I end up feeling heroic by the end, and I think I could turn into Batman if a mugger attacked me in that moment. Or I read a tragic story and spend the rest of the day feeling sad, even though everything in real life is just fine. Stories shape us; they get inside our heads, many times more than we realize.

And that's especially true of the stories we tell ourselves. We take those words we've heard or spoken throughout our lives and weave them together into *my story of me*. And that story impacts us and guides us, sometimes in a good way, often in a bad way. If I'm not careful, over time my word about myself might become that I cannot and never will do anything right because I'm just a screw-up, or that nobody could possibly love me because of what I've done, or I don't really care what happens to me anymore, or there isn't actually any real hope for me in my future, or I can't control myself so why even try, or I don't need anyone else's help and I'm on my own and that's the way I like it. Countless different words through the years that add up to our guiding stories.

Words are powerful things, especially when they're put into stories. Of course as I've already said, we in the church place a special priority on God's words, but then we can be awfully good and questioning what those words mean. The original lie told by the serpent in the Garden of Eden was, "Did God *really* say...?" And we've been *very* good students. We hear God's word to us and we start asking questions and we start wiggling around until we wind up with something much smaller than what God told us. That's not to suggest that we should be afraid of asking questions and exploring the depths of the meaning of God's word, but there are questions aimed at understanding and then there are questions aimed at argument, and so we try to dodge the power of God's word. "Yes, God, I hear your word, but did you *really* mean...?"

As I said before, there are any number of places we could look for a display of the power of God's word, but today we turn to John's gospel's account of the night of Jesus' betrayal and arrest. Psalm 1 paints God's word as an idyllic scene in nature; God's word is like water to a thirsty tree. We shift from that bucolic picture to one of impenetrable darkness, as Jesus the light of the world is accosted by a troop of thuggish soldiers led by one of Jesus' friends. They first need to confirm His identity before they arrest Him for the threat He poses to their established order of things. They say they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, and Jesus responds by saying, "I am He," or, more accurately in the Greek, "I am." And this odd little moment happens when we're told that these big, bad soldiers draw back and fall down because of those words.

If we're listening closely we'll remember the importance of those words, "I am." They call to mind God's self-identification to Moses on the eve of the Exodus. How can Moses describe and name this God who is sending him to free the slaves? "I Am Who I Am," the Lord says; I am the One Who Exists. And here Jesus takes those words upon Himself in this moment of darkness, pointing us to His full identity and revealing the power of His word when it appears as though His enemies are triumphant. We might also remember another moment earlier in John's gospel, when Jesus says something similar: in the course of a debate, He says, "Before Abraham was, I am," mixing up His verb tenses in a telling way to take God's self-revelation upon Himself again. That word is powerful then,

too, only in that case it motivates His enemies to try to stone Him to death. The word of God causes things to happen.

In the darkness of the garden, Jesus has to ask them again who they're looking for to give them another chance to arrest Him; the sword of the word that comes from His mouth is more than enough to defeat the swords of all of those soldiers, if He had wanted to avoid their cross. There is more power in God's word than they can handle. But there is even more power than it would seem; God's word is not merely a magic spell. Jesus is, of course, *The Word of God*. He is God's definitive statement, the creating proclamation through whom the world is shaped and lives are shaped and the kingdom of God is shaped. The eternal utterance of God takes on human flesh and convicts our sin and redeems us and calls for His Spirit to come. The Word of God, Jesus, makes things happen.

He confronts us with His Word, He reveals what is true about us, whether it's good or bad, noble or shameful, and with His creating voice He makes a new creation in and through and among us. And so His Word makes us choose: will we be re-created or not? Will the clay rebuke its potter, or will it wield to His craft? Will the creature criticize the designs of its Creator? Will we be formed by the word of God, or will we simply be bowled over by His power? The word confronts us and demands that we make a choice.

Perhaps we can make this word our New Year's resolution, of sorts. I say that knowing that New Year's resolutions are as much a joke as anything these days; the assumption is that we start the year with good intentions knowing that those intentions are unlikely to make it to next year. But even so, we can start the year examining our intentions and identifying those areas that need change, realizing that our intentions might need modifying as the year progresses. So the question for us at the beginning of this year is whether we will make the decision to be formed by the Word of God in this time He has given us. Are we aware, first of all, of what sorts of words are forming us in our lives right now? Do you know what you're putting into your life that is shaping you and nourishing you? If we take that image from Psalm 1, whatever stream you plant yourself by is the stream that will water you. Whatever law you listen to, whatever story you tell yourself, whatever word you accept *will* form who you are. God's word causes things to happen. Jesus, who is The Word of God, causes things to happen. But lots of other words cause things to happen, too, so which word will you listen to?

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says this to the church at Corinth: "Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you." This word, this gospel, this good news, this proclamation of God has saving power. God forms us through His word, but only as we are willing to receive it and be shaped by it. Of course this is an ongoing call upon the life of a Christian, to be formed by God's word, but for this year and in this moment, let us resolve to be people who are formed by the word. And the challenge put before us is to decide how we will go about that. Maybe you remember the call from a year or so ago, to be deep, beautiful, fearless people in Jesus Christ; this is part of that ongoing call. God forms us to be His people through His word, so how will you participate in His formation of you in this year?

Being formed by the word goes beyond reading Scripture. It means living in conversation with the God who is speaking to us through the Spirit of Christ, and so it is a life committed to listening, whether we listen through prayer, through service, through fellowship, through preaching, through

study, or, yes, through the reading of the word. You have many words to choose from, many words writing your story, many voices forming you. This year, commit yourself to being formed by the Word of God.



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