

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**January 8, 2012**  
**Genesis 1:1-5**  
**Revelation 22:16-21**

**“Sticks and Stones”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

When my friend and colleague Caroline Meyers was living in Michigan some years ago, she played this ongoing game with a friend of hers: Caroline and her buddy went back and forth wondering aloud—what was the first word ever said by the first people who ever lived? Picture cavemen and women...long ago...at some point one of the earliest men/women had to begin to talk. Caroline and her friend kept trying to guess: what might have been the first word the first humans ever said?

Apparently, after much debate, Caroline’s friend settled on what he thought was the first word ever said. He decided it was: “Wow.” Caroline did not agree. When she settled on the first word ever said she thought it was: “Mine.”

We do not know what the first word that the first humans ever said really was. But, according to the Bible, Genesis, Chapter 1, we do know what God’s first words were. And we know those words well...

*In the beginning when God created<sup>\*</sup> the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup>the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God<sup>\*</sup> swept over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup>Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. <sup>4</sup>And God saw that the light was good...*

*Let there be light...* those are powerful first words....

And notice the impact of God’s first words....

*God said, ‘Let there be light’; **and there was light.***

God calls light into being by speaking of light.

God’s first words create something...God’s speech inspires creation.

God’s words create reality.

After *Let there be light...* the Genesis passage goes on and God creates the entire world through speech.

*And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters...  
and God called the dome Sky..."*

*And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place,  
and let the dry land appear... God called the dry land Earth..."*

According to Genesis, God continues and by speaking, by simply saying the words, God creates vegetation, stars, the sun, the moon, birds, fish, animals, and then God makes humankind in God's own image. All by speaking. Each thing created comes into being after the words: *And God said....*

God speaks and miraculous things happen, worlds come into being, life itself begins....all after the words *And God said...*

Words matter. Words have power. Words shape our thinking, our theology, our lives. That is one of the lessons found in the first verses in the first book of the Bible. Words matter.

When I was growing up in the 1950s, parents had a rather primitive way to arm their vulnerable children against bullies. When picked on, taunted, or called names, us young ones were instructed to say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

There weren't anti-bullying workshops or curricula then. Our parents were doing their best to create a kind of firewall between us and the bullies. But in fact what they taught us was untrue, unhelpful, and would have to be unlearned in our adult lives. Sticks and stones are the least of our worries. Bruises hurt but heal. Words create wounds that last a lifetime. Words like "loser, slow, creep"....those words create reality. Words like "fag, nerd, dummy"....those words create reality. We embrace those words, believe those words, live into those words.

Words have power. How we use words matters. What we say, when we say it, how we say it matters. As Christians we must consider deeply the power and impact of our words. We need to learn the lesson from our Buddhist brothers and sisters about "right speech"—not saying words that divide, wound, or cause pain.

Notice in the Bible the first words God says to Jesus. Jesus is 30 years old, he has made his way to the River Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist. Jesus has not yet begun his ministry, as far as we know he has not done anything of note.

John dunks Jesus down into the muddy water and when Jesus rises, gasping, dripping with water, the heavens open, and God's voice is heard saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus has not yet done anything of importance. And yet God says YOU are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.

Powerful words of affirmation and love.

I love you for who you are, not what you have done or will do.

In my 20s, I was a labor and delivery nurse and I can tell you that God is not alone in God's tender reaction to loving a child simply because they are innately wonderful. Newborns come out slimy—covered with gunk, sometimes blood and even poop—and we take that newborn who has done nothing but be born and we hold him/her in our arms and we say, "I love you."

Mothers lying there panting, exhausted look at their babies with delight.

Teeny baby, you have done nothing, zip except cause me excruciating pain, and the first thing I want to tell you is: "I love you."

Words matter. Words have power. As Christians we must recognize that all we have are our words and our actions. With those, just those, we are called to create the kingdom of God on earth. Small tools, tall order. But it is what we've got, and so we go forward using our words and our lives.

We remember that the Gospel of John begins by spelling out the importance of words...

*In the beginning was the Word, 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.*

John 1:1-3

That is a remarkable passage. In the beginning was the Word...not a bang, not a being, not light, not a giant to do list. In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was WITH God, and the Word WAS GOD.

The Word was not just with God but the Word was God. God was the spoken Word. I love the confusing mystery of it all, how it is hard to figure out. I love that it sounds like the Word was Jesus. Jesus was first a concept, a spoken Word.

*In the beginning was the Word, 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.*

This is not just great poetry and powerful imagery, this passage is telling us that God's word imagines, inspires, creates, produces, generates, and forms. Furthermore, this beautiful passage from the Gospel of John foreshadows Jesus' entire life...all Jesus will have and use in his ministry are his words. Jesus will not raise an army, he will not gallop through the countryside on a stallion, he will not have weapons, riches, a harem, servants, or slaves. Jesus will have only his words...his speech, visions, prayers, blessings, and sermons....what Jesus had was his words and his actions.

And so we study Jesus' words. We feel the power in the Beatitudes—simple words that shape our lives:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

Matthew 5:3-7

We remember Jesus also said:

*In everything do to others as you would have them do to you;*

*for this is the law and the prophets.*

Matthew 7:12

We remember Jesus' courage in the face of death and his final words on the cross:

*Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they do...*

*...into your hands I commend my spirit.*

Luke 23:34 and Luke 23:46

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. So untrue. Words can hurt me and words can heal me. Jesus speaks words of forgiveness as he was dying on the cross. Words can mend and heal.

Back to children. I am thinking again about children, and the first words that they speak and how parents anticipate those first words for months and remember those words forever. Research has shown that the nine most common first words that babies speak are: dada, daddy, mama, dad, mommy, mom, cat, dog, and no.

Important first words.

Now what about important last words?

Jesus' last words were of forgiveness—he tried to redeem those who had killed him. Just like a child's first words, the last words spoken by a loved one are remembered forever. What we say as we are dying speaks volumes about how we lived.

Thinking about last words, their meaning and importance, made me reach for a little book my father once gave me...Famous Last Words.

Anne Bronte, dying of tuberculosis, said these last words to her older sister, "Take courage, Charlotte. Take courage."

General Stonewall Jackson spoke these final words just before he died: "Let us cross over the river and sit under the shade of the trees."

Alice James, sister to William and Henry, dictated this cable to her brothers just before she died: "Tenderest love to all. Farewell, I am going soon. Alice."

Contemplating the power of words, and the impact of final words, brings us to the final words in the Bible.

Revelation, the last book in the Bible, ends with these words:

*I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; <sup>19</sup>if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.*

The final words of the Bible are punishing and threatening? Maybe those are valuable final words, but maybe they should be questioned.

We are steeped in the radically inclusive and loving theology of the United Church of Christ and we believe in "progressive revelation..." the belief that people of faith can gather, pray, and discern the will of God together.

As Pastor John Robinson told the Pilgrims before they boarded a little ship called the Mayflower: "The Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word." We believe the good pastor. We believe there is more truth and light to break forth from God's word. We believe that God is still speaking today. We listen and we hear a Still Speaking God.

Therefore, the last words of the Bible are not the last words of Scripture. God is still speaking, we are the current chapter in a long story of God moving through individual lives and through history. Those last words in the Book of Revelation are not the last word. God is still speaking to and through US.

And so my dear beloved brothers and sisters, as we move into this bright New Year, I remind you that words have power.

What you say as a person of faith shapes your life and in small but real ways, shapes the world. You are armed with your words and your actions...your words matter. Make each one count.

And listen deeply to the Word of God. Remember we believe in a Still Speaking God...a God who is moving through our Church, through our lives, and through history speaking words of power, love, counsel and comfort to us and through us.

Listen deeply and speak carefully.

Know that your own words, like God's, have the power to create, inspire, heal, and shape...your life and others.

Amen.

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