

A Sermon for Christmas 2, Year A  
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## *The Power of Words*

When Laura was five years old, it became clear that she needed to have her tonsils removed. The doctor assured us that the procedure was simple, and that although she'd have a significant sore throat for while, Laura would be good as new in seven to ten days. The procedure took place one morning, it came off without a hitch, and that afternoon, we took Laura home with a prescription for pain medication. Her recovery went just as Peggy and I expected. However, a week after surgery, it was clear that Laura was feeling low. When we asked her about it, she told us that she was tired of having a sore throat. So, we assured her that the worst was past, and that in just a few days more her throat wouldn't hurt any more. To this, she said to us: "It won't?" And her mood brightened immediately. It was at that moment that Peggy and I realized that there was one thing more we should have said to Laura the week before: that is, that the pain wouldn't last forever.

Sometimes words need to be said, and sometimes they don't. Almost always, words can be powerful tools. This morning's gospel hints at the power of words. John's gospel opens with what may be one of the most familiar passages in the Bible:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." *John 1:1*

These words are not only beautiful, they are also interesting, because what gets translated into English as "Word" is the Greek word "logos."

Logos isn't an easy word to describe, because Greek can be so much more complex a language than English. Perhaps the simplest way to define logos is to say that it talks about the *words* and the *actions* of God working together. That is, when God speaks something happens. A good example is found in Genesis 1:3 – "And God *said*, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." The words that God speaks are powerful, creative tools.

Our words are powerful tools as well, and creative as well. With words like "I love you," we can create a community. With words like "I believe in you," we can create dreams and opportunities. And with words like "I think you're beautiful," we can create confidence in people.

But our words can be as destructive as they can be creative. In the past fifteen years, I've have a lot of conversations with people who've been hurt by words spoken, and as often as not, by people they trusted, and by people whose opinion they valued. The damage done by words varied, but sometimes it was truly great. I've known people with real potential brought down with a careless word. Henry Ford once said:

"If you think you can do a thing or think you can't do a thing, you're right." *Henry Ford*

And the difference between thinking we *can* do something and thinking we *can't* do something often comes down to the words we've been told. Whether we believe in ourselves, or don't, will often rest upon what others have told us. So we need to be careful about what we say.

But my wife, Peggy, reminds me that, as powerful as words are, our silence can be just as powerful and just as creative. Just yesterday, my mother called me from Austin, and she was quite upset. She's in her eighties, confined to a wheelchair, and living in a nursing home. Her condition is such that she needs help to do the most basic things. While we talked yesterday, she told me all about her frustration with her physical limitations, and how disappointed she was at the turn her life had taken. Being a man, I wanted to solve her problems with some well-chosen words of advice. But I knew that what she needed from me was someone who would listen to her. And although it's hard to tell about such things, when you're talking on the phone, I think my saying nothing did her some good. Silence, when it is the silence of a listening ear and a caring heart, can be as powerful and creative as anything you might say.

But there are times, indeed many times, when words are needed. But the problem arises when we don't know which words to use. Sometimes we can't know the full scope of what's going on in a person's life, and we don't want to say the wrong things. Thanks be to God, when times like that arise, we can take the advice of Saint Paul:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. *Romans 8:26*

Therefore, when it's clear that someone needs a word of comfort or of hope from us, but we feel helpless to provide it, Saint Paul tells us that we can turn to the Holy Spirit, and allow him to guide us.

As today's reading from John's gospel reminds us, God's words, and our words, can be creative and powerful. And I find it comforting to know that, when the need arises, we can turn to God's Spirit for guidance not only on what to say, but also for guidance to know when to remain silent.

If you're someone who makes resolutions this time of year, perhaps this will be one of them: Resolve to choose your words carefully. If you do so, sometimes you'll find that the best thing to say is absolutely nothing.