

When God Speaks

Luke 3.15-16, 21-22

Baptism of Jesus
January 11, 2009

God's Word cannot be found in objective laws, sterile creeds, or impersonal rules. Rather, God's Word is always an *incarnate Word*, a Word made 'flesh' through relationships, encounters, and through the joys and sorrows of shared human experience. Through the relationships we nurture within the circle of God's children, the Word becomes flesh ever anew, giving life and meaning. This community of the incarnate Word is called Church.

- Frederick Buechner (adapted)

The Reading

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

A Promising Question

Perhaps the most promising question one could ask of faith is, "What happens when God speaks?" Today's gospel reading suggests a significant response to this question. When Jesus rises out of the baptismal waters, the Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaims, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." Please note that this is a significant statement for the gospel writers, especially Mark. God's pronouncement is not simply a public endorsement of Jesus; rather it *is* an act of adoption, and this Jesus is now and forevermore God's son. When God speaks, things happen. Worlds are created, lives transformed, challenged, and empowered. God's Word is always creative; and it is God's creative Word that we want to encounter this morning. As we begin our time together, I invite you to pause for pray with me.

Gracious God, we pray that our spiritual ears will be attuned this day, this hour, to your creative Word; not to the blather of a preacher or to mere words on a page, but to your living, inviting Word that creates, leaving life and relations in its path. May we hear your creative Word this day. Amen.

James R. "Bo" Crowe
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A Brief History of the Word

I'm going to say a phrase and I want you to call out to me the first thing that pops into your head. Ready? The Word of God. The bible, you say? That's what I expected; when one mentions the Word of God, the first thing most of us think of is the bible. It may surprise you to learn that I both celebrate and lament this fact. I celebrate it because there's a very real sense in which it is true. The bible is a gift – a friend even – that God has given us through the lives of many men and women of faith and, as such, is completely trustworthy. I lament the fact, however, because many people limit God's Word to words on a page. There is more to God's Word than mere words on a page; even the pages of the bible. There is an ultimate, more powerful, more creative Word of God to which even the bible witnesses. And my lamentation springs from the fact that we rarely listen for this Word through the words of scripture, through nature, through the actions of Christian friends, family members, even strangers. You see, the Word of God is deeper, richer, and more profound than our wildest imaginings, and we need to listen not only for the words of God ...we need to experience the creative Word of God that makes things happen, that changes things, that creates worlds and transforms lives. Because when God speaks, good things happen.

Words on a page simply won't do. They're just not enough. Words on a page can be misunderstood, misinterpreted, manipulated, ignored, or even turned into weapons to use against others. Words on a page are not nearly enough, but the bible witnesses to encounters with another Word, the very creative utterance of the divine. Men and women of faith from Abraham to Paul have witnessed to an encounter with God's living Word that at once inspired, intimidated, and empowered them to live changed lives. When God speaks, good things happen!

Do you find this spooky? Do you find it frightening? You shouldn't, you know. We all have experienced the creative power of words in one form or another. For example, have you ever heard words of forgiveness from a loved one you had wronged? If so, you know well that the simple phrase, "I forgive you," changed your life. Poets talk about the power of words to paint worlds of meaning; to caress, adorn, and comfort. And while we often quote old proverbs to the effect that words can never harm us, we all know that isn't true.

All of us have experienced the creative power of words. Their limited creativity is based on the model of God's creative Word, known to us through our faith. Its history can be traced to the very beginning, because it was through the Word of God that the world came into being. God spoke and there was a world. Through time, individuals like Abraham and prophets like Isaiah encountered a Word clearly distinguished from words on a page. They encountered the creative

Word of God that embraced them, challenged them, and intimidated them; but at the same time it empowered and sent them out. Their lives were changed when they heard this Word. Remember, for example, the experience of Isaiah in the temple. He was awe inspired, intimidated, and fearful; but when the invitation came Isaiah said without hesitation, “Here am I, send me.” His life had been changed.

The ultimate event in the history of God’s Word occurred some two thousand years ago; an event more telling than either the creation, or the living Word of God to the prophets. John says it best; God’s Word became flesh. God’s Word became personal and up close in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Now, and only now, are we in a position to understand the full nature of God’s living Word.

Word and Community

The Word of God, we can say firstly, is always personal. This is one of the things the life of Jesus shows us; the Word of God always issues in relationships. God didn’t just create a universe, set it spinning on its way and abandon it, looking to some other task or hobby. God created a universe and continues to caress that universe, remaining in a living relationship with that universe, giving it life and vitality. And should God abandon this relationship, the universe would simply unravel.

God’s creative Word creates community. God’s creative Word invites us into relationships: into a relationship with God, each of us enjoying a unique and intimate relationship with God through Christ; into a relationship with the scriptures, which come to us as a friend, offering to help us explore the spiritual life, helping us see the world through God’s eyes, and begin living in that world. I don’t mean to be disparaging, but I don’t want to live in a world envisioned by Fred Phelps. Then again, I don’t want to live in a world envisioned by Bo Crowe. I want to live in the world that God sees. I want to see you as God sees you, and respond to you on that basis.

God’s creative Word invites us into relationship with the community of the believers as well. God’s creative word invites us into relationships with each other. The spiritual life was created in community, and I would go so far as to say the spiritual life cannot be lived effectively outside of community. God has called us into community. God has brought us together to hear that creative Word, to see it reflected in the eyes of others, to be here with and for each other, to support and love each other, to be transformed and inspired together by listening for God’s creative Word.

The Word of God always creates: life, relationships, community. And baptism is a beautiful symbol of this living Word. Through baptism we die to sin and are raised to newness of life through the Word. The old is thrown away, making room for the new. Through baptism, again, we are invited into the body of Christ, into the community of believers. It's difficult to speak exclusively of my baptism or your baptism, because baptism ushers us into community; baptism symbolizes being woven together in Christ. That being said, I must note that it's dangerous to come to church and witness baptism, because you make a commitment to every baptism candidate you observe. You make a commitment to welcome them into the faith community, to walk with them in faith, to nurture and nourish their faith, to grow together, to discuss, to explore, to go out and serve, to develop a passion for justice and outreach ...and more. Each of us affirms such a commitment when we say amen to a baptism.

Baptism is the first step into the community that we call church; and in that community, as Frederick Buechner says, God's word is always incarnate, always personal, always about relationships; open, caring, growing relationships. Such is the baptism we celebrate today. We celebrate it in the life of Jesus, and we celebrate our own baptisms as well. I invite you now to reflect on the significance of your baptism, to recall how you felt, and the changes it wrought in your life. I am confident that a common thread will run through all our memories; I am confident that thoughts of baptism will inevitably bring memories of community; memories of people who have touched our lives within the body of Christ; memories of being invited by God into relationships of love and forgiveness, goodness and grace. Let's take a moment to reflect on our individual baptism and the community of faith into which we were ushered. Following this time of prayerful silence, I invite you to join me in reaffirming your baptism. May we pray together.

Creator Spirit who in the beginning hovered over the waters, who at Jesus' baptism descended in the form of a dove, who at Pentecost was poured out under the signs of wind and fire, come to us, open our hearts and minds so that we may hear your life giving Word and be renewed by your power in the unity of Creator, Redeemer, Companion. Amen.

I ask you now, as we ask any baptismal candidate, do you renounce evil, repent of your sins, and turn to Christ. If so, please respond, I do.

Do you confess that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and do you accept and proclaim him to be your Redeemer and Friend? If so, please respond, I do.

Looking to your baptism, do you believe in God the source, the fountain of life? Do you believe in God as Christ the offspring of God, our Redeemer, embodied in Jesus of Nazareth and in

the church; and do you believe in God the liberating Spirit the wellspring of all new life? If so, please respond, I do.

Then look with joy to your baptism. Amen.