

WORDS
MATTER
LENTEN DEVOTIONS

Words Matter Lenten
Devotions is a project of

THE JUSTICE FOR WOMEN WORKING GROUP

of the National Council
of Churches, U.S.A.

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introduction

We've all heard it before, and we've probably said it too, in an effort to cheer up a child reeling from the effects of name-calling or insults: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Perhaps we so often repeat this rhyme in the hopes that saying it will make it true. Each of us knows that words have the power to wound deeper than sticks and stones, and no matter how firmly we assert that we are rubber and not glue, words have a way of sticking deep in our bones.

As followers of Christ, God's Word made incarnate, we also know that words have the power to transform, to inspire and to bring life. Words of scripture and the traditional words of our communities can link us together and draw us into fellowship across space and time.

There are so many ways that words shape our world—we watch politicians and news anchors "spin" stories with slick word tricks. Advertisers tease us with promises of "new," "improved," and "all-natural" with no clear definitions of what those terms actually mean. Expressions like "blackmail," "white lie," and "black sheep" reveal just how deeply racial prejudices lie in our collective body. Clearly, our words do matter.

This Lent, the Words Matter project invites you to the spiritual discipline of paying attention to your words. Far from a desire to be politically correct, Words Matter focuses on deep thinking about what is really at stake in the words we use, acknowledging that words can be used to tear down — but hopeful that more of us will embrace the potential of words to build up.

Each of the following reflections have been written thoughtfully by individuals with their individual experiences and wisdom. As you read the reflections, try to understand what might be at stake for each author. If something you read upsets you, ask yourself why—what is at stake for you? Please consider these reflections as starting points for your own exploration of what is at stake in the words we use—and feel free to use this devotional booklet on your own or in a group.

This Lent we invite you to commit to a spiritual discipline of paying attention to words. We think you'll find that Words Matter.

*The Expansive Language Sub-Committee
Justice for Women Working Group
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www.WORDSMATTER.org

“why do we fast but we do not see?”

READ ISAIAH 58:1-12

Most of us don't fast anymore – not really. Not unless we are trying to lose weight, do a detox of our bodies, or decide that we won't eat chocolate during Lent. Maybe some Catholics still refrain from eating meat on Fridays; maybe some Protestants do, too. But fasting? Not really. We wonder how our Muslim sisters and brothers make it all day during their month of fasting, but few of us join in this practice with them.

The prophet in Second Isaiah didn't like people who were all show when they fasted. “Look at me! I'm fasting! I'm righteous! I'm good! I'm humbling myself! Look at me while I fast!” No, that is not what is pleasing to God, says Isaiah. Instead, the prophet says, God looks to those whose actions bring about a more just and righteous world as the kind of fast to emulate:

...break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts. What I'm interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families.

[The Message – Eugene H. Peterson]

In this vein, let us fast or abstain from using words that cause harm to others during this Lenten season. They do matter; these words that fall out of our mouths. And I don't mean just angry or hateful words, but words that characterize people in ways that diminish their humanity, or that come from a place of not really knowing who you are talking about. Let's not talk about “Those people...” Let's talk about “Us.”

Use words and metaphors which lift up and uplift God's people as beloved and holy reflections of the divine. Speak from the heart – a heart that seeks to dwell in the household of God, prayer-filled and mindful. Choose your words carefully – and see what this kind of fast can do for you and for those you encounter each day. Be the word of life to others – as you would have them be unto you.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

This Lent, consider taking up the spiritual discipline of paying attention to what is at stake in the words you use. Imagine how your words might sound to someone of a different gender, race, or cultural background than you. Imagine what new words you would like to add to your daily speech.

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Man, Woman, Human

READ ROMANS 5:12-19

Romans 5:12-19 invokes the sweep of cosmological history from the Christ event back to the beginning of the creation of humans. How are we to read women into or out of this text? The Greek indicates the more inclusive term “human” in place of “man.” So Adam and Jesus the Christ are meant to be representative humans, perhaps more than they are specifically male. And yet Paul wants to locate the story in these two figureheads, whose gender is by no means insignificant, even if too essential to be noteworthy by Paul and his readers.

In a story of salvation that comes through one person, it might make sense to think of sin as having entered the same way. But Paul seems to be willing to ignore Eve and the non-human serpent in the story of the fall, in an effort to find a singular representative of humanity. (We might want to ask why Eve and the serpent should take the blame in Genesis, then, if they don't have to bear it here, when creation is held up next to the salvation story). In the second century, Irenaeus suggested Eve and the Virgin as figures to span the history of creation and redemption, representing disobedience and mortality on the one hand, and obedience and immortality on the other:

As we think about the power of gendered language, we need to be alert that even today readers of Romans 5 sometimes read “man” to mean all of humanity (inheriting the legacy of sin) and sometimes read “man” as a particular maleness in Christ that (while perhaps saving women as well as men) renders women unqualified for ordination. The way that “women” are sometimes assumed under but sometimes specifically excluded from the term “man” intended to mean “humankind” has consequences for our theology, for how we imagine the *imago dei*, the way we think humans resemble God. As Mary Daly wrote in 1981, “if God is male, then the male is God” (*Beyond God the Father*, 19).

Ultimately, it might be most useful to read this passage in conjunction with the genealogies of Christ in Matthew : 1-17 and Luke 3:23-38. Naming Eve and in the line of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathseba, and Mary could read back into Romans 5 a place for the complexity and richness of human sins and blessings into the story of redemption.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

What do you think about Daly's statement that “if God is male, then male is God?”

Do you assume women are included in the word “men?” What if one day your pastor called your congregation “sons of God?” What if your pastor said, “daughters of God?” Who do you assume is included in each phrasing?

Listen for male or female images and pronouns in reference to God and people during a Sunday service. What do you notice?

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“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”

READ MATTHEW 4:1-11

Many of us have probably experienced conversations, arguments, and debates where two or more differing understandings of scripture have been used against each other. The words seem powerful on “our” side, but the “other” side does not hear them the same way. Words can be used in many different ways—we all know that the childhood adage “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me” is nothing more than that in the end, an overused saying.

The words we use matter! In this scripture passage, the devil chooses to use them to assert power; to manipulate, to distort actuality, and to tempt to self-absorption. God uses words, and The Word, to create and liberate in grace.

In far less grandiose but equally intense terms, this dialogue of words goes on in our minds and hearts daily. In this Lent, to be centered in the Word of God through Christ for the sake of adoring God and serving the other is a salient “call” to concentrate. There is an ancient rabbinical tale that rabbis as they begin to learn and study Torah literally “eat” the words. Words get under your skin and become “you.” God spoke creation into being. God said, and it was! This is serious stuff.

In this text, words drive us to God: “every word that comes from the mouth of God;” “Do not put...God to the test;” and “Worship the Lord your God and serve only God.” The words get eaten up in praise so that in the end, ONLY God speaks. Words matter. Words are matter; they make life. Words matter; they wound and heal. God give us the creative grace to speak words that shape matter and persons to fuller life in Christ - words that minister the love, mercy, promises and hope of God.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

What do you think it means to live “not by bread alone” but “by every word that comes from the mouth of God?”

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We speak of what we know

READ JOHN 3:1-17

Our language is full of assumptions. In fact by definition, I guess you could say our language is an assumption, a symbol for something that resides in the world of our experience, a “pointing” at that something. It’s a lot easier to point at things that are nearby and visible, rather than those that are intangible or far away. But even our most basic levels of communication often break down. In this passage from John, Jesus speaks to things of earth, from which our understanding of heavenly things must grow. Why is there a breakdown on this most basic level? Is it because Jesus isn’t pointing? Is it because the “somethings,” the earthly things he is pointing at, don’t exist? Or is it because Nicodemus just won’t look in the direction of Jesus’ pointing?

Anyone who has studied a foreign language or watched a child learn to talk knows language acquisition is tiring, in part because it requires this constant work of listening, looking, and making the connection. Jesus here calls us to learn a new language—or to re-learn what we know about the world so that we might learn about God, to re-look. In order to step into the holy we are called to know the mundane as God would have us know it, to spend that energy of re-seeing, re-looking, re-naming the world. What does the language of those around you, the simple everyday language of the earthly invite you to see with fresh eyes? Where is the world being re-revealed to you?

Blessed Word, give us new ears and eyes to hear and see the world around us as you have created it. Grant us patience and perseverance to re-discover the world through your eyes and your ears, sustaining us in the knowledge of your love, your grace, and your mercy. By the power of the one who opens our hearts, Amen.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

Look up the origins of your family and friends’ names. What do these words you use to identify them day-in and day-out reveal about them?

Listen for the ways people you encounter from different geographic regions talk about family, home, and food. What do these differences reveal about cultural understandings of the everyday?

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Words of the Law and Words Set Free

READ ISAIAH 4:1-5, 13-17

My God-daughter took the ACT college prep test this past weekend, and her prompt question for the essay was: "Should students have to follow school rules when they are not on school property?" When asked what she wrote she replied, "The first thing I thought of was Huck Finn. So I wrote how if Huck Finn had followed all of society's rules he would have never helped Jim get free. That sometimes we need to be freed from the constraints of the rules society places upon us, to see whether the rules are actually just. We need to be able to step outside the law to examine and determine if it should be upheld or challenged in the name of justice. So I wrote that I didn't think students should have to follow school rules when not on school property, but we should have freedom." I must admit I was proud of her literary knowledge and fine analysis.

In Romans we hear a similar discussion:

"The promise...did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith..."

"For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace..."

The Grace of God – the unconditional love of God – sets us free to encounter ourselves and others with the same love, understanding and grace. The law – the words written down – creates rules that are a measurement, that judge us and others. When the law is a just rule it protects us and others. When the law is an unjust rule it constricts, binds and kills us and others. When the Word becomes Flesh – when God entered our world of laws, rules, words and judgments – Christ brought us Grace to set us free. Having been set free, we as a community can enter into hard conversations hearing one another's stories and together challenging the rules that bring death transforming them to words of life. Hearing the full story, hearing the whole life, hearing the context is critical to hearing why some words in some settings bring death and in other settings offer freedom. It is not just that the Words Matter, it is also that listening to each others' words through the experience of God's Grace assists us in communicating in life-giving ways. We must offer our words of love, forgiveness and acceptance to each other through the experience of God's grace, because then the Word of God will not be used to constrict – but it will set us free.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

When have you experienced words used in worship as judgment? When have you experienced the words used in worship as grace that set you free?

What "rules" of your worshipping community would you like to open up for conversation, to learn how others experience their application?

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Fighting Words

READ EXODUS 17:1-7

Quarrelling. Grumbling. Testing. Threatening. Crying. This is a story packed with angst. Often when I'm reading the Bible, I have to read a passage two or three times to get a sense of what is going on. Emotions, intonations, facial expressions, and actions are all lost on me until I set my imagination to work. I try to place myself in the story. What if I were a former slave who left everything I knew for the promise of a better life? What if my trusted guide and liberator took me deep into the desert with no water? What would I say? Well, I have to admit I would probably not act so saintly. I'd probably have some fighting words. I would say something like, "Hey Moses – great idea bringing us out here. I feel a whole lot better off dying of thirst with you than living as a slave with food and drink in civilized Egypt." Passive aggressive eye-rolling and imitations of an over-confident Moses with his goofy staff would abound.

But as we got thirstier and the reality of water scarcity became clearer, I would probably be more direct, like the people who said "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" (Exodus 17:3). Moses said people were ready to throw stones at him. Fear can bring out the ugliest in us. Too often fighting words can escalate. Eye-rolling can turn into a punch in the face. A sarcastic remark can turn into a gun confrontation. A lot can be learned from God's advice to Moses: go out in front of the people and gather a community to problem-solve with you. Moses didn't get defensive. He didn't refute the fighting words. He didn't arm himself with rocks to fight back in case of an altercation. Instead, he gathered a group to deal with the source of the problem: fear of water deprivation.

God of lovingkindness, when I feel angry help me refrain from lashing out at others. Help me to take time to examine why I feel the way I do. Help me to become more of a problem-solver than a critic. God of wisdom, when criticism, sarcasm, and fighting words come my way, help me to avoid being defensive. Help me look beyond the ugly words to identify the anxieties that lie beneath them. Gather us in to build positive communities of proactive people who can resolve conflicts. Give us constructive words, and not fighting words. Amen.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

Do you have a tendency to get sarcastic when things are going poorly? When do sarcastic words and actions stop being funny and start being hurtful? How do you draw the line?

Can you think of a time you were in a conflict that escalated to the point of violent words or actions? Why did it escalate? If you could go back, how would you have dealt with it?

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Speak the Truth: Words in the crossroads

READ JOHN 4:5-42

A few years ago, I sat in a meeting where a group of women were discussing concerns about our denomination's use of language and image in media. They felt that too often denominational media conveyed an image of the church that was exactly who we were -- a predominantly white, middle class organization. How, they wondered, could the denomination's print and media publications convey an accurate, but more welcoming, message and image to diverse racial and cultural communities? The communications representative seemed to struggle with the questions that were being raised, and at one point, asked the women in the group, "can you give me a list of words that should be avoided and the words that should be used instead?" Sometimes it's not about specific words, but the content of the message, the perspective from which the message is conveyed, the assumptions made about the speaker and the hearer.

In this text Jesus and the woman he encounters at the well cross political, religious, ethnic and gender boundaries in an encounter that ultimately changes lives. Honest dialogue happens because both parties in this encounter cross the "boundaries" of social convention -- to speak to each other, to see each other, to hear what the other has to say. For us, hearing the whole story requires that we learn to hear it not just through the lens of Jesus' words, or the disciples' surprise, but through the transformative experience of a Samaritan woman. And we need to acknowledge our own social location as we read this text, allowing it to address us.

María Lugones calls this learning to be "world travelers". Consciously recognizing the way that social location and cultural difference can influence our communication with one another is critical to communicating in ways that build community in a multiracial, multicultural world. In this boundary-crossing text, a Samaritan woman becomes an evangelist in a community that has shunned her! Her story challenges all of us to learn to be "world travelers" for the gospel!

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

What are the "boundaries" of my community? How can I learn to cross those boundaries and practice being a "world traveler?"

Approach someone in your community who you don't know very well. Ask them to tell you their story. How do things look through their eyes?

Rev. Teresa Chávez Saucedo, PhD. consults, writes and teaches on issues related to racial justice, cultural proficiency and organizational transformation, and U.S. Latino/a theology. She is currently working with Racial Ethnic and Women's Ministries/Presbyterian Women in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. to develop resources for antiracism training.

Dis-abled Words

READ JOHN 9:1-41

Our culture is constantly using terms for disability as negative metaphors. Some are more malicious: cognitively disabled persons are still taunted as “retards,” and to be called a “retard” is to be thrown in with the lowest class of persons. Fag, and even gay, are used in much the same way, it’s horrible to be one of those, and horrible to be equated with one.

Other metaphors culled from disability are meant to be descriptive. “She was deaf to my pleas;” “he was crippled by fear;” “she was blinded by love.”

These are a kind of extrapolating metaphor. We think that if we couldn’t hear, we would be cut off, if we couldn’t walk, we would be powerless, if we couldn’t see, we wouldn’t be able to make sense of the world around us. Of course, we say hurriedly, we don’t actually think this about the people who are deaf, or paraplegic or blind. But we sort of do. Our own fears about disability show through in the metaphors we use.

Almost every metaphor related to disability is negative, and all the metaphors of our abled-bodied selves are positive. “See the light,” “hear the cries of injustice,” “stand up for freedom.”

But, imagine with me the following not-altogether-unlikely scenario. More and more of us are joining the community of the disabled every day. The baby boomers are getting older; people are living longer and their physical realities are changing. All the while, disabled folks are fighting for, and gaining, greater equality. I’m saying, one day, we’ll acknowledge that being disabled is the norm, and we’ll begin to use metaphors of able-bodiedness as pejorative, lacking, or inferior; and all the metaphors for fun, smart, cool, wise, and sassy will be drawn from disability. So why not start now. Try it out. Here are a few examples you might want to start slipping in to your everyday speech:

Deaf: Fierce, bad-ass “Wow, when you told off that guy you were totally deaf!”

Crippled: very cool, sophisticated “Those sunglasses are so crippled!”

Wheelchair: power symbol “You wheelchaired your way to the top!”

Blind: irresistibly sexy “Come over here you blind thing!”

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

Examine the words spoken and written during a worship service at your church for references to disabilities and able-bodiedness. Do you speak of “spiritual blindness” or ask for “all to stand?” Do you assume that everyone is able-bodied?

How do our fears about our bodies’ abilities shape the way we use words about disability? What resources can we find in our faith to cast out this fear and change the words we use?

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Darkness and Light

READ EPHESIANS 5:8-14

In this pericope, Paul is stating that Christians have to undergo a dramatic transformation of the self by moving from darkness (sin) into light (salvation). Light and dark imagery connotes divergent meanings associated with the two words. In other words, darkness is seen as the antithesis of light, with light being the symbol of God's purity, glory, and wisdom, and darkness symbolizing depravity, disobedience to God, the unenviable place of the dead, the place where the wicked sit, and a place of punishment into which wrongdoers will be cast.

As U.S. Christians we have a hard time talking about race. The Bible is replete with racialized language that has damned and subjugated people of color: The Curse of Ham (Genesis 9:18-27), and Apostle Paul's edict to slaves (Ephesians 6:5-8) have served as the scientific and Christian legitimation for the enslavement of people of African ancestry in this country. And neither resenting textual encounters with Paul's use of light and dark imagery nor contextualizing his use of it eradicates its racial stain.

We must, as Christians, look at the systemic problem of what happens when the racialization of light and dark imagery has a broad-based cultural acceptance in our society today.

Why? Because language is a representation of culture. Language re-inscribes and perpetuates ideas and assumptions about race, gender and sexual orientation we consciously and unconsciously articulate in our everyday conversations about ourselves and the rest of the world, and consequently transmit generationally and in our religious traditions. My enslaved ancestors knew that their liberation was not only rooted in their acts of social protest, but also in their use of language, which is why they used the liberation narrative of the Exodus story in the Old Testament as their talking-book. The Exodus story was used to rebuke systemic oppression, racist themes, and negative images of themselves.

Too many of us keep these words alive, ignoring their power. Even reclaiming racist words, like light and dark imagery, can not eradicate their historical baggage and/or existing racial prejudices. Instead, it dislodges the words from their historical context and makes us insensitive and arrogant to the historical injustice done to a specific group of people. It also allows Christians to become unconscious and numb in the use and abuse of the power and currency these words still have, thwarting the daily struggle many of us work hard at in trying to ameliorate race relations.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

Make a list of images in Christian faith that deal with light and dark. What images can you imagine that would change the connotations of these words? Pay attention to images of light and dark used in your church during Lent, and meet with a diverse group to discuss the impact of these images on perceptions of race.

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Words of Prophecy

READ EZEKIEL 37:1-14

Ezekiel is asked an obvious “no” question! (Can these bones live, indeed!) Perhaps, today’s equivalent would be “Can we create harmony within the church?” I suggest this because the idea that dried bones could be given life – not the skeletal life of horror movies but actually be given muscle, skin, and completely restored to life – seems no more possible than harmony within the church. The words that come from our mouths, our pulpits, our seminaries, and are written in our many volumes can be unnecessarily rigid; anyone in the ecumenical movement must acknowledge this since it has been the clarification of these words that have made our movement possible.

There continue to be divisions over what it means to call the Bible sacred. We know that the writers and translators of the Bible or our preferred theologies had a culture and context from which they framed their words—but we don’t agree on what that might mean for their interpretation today. The idea that God could be just as appropriately called Mother as she can be called Father is lifesaving for some and theological treason for others. How can this contentious group come together? Can these dry bones live? Ezekiel’s story stands as a witness to how unreasonable God’s plans can sound to our earthbound ears.

We could all take a page out of Ezekiel’s game book. When it comes to the things of God, look, watch, and listen! See what comes from such talk of healing words and words of gender and racial reconciliation as you will find in Words Matters. Consider entering into this prophecy, for these are words of prophecy that tell of God’s ability to rebuild and strengthen the Body of Christ. Words Matters is one gift from God that can support new life even in situations where all we can see are dry bones.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

What are the divisive words or ideas in your community, church, or denomination? Explore as many points of view on this word or idea as possible. Try to understand where each voice is coming from. Work together in your community to pray and consider with the question “Can these dry bones live?” in your own situation.

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Flesh vs. Spirit

READ ROMANS 8:6-11

Did you know that many tribal societies, in what is now known as North America, were matriarchal and matrilineal? Did you know that these tribal societies had very complex and meaningful religious traditions, practices, and faith lives? Did you know that the Creator is considered to be and referred to as gender neutral and/or both genders to most tribal societies even today?

How confusing it must have been to Native people when first learning that the Spirit of a “him” had to dwell inside a human’s body, even a woman’s body, as if a woman’s spirit was not sacred enough. It was surely as equally confusing for Native men as it was devastating for Native women. How could it be that Christians would be dependent upon either a male-biased God or a God that was incomplete, only half of a whole? The Native peoples who were first to be converted to Christianity must have thought that using words such as “he” or “him” when referring to God was not balanced, off centered, and exclusive. Such thought has not changed for many Natives even today.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

When discussing Paul’s message about the Spirit versus the flesh, how might referring to God as a “he” or “him” influence the way women and men relate to God, receive the Spirit, or think about their flesh or human bodies?

We know that words we use for God are metaphors—that we can not fully describe God using words no matter how we try. Take a look at the language used in your last worship service—words printed in a bulletin, on a screen, or in a hymnal or prayerbook. Are there words for God that are used repeatedly? What are they? If you made a list of all the words for God used in this service, what parts of the fullness of God do you find missing from the description? Are there words you would like to use more in worship services? What are they?

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Historical and Cultural Contexts of Words

READ MATTHEW 21:1-11

Matthew, like all the evangelists, has a particular audience in mind as he writes his Gospel. It is generally agreed that Matthew is writing to the Jewish-Christian audience, some of the first Jews to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. His readers, then, would have been familiar with the promises of the Hebrew Bible including the words of the prophets. It is important for Matthew to speak to his audience in their own symbolic language. The early Christian elders who decided to place Matthew's narrative of the life and ministry of Jesus in first position among the Gospels understood it as a bridge from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament to the New Testament. Old symbols renewed, is one way to conceptualize Matthew's work. Matthew had to be translingual and transcultural. Much like the effective preacher today, Matthew attempts to distill the eternal of the Law and the Prophets and temporarily compress it into language and images that can unfold in new contexts which the original writers never imagined.

The preparation to enter and the entrance into Jerusalem represent a kind of homecoming for the incarnate Word of God. In the sequential images, Jesus is recognized as the Lord and King. It is important to notice however, that these images and Matthew fulfill the longing for the Messiah in oddly unconventional ways. While it seems that Jesus accepts the role of Lord, he does not demand the donkeys. He requests them of their owner for temporary use. And he will send them back immediately (Mat 21:3).

In the triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, Jesus is not portrayed as a type of conquering Alexander entering the city atop his ever steady Bucephalus. Instead Zechariah 9.9 retools the image to remind us of the true role of a ruler: to create conditions so that the people may live together in peace. I wonder if it was not the intention of Zechariah to flip the image of the victory dance and song, an Ancient Near Eastern tradition in which the women led the celebration of the victory that their god and their god's warriors had won. Matthew takes this image and reminds us of Zachariah's celebration of peace and harmony. Isaiah's eighth century word of comfort to Ahaz includes the promise that the fetus developing in the womb of one of his courtiers, will be known not as a warrior; but as The Prince of Peace. The quotation from Zechariah continues: He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zec 9:10)

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

How many languages and cultural impediments must we cross to return to something like the original meaning of the text and then bring it forward to speak to today's audiences in the United States?

What would it mean today for Christians to truly worship Jesus as the prince of peace? Can we diminish if not eliminate martial metaphors from our preaching and teaching of the faith? Can we trust God to be our armor, and encounter our neighbors as friends rather than enemies?

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Courage to Speak

READ PSALM 70

Prayer tells us that words do matter when in conversation with God. We all know that God knows our hearts, what we desire and what we think. However, there is something uniquely important to us, as human beings, in conversing with God, putting our thoughts into special words. If we look at any religious tradition the best words in any language are used in relation to God, in our responses to God. We think of the best words possible to use in prayer: Do words matter in our responses to God? If the words do matter in our relationship with God, then words do matter in our relationships with one another.

What is the Psalmist saying in Psalm 70? The psalmist is communicating urgency for his need in his prayer to God. He wants God to react and respond to his request quickly and deliver him from his situation. He talks about the other people in his prayer who are actually malicious to him. He also talks about people who are seeking God. In these Lenten days, let us reflect upon these words and examine ourselves. Are we among the people who are malicious to others through our thoughts, words and deeds or are we among the people who are seeking God's ways and God's wisdom? The Psalmist calls out to God to come quickly and respond to his need for deliverance and liberation. There is a famous saying..."Justice delayed is justice denied." Yes, justice cannot be delayed. If we are among the people who are seeking God, may all of us act quickly to bring justice through our words and deeds. Amen.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

What words do you most often use when you pray? Where did you learn to pray with these words? Are there other words you would like to add to your prayer vocabulary? Are there words from your prayer life you wish you used more in your day to day speech?

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The Words of the Dance

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26

Hand, take, bless, give, receive, bread, wine, body, blood, life, death, new life. Words, but also - more than words: For human beings, words are primary, the foundation of communication. Words simultaneously open us up to new ideas and define boundaries around those ideas. The Logos, traditionally defined as the WORD of God made flesh in Jesus. Jesus, the love of God poured out in the incarnation and re-membered in this holy meal, reveals something about the nature of God that mere words struggle to describe.

Some suggest that Logos can also mean "Discourse" or "Story" or, perhaps, even "Conversation." The Logos, by nature, invites relationship and sharing, in and within creation. The Christian theology of the Trinity reveals how the Holy Spirit enables the Logos to be activated through time. Eastern theologians use the word "perichoresis," an interpenetrating dance-like relationship, when trying to describe the Holy Trinity. That divine community of interpenetrating love continues to go outward, so to speak, inviting all creation into the dance. The Logos is a conversation between God and creation. It's a love story expressed in the dance of life. The choreography of this great love story includes hands holding bread, lips sipping wine, and bodies giving themselves over to the death that brings life.

The Logos, present with God in the chaos that precedes created order: The Logos that spoke into the chaos and called forth God's desire, member-ing water and land, earth and sky, bread and wine, body and blood, love and grace, hope and mercy, life and new life, re-membered. Logos, the Word of God, bread of life, cup of salvation...

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

The next time you attend a worship service that includes a communion of bread/wine/juice be attentive to the dance of words, images, and symbols. Notice how you are invited into the dance through what you say and, what you do. Be attentive to the energy that permeates the words and actions. How would you describe that energy?

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The Word is Near

READ HEBREWS 10:16-25

The writer of Hebrews 10: 16-25 points us toward the scriptural tradition of the nearness of God's presence, law, word. "The word is very near to you...in your mouth and in your heart..." (Deuteronomy 30: 14); "...I will put my law within them and will write it on their hearts..." (Jeremiah 31: 33-34); the Creator of all gives Wisdom "a resting place...[among people in] the beloved city" (Ecclesiasticus 24: 8-12); and "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1: 14). Human experience is a privileged place of encounter with the divine. Hearts, minds, relationships and even societal structures offer intimate access to God's ever creative, ever challenging word. As our experience grows and deepens, so does our appreciation for the mystery of God, so close yet so beyond our understanding.

We search our experience for God's dynamic word, but soon discover the limitations of our own vocabularies. God writes "Wonder!" "Desire!" "Lament!" "Justice!" on our hearts, but we struggle to find the words to do justice to the divine word. Confusion may stop us; we find refuge in silence.

But through the eloquence of the Word of God—the life, death and resurrection of Jesus—God continues to write in our lives, remembering our failures no more, challenging us to keep listening deeply for the call to faithfulness. Let us joyfully seek the good word so close to us, and "provoke one another to love and good deeds!"

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

Are there words you feel God has written on your heart but you are unable to express? Take a moment to brainstorm, draw, or write a story about those words. Is there a word you wish for God to write on your heart? What is it?

When Words Fall Short

READ JOHN 20:1-18

Together as a Christian community, we have come to the end of our solemn preparations for Easter; much like Mary's sorrow ended when she saw Jesus by the empty tomb. Perhaps one thing we've noticed this season, especially if we've been reading these Words Matter reflections, is how our choice of language affects both those with whom we converse and our own understandings of the world. As we choose our words judiciously within a community of Faith in the Risen Lord, this passage draws our attention past words toward a rich palette of images and actions.

The images of the empty tomb, the grave clothes, the angels, and Jesus' appearance, are paired with Mary's responses. She runs to find her friends, weeps, speaks with the angels, questions Christ, and then once again runs off and exclaims her experience to the disciples. Having grown up in the Orthodox Church and noticing that the movement in John 20 is initiated through a series of striking images, I am reminded of the Orthodox Easter Liturgy in which images and actions are certainly brought to the fore of worship. Even as the Johannine literature is replete with early Christian theological language, both this passage and our Christian worship remind us that words alone fall short. All Jesus' teachings did not make Mary or the disciples understand that he would rise from the dead (John 20:9). Not even the empty tomb, grave clothes, or angels seemed to have suggested to Mary or the disciples that Jesus was not dead anymore. Only at Jesus' own appearance did Mary realize that Jesus had risen from the dead! She had to see him to understand—and she is not rebuked in the least for this.

At the Orthodox Easter Liturgy, the people gather knowing why we are coming to church. We know already that "Christ is Risen," but the movement and images of the service ingrain an "understanding" (John 20:9) into our bodies. We have to experience to understand. The church is lowly lit and the priests and tables are covered in dark clothes. A tomb-like structure is in the center of the church; the choir sings hymns of anticipation and soon all the lights are turned off. Suddenly out of the darkness a single candle is lit, and the priest holds the candle and proclaims "Take ye the Light that is never overtaken by night." A procession around the church with singing, ringing bells, and lit candles ensues. The climax is certainly when the Gospel is read outside and the choir begins singing "Christ is Risen from the dead trampling down death and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!" However, I do not fully experience Christ as Risen, until I enter the church again, and see that it is indeed no longer dark. The lights are nearly blinding and the priests and tables are dressed in dazzling white. I have to see, and I have to be there.

Words alone fall short. After all, God is "...ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible..." (Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom). As we continue our endeavors to consider our language, we go into the Easter Joy of these next forty day, understanding that God's grace is conveyed through words, even as much as through actions, experiences, and through each of us as we move and breathe and work in the world.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

As Lent draws to a close, reflect on what you learned while observing a spiritual discipline of paying close attention to words?

What will you or your community do to continue this spiritual discipline now that lent is over?

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