

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Word Power

Luke 4:31-44

It's important to get the words right. We learned that eight years ago when Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts administered the oath of office during the first inauguration of President Barack Obama. Roberts began, "I Barack Hussein Obama do solemnly swear." But halfway through the line Obama interrupted him and began repeating the line. Roberts paused and Obama then repeated the entire first line. Then Roberts incorrectly quoted the next line of the oath. He was supposed to say, "That I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States." Instead Roberts said, "That I will execute the Office of President of the United States faithfully."

Though getting the word "faithfully" out of sequence was a minor mistake, it was enough to raise concerns about whether Obama had been properly sworn in. What if someone wanted to use the error to challenge the legitimacy of Obama's presidential decisions and actions? The White House counsel took no chances, and advised that President Obama and Justice Roberts redo the oath-taking ceremony. They did so that same evening in the Map Room of the White House, this time without a hitch.

Words matter. The right words, at the right time, in the right sequence. And not just the words themselves, but also the tone, the tempo, and the nonverbal gestures that accompany the spoken words. All these things come together to make words a very powerful force, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. During this past week, and in the week ahead, words have and will gain even greater prominence. On Tuesday evening, President Obama delivered his farewell speech. This Friday, President-elect Donald Trump will deliver his inauguration speech. This transition of power simply wouldn't be what it is without the presence and impact of words.

Earlier in Luke 4, Jesus delivered what might be called his own inaugural address. He launched his ministry and summarized his mission with words from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (vv. 18-19). In Jesus, God's promises are being fulfilled and God's reign has arrived. Jesus is the one who will bring in the liberation and restoration that the poor and oppressed have been longing for. Justice and peace will finally become a reality. With words like these, it's no wonder that hopes were high and expectations elevated. Luke says that the people in Nazareth were impressed by Jesus' speaking skills. They were "amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips" (v. 22).

But Luke goes on to say that the mood quickly changed when Jesus started to preach about how God's mercy and grace weren't just operating among the good religious folks. And soon, what began as a peaceful worship service turned into a case of mob violence. The congregation tried to kill Jesus, but he managed to escape. Thankfully, this episode was the exception. Overall, Jesus was favorably received during his early ministry in Galilee. He drew huge crowds. His reputation spread. His popularity skyrocketed. His poll numbers went through the roof. Some, though, remained cautious. Would all this good will last, or

was it just part of his ministry's honeymoon period? Better to wait and see what Jesus would actually accomplish during his first 100 days. What would he do to turn that inaugural address into concrete action? How would he move from rhetoric to reality?

We get a sense of what Jesus was able to achieve in the vignettes that Luke gives us in this morning's Scripture reading. Our first stop is a synagogue in Capernaum, where Jesus is busy teaching. Suddenly, Bible study is interrupted by an evil spirit in a man who was present in the house of worship. Now give this demon credit, he knows when he has met his match. He knows that Jesus' word is enough to destroy him. In fact, to destroy the whole realm of evil spirits. So the demon tries to gain power over Jesus, or at least neutralize him, by calling Jesus' name. But Jesus uses his own words to squelch the demon's words. With his very speech, Jesus serves the demon his eviction notice.

Our next stop is Simon's house. His mother-in-law is sick with a fever. What's interesting is how Jesus treats her illness the same way he treated the demon. He rebukes it. He gives the disease a reprimand. In this particular situation, healing doesn't come by touch but once again by Jesus' spoken word. Not a word uttered within the sacred confines of God's house, but a word issued within the four walls of a family's house. Sometimes the pulpit is there in the officially designated place of worship, where it should be. But many times the pulpit is also out there beyond the walls of the sanctuary, where it must be. It positions itself right in the midst of the pain. It shows up right there on the scene of suffering.

Richard Lischer writes about one of the strategies that Martin Luther King, Jr. used in response to attacks and violence during the Civil Rights Movement:

In the days of black-church bombings in the South, King and his associates would often rush to the scene of a bombing and hold a service of prayer and preaching in the still-smoldering foundation. Several years ago I interviewed a few of the people who participated in these services. To each I posed the question, "What did he say?" And each responded, in effect, "I don't remember what he said, but I will never forget *where* he said it." Preaching in the ruins was his way of symbolizing the triumph of the word of God over every attempt to destroy it.¹

In this morning's text, the word of the Lord is indestructible. In fact, the only things getting destroyed are the diseases, demons, evils spirits, and all the other forces that seek to harm, oppress, alienate, and ultimately separate us from God and from one another. Just ask Simon's mother-in-law, who goes from being flat on her back to up and at work, all because of the word of Jesus.

Luke then takes us to another spot in Capernaum. The setting sun indicates that the Sabbath is ending, so people are now free to carry a burden. In this case, that means lifting a sick relative or friend and bringing them to Jesus. The crowds are large, but so is Jesus' compassion. His mercy takes the form of touch, as he lays hands on the sick and makes them whole. And with his mouth, Jesus continues to speak words of release, words of freedom, to those who are captive to evil spirits. When the expelled demons start broadcasting Jesus' identity, he silences them, probably because he doesn't want the crowds to rush to the wrong conclusions about what kind of Savior he is.

And then, at daybreak, after a long, exhausting night of ministry, Jesus goes to a place where he can be alone. With the way his reputation is spreading and his fame is growing, these kinds of moments are harder and harder to come by. And even this one doesn't last very long. People soon show up, looking for him, fearful that he's leaving town. What about all the local folks who still need to be healed and fed and clothed and comforted? What about the town's faithful synagogue attendees who need to be taught God's word? What about the captives who still need to hear good news of release and hope?

Richard Lischer tells about how Martin Luther King, before he embarked on one of his civil rights campaigns, sent two of his closest aides to confer with members of Billy Graham's staff. Though the two preachers had different opinions about many political issues, King had known and admired Graham, and trusted his goodwill. In fact, King had even once played a small part in one of Billy Graham's crusades. In this case, King's representatives wanted guidance on how he could win the approval of the American public, and how the organization King had founded, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, could run its operations as smoothly and successfully as Billy Graham's. Graham's basic advice was that King was spreading himself too thin. As Lischer puts it: "Graham's team spent thousands of hours preparing for a few carefully orchestrated appearances each year; King was dashing in and out of every little church and hamlet that wanted him, answering and inspiring Macedonian calls wherever he went. His model of evangelism seemed designed to exhaust the evangelist."²

By the end of the Capernaum crusade, Jesus is an exhausted evangelist. And now, this weary Messiah is hanging out near the edge of the city limits, seeking some solitude and reviewing his itinerary. In one respect, it's understandable that the townspeople track him down and want to keep him with them. After all, Jesus' word—preached, taught, and practiced—is able to do things that only the power of God can do. But in another respect, the announcement of God's reign is bigger than any one place, and larger than any single group of people. So Jesus says, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent" (v. 43).

Maybe Jesus' experiences of solitude were part of how he prepared to move on to the next town or village. It reminds me of something Nelson Mandela once wrote. He said, "It is never my custom to use words lightly. If 27 years in prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact on the way people live and die."³

Every day, we live with the impact of words. Words we speak. Words we hear. Words we embody and practice in our lives, individually and together. Some of these words are spoken on historic moments in historic places. "Four score and seven years ago. . . ." "I have a dream." "Ask not what your country can do for you." "That's one small step for man, . . ." True, sometimes even famous words get fumbled. Just ask Chief Justice Roberts and President Obama. But then again, we ourselves fumble through a lot of the words we speak under ordinary, everyday circumstances. We struggle to find the right words to say.

The good news is that we worship and serve a Lord whose word never falters or fails. No matter who happens to be Commander in Chief, our ultimate and highest allegiance is to the One whose command spells doom for disease, evil spirits, hatred, division, violence, injustice, death, and all the other things that resist God's reign and try to separate us from him and from one another. Remember that the Lord had the first word in creation, and he'll have the last word when Christ comes again. In the meantime, we're sent to participate in the spread of his powerful word into the world. We can't keep Jesus to ourselves, or live as if his word is here only for our benefit. Instead, we live with confidence in the effectiveness and victory of his word, not just among us but beyond us.

¹ Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2005) 33.

² Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word that Moved America*, Kindle ed. New York: Oxford, 1995.

³ Nelson Mandela. "In His Words." *Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2013.