

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/25/2009, Christmas Morning  
John 1:1-14  
The Word that Changes Everything

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>14</sup>And *the Word* became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John 1:14, RSV)

One of my favorite sermon themes from Pastor David Lotz is the kinship between “words and *the Word*.” Pastor Lotz was longtime Pastoral Associate here at Immanuel. He and Norma are now retired and happy down in Florida, but many of us remember Pastor Lotz’s elegant preaching, including his emphasis on the importance of words. The man is a wordsmith. He loves poetry and well-crafted prose. But the example he gave about the importance of words that most stays in my memory is a humble, simple sentence of three words -- aye, but three words that can change everything for the better: “I love you.” When that one who has captured your heart speaks these three words, well, the world just gets better.

And so it is with Christmas: *the Word* became flesh and dwelt among us, and our world just got better.

My aim in this sermon is point to three occasions in the Bible when things suddenly got better because a fit word was spoken. This is all to set the stage for that greatest of Words: the birth of our Savior in Bethlehem’s stable.

First, let us go back to the beginning of things, to the beginning of *all* things in the First Chapter of Genesis. The esteemed Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann makes an interesting translation point about the second verse of Chapter One -- the verse the King James Bible translates thus:

And the earth was without form, and *void*; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. (Genesis 1:2, KJV)

Westermann notes that in Hebrew the expression “formless void,” has an air of restlessness or suffering about it. The Hebrew phrase, Westermann says,

... indicates a desert waste, analogous to the Greek *chaos*; its darkness is uncanny, something like what animals experience during a solar eclipse.<sup>1</sup>

This is how the Bible pictures things before the Lord intervenes. The world is ill at ease. Spooked. Aching. Longing for help. And then the Lord does intervene with his fit Word, his majestic Word, “Let there be light!” And so it was. Thus began the series of steps by which our Maker made a world in which creatures could live -- not just us humans, but all the creatures.

Maybe I’m getting soft, but to me, this description of the beginning of things sounds almost romantic. This notion of a primeval restlessness suddenly put on the path of peace and order by a word, “Let there be...,” puts me in mind of that lonely, hopeful heart that would surely love to hear those three words that could change everything, “I love *you*.”

And in the end, I do not think I am being overly romantic here. It seems to be a good lesson of the Bible that our Maker loved us from the beginning. He began with goodwill toward this world and at each stage of his creation he looked with satisfaction upon what he had made and gave his verdict: “It was good!”

Next I want to speak of a crisis in the Lord’s dealings with his people. It is a crisis that I hope you mothers and fathers are spared, though sometimes you are not. I mean that crisis in which the children have about broken your heart and driven you to your wits’ end. This child which you created in love and have nourished all these years, this child is wayward and disobedient and seems to want to have nothing to do with you.

So it is in the Eleventh Chapter of Hosea. The Lord seems taxed to the limits. He contemplates rejecting his people and being done with them:

<sup>7</sup>My people are bent on turning away from me; so they are appointed to the yoke, and none shall remove it. (Hosea 11:7, RSV)

But immediately, the Lord changes his mind. Immediately he puts his love into words, and it makes all the difference in the world. He swears that he will not treat Israel as two other cities were treated. Those communities, Admah and Zeboiim, were destroyed. Israel has despised her Lord’s love. That is simply a fact. Yet, the Lord cannot bring himself to destroy Israel for this. And so he puts his love into words:

<sup>8</sup>How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel!  
How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboiim! My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. <sup>9</sup>I will not

---

<sup>1</sup> Clause Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*. Translated by David E. Green (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987), pg. 8.

execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy. (Hosea 11:8-9, RSV)

Now, let's move on to a third story of love. In a way, it is the continuation of the Hosea passage. In that passage, the Lord testified to his love and promised not to destroy his people. One way to think of this story to which we now turn is that it speaks more positively of the Lord's love. In this story, we find the commencing of salvation. Ponder nothing lowly here. We are not speaking of the Lord's decision not to destroy, but rather his positive decision to save.

This time, the word of love is spoken not by God, but by a plain person, like you and me. Sometimes, we are privileged to do that: we are privileged with our words to speak God's word of love to others.

I am speaking now of Joseph, the Protector of the Holy Family. We give credit to young Mary for believing the word spoken to her by the angel that she would conceive the Christ Child, though she was a virgin. Now, let's give credit to Joseph for a similar faith. He believes an incredible story: he believes that this girl who has won his heart is pregnant and yet has been true to him. He knows that he is not the father of her child, and in the goodness of his heart, he is willing to set aside all logic and to credit the angel who tells him that his pregnant beloved bears God's Son.

And so, the young man takes the young woman's hand, and says, "Let us be on to Bethlehem. Let us be on to build a life together." Indeed, I like to imagine him repeating sweet words from the Bible to his Mary:

<sup>10</sup>... "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; <sup>11</sup>for lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. <sup>12</sup>The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. <sup>13</sup>The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. (Song of Songs, 2:10-13, RSV)

I know that these times are tough. This Christmastime finds our world with war and terror, hunger and homelessness. Many people are getting worn out by tough economic times.

That is why I am eager to return to our sermon text, to St. John's teaching on the Holy Incarnation of Our God.

<sup>14</sup>And *the Word* became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John 1:14, RSV)

This Word is our Maker's Word of love for you, for me. If we were to read the life of Bethlehem's Babe, from his birth in the stable to his death on the Cross, it would amount to one strong Word of affection, one strong Sermon of love. For what more can he say, what more can he do, than he is about to say to us in this Blessed Sacrament:

My very life: it is for you! My body, my blood, I count them less precious than I count you! Go on, then, Dearhearts. Go on and walk in my love, until one day you see me face to face, and heart to heart, as Mary and Joseph saw me so long ago. By then, our love shall have triumphed and there shall forever be peace on earth and goodwill among humanity.

To Immanuel, this Word of God with us, be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.