

How many of you believe that prayers get answered?  
How would you explain prayer to a kindergartener?  
What's the effect of prayers of thanksgiving?

I believe that words have power. And for that reason, I didn't write this sermon until yesterday. Many of my colleagues wrote on Thursday that the sermon they wrote earlier in the week was useless now. I typically like to walk with the texts through the week, to hear the stories of people in the congregation and let the Holy Spirit raise up a message of faith and encouragement that I can share with you on Sundays. That practice was especially helpful this week.

On Wednesday, there was so much fear and anger and accusation and chaos that I don't think the words I had would be helpful today. Now some of you may think I'm talking about the events in Washington, DC, in this sermon. I am. But I am also talking about what you and I do on days when the news reporters have nothing to talk about. When you think you hear me criticizing one point of view over another, please know this. I believe there is plenty of criticism to go around. On Wednesday, and really every day, the words of Paul to the Romans are appropriate: For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats, police and protestors, media and individuals all have the human tendency to "turn in on ourselves" and hear and see those things that we want to see, that validate our beliefs about how the world works. We are all broken. And if there are five people in a room, there is likely to be ten perspectives on what happened and what needs to be done about it. I said earlier that I believe that words have power. I also believe that our faith in a loving, gracious God also has the power to get us through what we as a nation are facing right now.

In Genesis 1, the creation poem tells us that God spoke order into chaos and creation began. The earth was a formless void, covered with darkness. The first thing God did was to speak to create light. We now call this creation account a poem. It is a type of literature that tells a story that can't adequately capture a reality in words. It's interesting that the writer used the spoken word to describe how it all got started.

It's also just as interesting that light was the first thing the early faith community recognized in creation. In the midst of darkness and chaos (remember that described the earth), light is needed to see what one faces. Until that is known a path forward cannot be discerned.

A few of us here today are "mature" enough to remember the 1960s television series "Get Smart." When the James Bond franchise was starting, Mel Brooks and Buck Henry created a weekly sitcom about secret agents. Maxwell Smart and his sidekick "Agent 99" worked for CONTROL, a secret government counterintelligence agency in Washington, DC. Their goal was to thwart and eventually eliminate KAOS, an international organization of evil. Did you hear that? CONTROL was trying to eliminate KAOS. Would you believe it almost sounds like the creation story in Genesis. That's what we all try to do each day, isn't it, eliminate chaos in our lives and get things under control: that messy desk, the unfinished project, the disagreement with a friend that's keeping the two of you apart. The systematic development of creation, day by day, reflects our own desire for order in our lives. When our lives are filled with disorder, we are typically uncomfortable. For example, our normal order has been disrupted by the pandemic. We've had to find new intentional rhythms to bring order into our lives. Many of us are tired of this disruption because we have to "pivot" so frequently because of new wrinkles in how it's affecting more and more systems in our communities.

One of the ways we assess the impact something has on our lives is by reflecting on what we say about it. The Lutheran pastor who inspired me to become a pastor used to say, "What ever gets your attention, gets you." If we focus on problems and not on possible solutions, our world will close in and get darker. It can become overwhelming.

That's where the gospel lesson today comes in. Mark writes, "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." I want to encourage you to take a moment and think about repentance with me. Some voices in our culture say you have to feel sorry about what you done and ask for forgiveness. That's when Jesus will save you. Those aren't Lutheran voices. Yes, it's important to acknowledge our sins and we often are sorry

for doing them, but we have a different narrative for salvation than the one that has gained traction the past few hundred years.

Lutherans say God saves us through baptism. It often happens before we can feel sorry, or even before we have an inkling of how to control our behavior. We emphasize what Paul wrote in Romans 5:6, When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Lutherans keep the focus on God—because when God says “You are my beloved child” you are God’s beloved child. God isn’t subject to the whims that we are. With that in mind, we have a source of hope, of order, of confidence. Lutherans don’t say I was baptized, but rather I am baptized. And we recall that baptism daily.

How about this way to look at repentance? Repentance is acknowledging that what we are doing isn’t working and asking God to help us try something else. And it means we know that the new approach won’t be perfect, but we trust God to be patient with us and get us closer to what we should be doing.

Carey Neuhoff is a Canadian Pastor who wrote on his blog Thursday, “The culture needs an alternative to itself, not an echo of itself.” Between the pandemic pivots, political disruptions, social conflicts and economic uncertainties, we need a message of peace, of hope, of order. As the Church of the risen Savior, we are called to proclaim a powerful and different narrative in words that can heal our world. Neuhoff suggests we remember that words do create worlds. He has 3 things we can do starting right now to shape a world that is worthy of our savior:

1. Ask what your words will do before you speak them. Ask yourself how what you are about to say helps. You can contribute to life. You can also contribute to death. People listen to what you have to say, and many make decisions about how the world works based on your words. His best advice here: “If it doesn’t help, doesn’t heal, don’t speak or post. Especially if you’re a Christian.”

2. Vent privately, not publicly. If you’re mad, he suggests you write a letter and put it in a drawer, not an envelope or email. It’s normal to have negative feelings in tough situations. By putting them in an unsent letter, you can express them without hurting another person and damaging relationships. Be sure to shred the letter or delete it from your word

processor. His best advice here: “Turn to God with your frustrations about people, because if you don’t turn to God, you’ll turn on them.”

3. Remember that word issues are heart issues. Jesus said that out of our mouths come the things that are in our hearts. Paul knew we had dark places in our hearts and urged the Roman Christians to not be conformed to this world, but be transformed so that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12). Remember that new way to look at repentance? God has made room for us to try something else. It’s called grace. As we bring our words of fear and pain to God in prayer, God replaces them with words of faith and hope through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit may just speak to you through the person sitting next to you or who calls you on the phone. But know this, God will replace the words of pain you give him with words of life that you can share with others.

How might this look in our two ministry sites?

At Bethesda, we are here to make a space for worship

A good space

A space that builds up

A space that listens

A space that hopes

A space that heals

At St. John we are here to Share the Joy of Hope Now

Hope focuses on the positive, not the negative

Hope looks at a future worth working for

Hope moves us together, not apart

Hope lifts up what we can do, not what we fear

Hope gives us time to improve

So just to review, I've talked about the power of words to create worlds, and how our world desperately needs a new narrative, not an echo chamber. I've also shared three suggestions from a Canadian pastor to help us bring a much-needed narrative of hope and order to move us through a time of fear and chaos. And most of all, I hope you've heard a message that the God who claims you as his beloved child is patient and forgiving and will work in your heart to move you to a better way of living.