

Sermon 12-9-18  
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Trinity Lutheran Church  
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### War of Words

Zechariah, a priest of the living God, was serving his term of duty in the Jerusalem temple when an angel of Yahweh appeared to him. The angel Gabriel announced to Zechariah that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would be having a baby, and not just an ordinary baby. The angel said in Luke 1:15-17, "15... 'he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. 16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'"

The only problem was that Elizabeth had never been able to have children and she was now past the age of child bearing. Having accepted that he and Elizabeth would die childless, Zechariah did not want to be disappointed and so he doubted the angel's words to the angel's face. Gabriel responded by striking Zechariah mute and told him he would not be able to speak until the child was born. But the angel gave Zechariah a name for the baby – John.

Elizabeth did conceive. And when the baby was born, the neighbors were gathered to share joy with the couple. Since Zechariah was unable to speak, they proposed naming him after his father. We read in Luke 1:62-65, "62 Then they made signs to his father [Zechariah], to find out what he would like to name the child. 63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John.' 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things." One small aside – notice that Zechariah could write and the neighbors could read. That tells you something about the culture into which Jesus was born.

Once he was again able to speak, Zechariah praised God and sang a psalm that is recorded in the gospel of Luke. Part of the psalm foretells the ministry of John. Luke 1:76-80, "76 'And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, 77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, 78 because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven 79 to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.'" Zechariah's psalm is chock full of allusions to Old Testament Messianic prophecies. The narrative of John's birth concludes this way in Luke 1:80, "And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel."

What exactly does it mean to be filled with God's Spirit from birth? It's a holy union, a connection between Creator and creature that overcomes some of the rebellion we are conceived and born with. To those filled with the Spirit, the Word of God is precious around them and in them.

Whether we realize it or not, everything in creation depends on God's Word. It all exists – we exist – by His Word. God speaks and it is done. Our problem is that we pay attention to and are filled with words that are not God's Word. That's why we live in darkness and the shadow of death. Those filled with God's Spirit, however, are able to operate in God's Word more closely than others. The reason is that being filled with God's Spirit, they are more filled with God's Words.

As I've said before, the main struggle in life is over words. Whose word are you going to believe? Whose words are you filled with? When you're a kid it's your parents' words against your friends'. When you're older it's this fellow worker's word against that one or against management. And with God, it's His word over against most of the other people you know. But think. Who has the real take on reality? Wouldn't it be your Creator, and the Creator of everything around you? Shouldn't His Words fill you?

You might say, "Well, if I could see Him or hear Him, then I could believe His Word." But that's not so. Adam and Eve could both see and hear God. Yet, they listened to and believed the words of the serpent. Jesus came and walked this earth. People could see and hear God. Yet, what happened to Jesus at our hands? Crucifixion.

We've also got tremendous evidence around us of what happens when we don't believe God. Yet, that doesn't seem to make a difference either. For instance, there is the testimony of all who suffered under atheistic communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is the testimony of over 100 million deaths due to communism. Just this week there was an article about all the old housing in Havana that is literally collapsing on people as they sleep because communism can't properly maintain Havana's buildings. And then there's the nightmare of Venezuela and the new concentration camps in China. Yet, even with all the evidence, polling research has found that over 40 percent of our youngest people are in favor of the so-called ideals of communism.

And what about drug addiction? The evidence is plain on the streets and death is all around. Yet, that doesn't stop people from experimenting. Oh. That could never happen to me!

Sin is what it is. The sinful nature is what it is. It's rebellion against our Creator and all His good Word. It's rebellion no matter what it costs us personally or what it costs society. Even if we could see God and hear Him in person, it would make no difference. Rebellion is king.

So, given the power of sin, how is it that God's words written in a book can make any difference? The answer to that riddle resides in the book itself. Jesus said in John 3:3, "... 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'" And in John 3:5, "... 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.'" Referring to Jesus, John the Baptist said in Luke 3:16, "... 'I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy

Spirit and with fire.” And then there’s Romans 10:17, “... faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”

This means that any time the Word of God is preached, any time the Sacraments are administered, any time you read the bible, the power of God can be present with you to receive God’s Word and believe it. Jesus is the baptizer with the Holy Spirit and fire. The Father and the Son have poured out Holy Spirit upon all flesh so the miracle of the new birth can happen. God can fill you with His Word, Jesus, and His Words.

Lord Holy Spirit brings us the new birth in our baptism into Christ through God’s Word. The new birth opens God’s Word to us so that we can understand it, believe it, do it and live it. The power of the new birth and life in God’s Word brings us into a blessed living union with our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. This is the salvation God purposes for every believer for all eternity. It all comes through God’s living Word. Therefore, the power to understand, believe, do and live the Word of God comes from being filled with God’s Holy Spirit.

Now, on the Day of Pentecost 33A.D., Peter proclaimed a new baptism. It wasn’t simply John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We read in Acts 2:38, “Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”

Notice here that there are several things that go together. First is repentance. Second is being baptized into the Name of Jesus the Messiah for the forgiveness of sins. It is Jesus who won victory over sin on the cross. Third is the guarantee of receiving God’s promised Holy Spirit. Now, these words were proclaimed to adult Jews. Three thousand of them were touched by Lord Holy Spirit, repented, were baptized into the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. They then were able to live in the power of God’s gospel Word.

Now, there are still many people in this country who were baptized as infants, although in the present culture and spiritual climate of the U.S. that number is declining. In a valid infant baptism, adults in the family stand in for the child. They repent for the child, renouncing the devil and all his works and ways. They present the child to be baptized into the Name of Jesus the Messiah for the forgiveness of sins. And we believe the promise of Acts 2:38 that Lord Holy Spirit is then given to that child.

But what happens if that child is never taught the Word of God and remains ignorant of it? Or what happens if that child begins to believe the persuasive words of friends who are open rebels against the Word of God? Or what happens if the child is converted to atheism or paganism at the hands of persuasive teachers and professors? The answer is simple. They have come to believe words other than the Word of God. Therefore, if they are ever to come to the truth, if they are ever to come to the union with Him that God’s desires for them, they need to repent. Repentance is giving up all the words that are not God’s Word and the rebellious powers that are in those rebellious words. Repentance is then submitting your life under the power of God’s creative and living Word.

The Jews John the Baptist was preaching to had much the same problem we do. They had the Word of God available to them in the Old Testament. Through

circumcision they were set apart to be God's people. But, there were all these other words in daily life – words of doubt, words of fear, words of evil, and words of rebellion. It was to the people who had fallen prey to these other words that John addressed his message of repentance.

And John didn't preach pleasant words. It didn't bother him if people left his church feeling bad or angry with him. He knew they would be relieved if they repented and believed God's Word instead of the devil's clever lies. But if they wouldn't repent, then, as far as he was concerned, they should go home discomfited. That's why he could start a sermon, "Good morning, you brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee here to me from the coming wrath of God?"

It's good, right and true to preach repentance. God knows that we need to be set free from all the rebellious and evil words we have accumulated in our lives. Our problem is that we've lived so long believing rebellious and evil words that we can't identify them for what they are. This is what the preaching of God's law does. It identifies the rebellion against God in us. It identifies all the ways in thought, word and deed that we despise God's ways. Preaching of the Law makes us conscious of our rebellion against God and identifies it in our lives.

The preaching of the Gospel then gives us good news. We don't have to live in the grip of evil words of rebellion. On the cross Jesus won the victory over rebellious words forever. Therefore, when Jesus returns, the devil and all his rebellious words will be removed forever from the reality God has planned for His saints. God will be able to live directly with His purified people and they with Him.

But in the meantime all baptized and believing Christians are in a war of words. God's Law identifies for us all the rebellious and evil words the enemy plants in our hearts and minds. Christ's Gospel identifies the healing words of promise and forgiveness God speaks over all He leads into repentance from their rebellion. Lord Holy Spirit leads us in glorious Words of life.

You've probably heard it said that, "we are what we eat." There is a far greater truth than this. Truly, we are what we believe. If by the sinful nature we believe the devil's lies, then that is the power under which we live. On the other hand, if by Lord Holy Spirit we believe God's truth in Jesus Christ, then that is the power under which we not only live this life, but will live forever.

God is most gracious. We have no power over sin or the sinful nature. But Yahweh does. And He graciously exercises His power through His Spirit in the lives of all those who would be released in repentance from the darkness of their rebellion so that they might live in the light of God's truth. God can exercise His power in us because Jesus was born into this world, obediently suffered, died and was resurrected in this world to win God's victory over our rebellion once for all. Baptized into Jesus, we are given the new birth. And in this new birth we receive an entirely different way to live – by faith in God's life-giving Words to us, and not faith in rebellious words. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.