

Epiphany 4
January 31, 2021
Mark 1: 21-28
Revelation 21:1-6

And the One who was seated on the throne said “See, I am making all things new. Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

It seems as though we have been inundated with words in the last year. The phrase “Breaking News” used over and over again brought us virus numbers and statistics, political campaign updates, voices from Black Lives Matter protests, voting totals, counter-claims, and the stunning shouts of insurrectionists. “Words matter” writers and journalists said, stating the obvious.

I was an English major in college; like many of you, I love to read. Some writer’s words can take your breath away with their poetry, beauty, and poignancy. I love human interest stories that take you out of your own life and vividly into the lives of other people. But at some point last summer I found I couldn’t read certain things--first person accounts of family members saying goodbye to loved ones on FaceTime or graphic descriptions of chaos and death in Emergency Departments. The words were too much and held such pain and fear.

“Words matter.” A good friend of mine was hospitalized with COVID just before Thanksgiving. She was very sick by the time she got there. She told me later that each day she asked, or tried to ask her caregivers “Am I getting better?” The nurses were non-committal--perhaps understandably so with what they have seen. A word of reassurance was so needed and yet not able to be given.

“Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” The verses that we hear today from Revelation come near the end of the book. For many of us, we think of this part of scripture as strange and not very accessible. It’s been used over the centuries to stoke fear and to categorize certain people or nations as enemies of Christ. We don’t understand some of its symbolism or images, but we do know that it was written to be an encouragement to early followers of Jesus who lived under

the oppressive thumb of Rome. The words in an inscription from the time said “Rome always wins.” To that, Revelation says “And yet;” and yet...Jesus is the beginning and the end of all things and will make all things new.

It’s great Lutheran theology to say that we live in that tension between what is and what will be; between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet.’ It’s not just theoretical theology, either, because we live it, don’t we? Every question we ask that begins with “Why doesn’t God?..” is a lived reflection of this tension. Why doesn’t God...stop violence; cure cancer; stop hatred; make us love one another, we ask.

We trust that the crucified and risen Christ loved this world, **and** we also know that the world and our lives are imperfect and broken by pain, sin, and our selfishness. We live with this realistic assessment of ourselves and the world one one hand; and yet, we live with hope.

I wonder if you might be able to think of examples of this that you have experienced maybe sometime during this unusual year, or another time in your life. Those moments or times when you knew the presence and embrace of Christ and also knew there is a promised fullness of that embrace which is still to come. Birth and death inhabit those spaces, but so do smaller moments, like the joy of love, stirring music, the beauty of creation, or the relief of forgiveness. The poetry of Revelation captures this in the vivid image of God, “who will wipe every tear from their eyes,” as does the very concrete encounter that Jesus has in the synagogue today.

This is Jesus’ first healing in Mark’s Gospel. A man has an unclean spirit--which might mean many things--a physical or mental illness which has probably pushed him out of the community. He was different, his behavior was different and it seems, erratic, making others fearful and judgmental. In other places in the gospels, Jesus heals with a touch, but here Jesus just speaks, and the tortured one is made whole again--not only healed but restored in mind, body, and to the people gathered around.

“What is this?” the people ask. Because the healing of one person is one thing--but they recognize, they feel that something greater is happening. With a word, Jesus *enacts* the will of God: an end to the nightmare of pain, hopelessness and separation from God and from one another. On the cross, Jesus will *embody* the will of God, embracing all with the gentle authority of love that never ends--

Words wash over us on a daily basis--emails, social media, voices that all clamor for our attention--many that fuel division, cynicism, and despair. The words of Jesus here in this Gospel are commanding--in other places in scripture they invite, don't they: “Come to me all who are weary,”; and they challenge: “Who of you is without sin?”; and they embrace: “Let the children come to me...”

The words of Christ, says Revelation, are “trustworthy and true”--because they come from the One who dwells with us, the One who speaks healing and hope, the One who defeats death and wipes away tears--giving *us* words to speak, giving us words to *choose* to speak: of reconciliation and mercy, of hope, of grace, and of love.