

Word Power

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John 1:1-14

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

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In 1934, Hitler was propagating his anti-Semitic message throughout Germany. An 11-year-old Jewish boy named Heinz lived in a small Bavarian village with his family. As tension mounted between Jews and Hitler's followers, Heinz's father, a schoolteacher, lost his job and his family endured considerable hardship. Whenever gangs of Hitler's youth roamed the Bavarian neighborhoods, young Heinz would steer clear of Hitler's bullies.

One day, Heinz couldn't avoid a confrontation with Hitler's youth. A beating seemed inevitable, but, instead, Heinz walked away unhurt. It wasn't because he put up a good fight. Rather, he convinced these troublemakers that a fight was foolish and unnecessary. Heinz learned at an early age the power of words to turn away conflict. Heinz and his family eventually escaped Bavaria and came to America. As the years passed, his name became synonymous with peace negotiations under Presidents Nixon and Ford. In 1973, he was a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. He is not known by his given name Heinz. Some of you will remember him by

his Anglicized name, Henry Kissinger.

I grew up with the school yard taunt, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." I wonder if the perpetrators of this taunt were ever on the receiving end of hurtful words. Words have power to hurt people. Any of you who have been victimized by gossip know of what I speak.

Words also have enormous healing power. "I'm sorry" can be incredibly powerful. So can "great job," "you can do it," "I'm proud of you," or "I love you." Affirming words have enormous power in the growth of children.

Words have power. Our Scripture lesson makes a related point. God's Word has power, hence the title of this sermon, "Word Power."

The prologue or introduction to John's gospel won't likely make it into any children's pageants this Christmas. There's no baby lying in a manger, no angels singing glory to God in the highest, no shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night and no wise men bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh in John's gospel. John's starting point goes back to creation

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- John 1:14***

itself: “In the beginning was the Word.” His first words echo the opening line of Genesis: “In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth.”

John deliberately connects his gospel to Genesis to represent a new epic in salvation history. “In the beginning was the Word [logos] and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” This Greek term, *logos*, would trigger a response from John’s Greek and Jewish audience. When the Greeks contemplated the orderly nature of the world, they concluded there must be a force or rational principle behind it all. They called this impersonal force “the Word.”

To the Jews, “word” conjured up God’s speech in Genesis. Whenever God speaks, creation comes into being. God’s first recorded words in Scripture are these: “Let there be light” and there was light (1:3). Light makes life possible.

In biological terms, we call this light-to-life process photosynthesis. Plant leaves act as solar collectors. Photosynthetic cells in plant leaves convert sunlight into sugar, thereby creating fuel for plants.

Our bodies undergo a similar light-to-life synthesis. A cholesterol-like substance in our skin absorbs ultra-violet light from the sun and converts it to Vitamin D, so essential for producing calcium in bone development.

John picks up this light to life image, “In him was life and this life was the light of all people” (1:4). This Word acts as both a life-giver and light-bearer. This Word gives light and dispels darkness. This Word gives life and conquers death.

Verse 14 reveals plainly the identity of this Word: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” *Dwelt* in the Greek literally means to tabernacle or pitch one’s tent. God dwelled among His people in the Old Testament in the tabernacle; in the New Testament, God tabernacles among His people in the person of Jesus Christ.

John answers in his prologue questions we often ask each other when we meet for the first time. We ask questions such as “What’s your name,” and “Where are you from?” John, in his prologue, answers these questions with respect to Jesus. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” The verb “was” appears in past tense to express that this Word was with God from the beginning. This Word existed as God from the beginning and participated in every facet of creation, “He was in the beginning with God. Through him all things were made, without him nothing was made that was made” (1:2-3).

Jesus is fully God, yet he is also, at one and the same time, fully human. Jesus did not

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come into existence at Christmas. He became human at Christmas. The Greek word is forceful in this regard. He became flesh. That's why Eugene Peterson translates this verse in *The Message*, "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood."

We believe Jesus is at one and the same time fully divine and fully human. How can Jesus be both fully divine and fully human? The same way someone can be both a son and a father or a wife and a mother.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? We do not worship a dispassionate God who is above and beyond us. We worship a God who comes near, who lives and dwells among us.

There is an intriguing verse in the book of Hebrews: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (4:15). God knows what it is like to be human. God knows what it is like to experience struggle and temptation. This is really good news for any person who may be wrestling right now with whether God really cares about them.

Sometimes God seems very far away. There are times when our prayers seem to lie on the floor unanswered. God seems sometimes in the circumstances of our lives to be a no-show.

But things aren't always what they seem. God occasionally speaks in a gentle whisper. I get this. When I used to raise my voice, my kids would tune me right out. Sometimes when I spoke softly, they would actually listen to me. Maybe God speaks softly to get our attention. God could be trying to woo us rather than compel us to believe.

What can we do when God's presence fades from view? I have four suggestions for your consideration.

First, remember God's faithfulness in the past. Remember is an epic Biblical word. Abraham Heschel, considered by many to be the premier Jewish theologian of the 20th century, claims that "...much of what the Bible demands can be summed up in a single word—remember."

We derive our English words memorial and monument from the Hebrew word for remember. The World War II, Korean War and Vietnam memorials help us remember the sacrifice other people paid to insure our freedom. Perhaps you had out-of-town family and friends who wanted to see these memorials this weekend. Our act of remembering is an antidote for spiritual amnesia. The refrain of Rudyard Kipling's poem *Recessional*, "Lest we forget," is taken from the Biblical injunction, "Beware, lest we forget the Lord" (Deuteronomy 6:12).

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Second, practice the “disciplines.” We need constant, daily reminders of God’s presence. That’s why we are encouraging you to join us in our Advent devotional, “Advent Beginnings.” We believe the practice of daily prayer and Scripture meditation can bring us back on point again.

C.S. Lewis writes about one sure way to promote God’s absence:

Avoid silence, avoid solitude, avoid any train of thought that leads off the beaten track. Concentrate on money, sex, status, health and (above all) on your own grievances. Keep the radio and TV on. Use plenty of sedation. If you must read books, select them carefully. But you’ll be safer to stick to the papers. You’ll find the advertisements helpful; especially those with a sexy or snobbish appeal.

Third, act as if God’s promises are true. Jesus promised, “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). If Jesus promised it, act as though it’s true. Hang onto this promise like a burr to a top coat, as Martin Luther used to say.

Some psychologists practice a school of behavior therapy that encourages people to “act as if” something is true, no matter how challenging it seems. The way to become a basketball player is to act like a

basketball player. The way to become a Christian is to act like a Christian. It’s much easier to act your way into feelings than to feel your way into actions.

Fourth, keep looking for God. God doesn’t play hide and seek games with us. God is forever leaving clues for us. God wants to be found. But we’ve got to be on the lookout for these clues in order for them to be found.

Where’s Waldo? is a series of children’s books created by an illustrator named Martin Handford. He began to draw Waldo into his pictures as something of an afterthought. His original intent was to paint crowd scenes, but children became fascinated with finding Waldo. So, he painted Waldo into every page. Maybe that’s why *Where’s Waldo?* has sold 180 million books worldwide.

Waldo is distinguishable in his red and white striped shirt, matching stocking cap and goofy glasses. But finding Waldo is not as easy as it sounds. Although Waldo is on every page, there’s also wannabes and look-alikes. Since Waldo is often hidden to the untrained eye, sometimes we have to look for him. But that’s part of the fun of it. If finding Waldo was easy, no one would even bother to try.

God is there on every page. Sometimes He is easy to find. Sometimes you have to look for Him.

