

In the beginning, when God was creating the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. Into that darkness God spoke a word - Light! - and suddenly, light was. It really was that simple. God spoke a word, and that word became reality. Light, day, night, firmament, earth, tree, apple, rose, sun, moon, duck, minnow, newt, toad, beetle, ostrich, lion, human. There was no spell, no potion, no wave of a wand. Just a word spoken into the darkness and immediately that word was created. God spoke, and that word became.

God has spoken words into being for the whole of human history. God said garden, and a garden appeared, well-suited for walks in the cool evening breeze. God said clothing, and clothing was fashioned to wrap the bodies of this disobedient, distressed woman and man. God said flood, rainbow, dove, stars, sand, father, covenant, laughter, mother, baby, ram, well, wife, twins, stone, ladder, descendant, Egypt, wheat, newborn, basket, reeds, staff,

plague, lamb, sea, wilderness, pillar, manna, promise, land, home, judge, king, prophet, rain, giant, slingshot, shepherd, harp, friend, crown, gold, glory, cedar, temple, oil, lamp, river, girl, angel, cousin, Baptist. God has spoken all of this, and in the speaking, what was said was also made.

How I would love to have that power. How I would love to have those magic words in my vocabulary, to say abracadabra or alohomora and have a world of possibilities unlocked before me. It's tantalizing to think about, isn't it? Like, if you could speak one word into being, what word would it be? Time, perhaps. Imagine the possibilities if we could say "time" and have hours added onto our day, hours for sleeping or praying, hours to really think about the gifts we're buying for Christmas this year, hours to call old friends or text new ones. If not time, maybe we could say money. Not the kind of money that makes you want to drink fine champagne from crystal goblets and then smash them on the hearth; just enough money so

that we don't have to worry. Money so that we could do the work we'd really like to do, so that we could save up a little for the future, take care of our parents, leave something to our children. Money so that we could make a difference in the world by providing scholarships, paying for meals, funding research, defending our natural resources. Money so that we could offer to God and to God's Church not only a sacrifice of thanksgiving but also, I don't know, an elevator. New wiring. More classrooms.

So maybe we'd say time. Or money. And there are other words we might choose, too, like romance. Or cure. Time, money, romance, cure, employment, meaning, balance, power, trust, joy, release - what if we could speak these words and our souls and bodies and whole selves would be healed? What if we could speak what we need into being? If only we had that kind of magic.

There is one word we haven't mentioned yet, a word that reflects something that we all desperately need. Today's psalm assures

us God is speaking this word into the world right now, and indeed every moment of every day. Listen to what the Lord God is saying, the psalmist sings, for God is speaking peace to his faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to him. Peace. The Lord God is speaking peace into the world, to all those who will listen. Peace. Peace in our hearts and in our minds. Peace in our bodies and in our souls. Peace in our homes. Peace in our streets. Peace in the hearts of those who are afraid. Peace in the hearts of those who hate. Peace in the hearts of those who have no hope. Peace in the world, in what we say and what we do, in how we think and how we act. Peace, God says, and peace becomes.

The peace that God speaks into being is not a peace that covers up or compensates. God's peace is not a peace that hides and smooths over. No, the peace of God is real peace, authentic and courageous. This is the peace that John the Baptist speaks of, a peace that requires work, that requires repentance, that requires

reconciliation, that requires allowing God to fling us high into the air so that all the chaff of sin and selfishness is blown away and burned. This peace chooses righteousness for its partner; it is not friendly with submission or suppression, false niceness and tamped-down frustration, but with righteousness. Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. And if peace is bound to righteousness with a holy kiss, then that peace must be more than something sugary and sweet. The peace of God must be something that slices through this world like steel, something that is, that has become, that has been spoken, and that cannot be denied.

Look around us and you will see little peace. Where in the world, where in the news, where in our hearts is this kind of peace that passes our understanding? Where is the peace that is born of the generosity and fairness and integrity of which John the Baptist speaks? Where is the peace that this holy season is supposed to bring? These days we feel less like the angels who sang to the shepherds and more

like the poet Longfellow, crying out, “‘There is no peace on earth,’ I said; / ‘For hate is strong, / And mocks the song / Of peace on earth, good-will to men!’” It sometimes seems that the only peace that we can find these days are stolen moments when we shut down the news and watch old Christmas commercials or videos of people helping turtles across the road or rescuing Labrador retrievers from frozen ponds. But this is not peace. This is escape. And peace and escape are not the same thing.

John the Baptist knew this. He knew that the only way to peace is through repentance. He knew that the only way to live the peace that God speaks is to journey to the desert, through the darkness, into the heart of all that is broken within us. When we are courageous enough to do this, we find a lasting, resilient peace, a peace built upon the foundation of God’s righteousness, a peace that is living and active, that bears the light of God’s truth into the world.

The Christian psychiatrist M. Scott Peck once wrote, “There

can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community without vulnerability; there can be no peace, and ultimately no life, without community.” There is, I think, some truth here. You and I are part of a community here, a community built upon the promise of the coming of Christ, a community that in fact calls itself Christ’s own body. That community is bound together by vulnerability, by the ways we allow ourselves to be open to the word spoken by God, to the Word that is coming in Christ, to the broken beauty of ourselves and to the broken beauty of our neighbors. And that kind of vulnerability is a kind of risk, the risk to be present to one another, in all of our joy and pain, and to continue to love, no matter the cost.

In a moment, this community will have the opportunity to speak a word into being, to bear a word spoken by God into the world. Peace, we will say to one another. The peace of the Lord be always with you. The liturgical moment of the peace at Atonement is truly one of the friendliest peaces in all of Christendom. If by the end

of the peace you don’t feel warm and loved and truly welcomed, you’re just not paying attention. But today we are reminded that our speaking this peace is not just a nicety; it’s not like just saying hello or have a lovely day. What we say is far more than just complimenting your neighbor on her Christmas sweater, or even saying how wonderful it is to see someone back in the pews. The peace that we speak here is God’s own peace, borne into the world, made flesh in you and in me. What if this morning we were to risk being vulnerable to that kind of peace? What would it be like to let that word linger there, connecting you to the person next to you, inviting your souls to kiss? Peace. Peace be with you. The world needs us to be brave in this moment, to continue echoing that word God speaks into this moment and into all time. Peace, the peace of God’s own lips, the peace of Christ’s own breath, be with you. Peace, we say, and peace becomes. Peace, we say, and the angels sing. Peace on earth, and goodwill to all.

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