

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 30, 2011

It's easy to become sick of words. We might even come to the conclusion that words don't matter. We have grown weary of political wizards who have tricked us with lovely words like "safety net" and "peace-keepers" which describe ugly realities. Communication experts tell us that it's the image, not words, that are important. We have all been hurt by words, especially those that promised: "I will never leave you." "I will always love you." "I will never lie to you." Words are cheap. Deeds are what matter, not words.

But is it all that simple? Can we so easily dump our trust in words? I have a hunch that, despite the fact that we have all been bruised by bad words, we are all, in some way, waiting to hear some good words. Maybe that is why when people today choose their leaders, they look not only for strength and competency, but leaders whose backgrounds equip them to master words.

In his Tucson speech, President Obama was eloquent, bipartisan and inspiring – a pastor of sorts to the nation in a time of shock, anger and grief. He gives the nation what might be aspirational goals or a vision. He speaks to us about our "better angels," our shared values as Americans and our national story. All this is to say that he reminds us of who we are, of our identity and our story as Americans.

In doing these things, he accomplishes a second related value, one sought by all good leaders and preachers. That is, he gives us a better story to live by. We all live in some story, some narrative that defines and guides us. A better story reminds us of our own better self, collectively and individually. Another upside of the president as preacher is calling the nation to bipartisan or post-partisan common good.

Yes, it's true that from time to time, we do sing with Eliza Doolittle in the musical comedy *My Fair Lady*, "I'm so sick of words!" But it's also true that we are people who are hungry for words that will lift up our hearts.

That is why, before we come to the banquet of the Lord, the Eucharist, we listen to the Word of the Lord. After all, we are children of Abraham. Our faith is deeply rooted in what the ancient Jews called *dabar*. *Dabar* was more than just the utterance of a sound. It was a word that had power, a word that brought about a new beginning. We believe with St. Paul that “faith comes from hearing.” We believe with St. John that “in the beginning was the Word.”

Sometimes the words we hear in the liturgy are about people with odd-sounding names, living lives that seem so distant from our own, like the prophet of today’s reading, Zephaniah. He is the least known of the biblical prophets. Zephaniah is mentioned only once in the New Testament. The only reason that the church remembers Zephaniah is because of a word he spoke in his day to Israel. The word was *anawim* which means the poor little band of people who relied completely on the Lord. Zephaniah is still remembered because thousands of years ago he spoke one word, *anawim*, and gave new meaning, new life, new blessing to that name and people.

In today’s gospel, Jesus takes a clue from Zephaniah and reminds us that words matter. Before Jesus healed, before he changed the water into wine, before he performed great deeds, he spoke words that startled, challenged and cause the crowds to come back to hear more.

From his vantage point on top of the mountain, Jesus looked at the people. Many were poor, some were still mourning the loss of a loved one, some were homeless, others were called odd because they didn’t buy into greed and hatred. Jesus looked at all these people and used one word that nobody had ever called them before: *blessed*! Blessed meant “truly happy.” “Despite what people call you, despite what you might even be tempted to call yourself, listen to me.” “I call you blessed. You are blessed because you belong to God’s kingdom!”

Of all the wondrous words that Jesus spoke, the one that people cherished most was when he called them *blessed*. That one word sparked a revolution of spirit and changed the world. That one word of blessing defied empires and defined a new people. We who follow him could change the world again if only we, too, could learn to call others, especially the forsaken among us, one word: *blessed*!

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