

# WHAT'S THE WORD?

Sermon, December 29, 2019  
The First Sunday of Christmas  
Texts: Isaiah 8:19 – 9:7; John 1:1-14

"You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend." Psalm 88:18

That verse from Psalm 88 may strike a poignant chord with any of you who've experienced bereavement and/or loss of loved ones. The verse also calls to mind the opening line of a song which rose to the top of the charts on both sides of the Atlantic in 1966 (*yes, it was that long ago, 1966*) that began, *"Hello Darkness, my old friend. I've come to talk with you again ... because a vision soft-ly creeping, left its seeds while I was sleeping, and the vision that was planted in my brain still remains within the sounds of silence."* Again, I know I'm a product of my generation, so I don't expect all of you to have familiarity with these words, but I can see many of you also know the song; I could see your lips moving as I recited the lyrics ... it's Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sounds of Silence."

Darkness was also a close friend of many at the time of Isaiah's prophecy. It was a dark time; there was oppression, their lives were disrupted, there was the prospect of war, people were being separated from home and family. This was the context into which Isaiah wrote and spoke the familiar words we use as a Call to Worship each Christmas Eve: *"The people who walked In darkness have seen a great light, those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder. And His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince Of Peace."* For Isaiah, there was a divine vision " ... *that was soft-ly creeping,*" creeping into his consciousness, allowing him to see with a prophet's eye what others at the time could not see and making it possible for him to speak into the darkness a WORD concerning Light and Hope.

The people of Isaiah's time knew they needed help. They needed light in their darkness. They needed hope in their despair. Unfortunately, they apparently went to the wrong places for these things. Just before this prophetic words read every Christmas in chapter 9, we read in chapter 8: *"When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists and wizards who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the Law and to the testimony! If they do not live according to this WORD, they have no light ... they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness."* The Revised Standard Version translates *"whisper and mutter"* as *"chirp and mutter."* Interestingly, this phrase is also translated as *"chirping and twittering."* So, Twittering was on the scene 'way back then!

You might say the people were bowing and praying not *"... to the neon god they made"* as in Simon and Garfunkel's lyrics, but they were bowing and praying to the lifeless gods they made. Instead of turning to the "testimony of God," to a WORD that is characterized by clarity and authority and simplicity, they decided that they'll listen to the gibberish of sorcerers and conjurers (*and advice columnists and talk show hosts*) which only served to drive them further into darkness and misery. It is in those circumstances that Isaiah declares hope for the people. God's answer to the dark dilemmas of life, THEN AND NOW, is His WORD, and as John tells us in the prologue to his gospel, that WORD, that full expression of God's will and testimony, is made flesh in the person of His Son, this Child who "unto us is born." Now, please hold that thought for a moment.

Bernard Levin was a well known British author, broadcaster, and journalist (*he retired in the early eighties*).<sup>1</sup> He once told the story of how, when he was a small boy, a great celebrity came to visit his school. The celebrity wanted to have a dialogue with one of the students, so the headmaster of the school called the young Levin to the stage in front of the whole student body. The great celebrity asked the little boy what he'd had for breakfast. *"Matzo brei,"* replied the young Bernard. He was the child of Ukrainian Jewish immigrants; his mother made matzo brei, which is a common central European Jewish dish made of eggs fried with matzo wafers, brown sugar, and cinnamon. To young Bernard, matzo brei was a perfectly ordinary word for a perfectly ordinary meal and a perfectly truthful and simple answer to the celebrity's question.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard\\_Levin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard_Levin)

<sup>2</sup> This story and some of the subsequent illustration is from Bishop of Durham N.T. Wright, adapted from parts of his Christmas 2005 sermon, delivered at the Cathedral Church of Christ. <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/03/29/what-is-this-word>

But the celebrity was ignorant of such cuisine; he didn't understand what the boy said. So he repeated his question, "WHAT did you have for breakfast?" The young Bernard, now puzzled and a little anxious, gave the same answer ... matzo brei. The celebrity glanced over at the headmaster, whispering: "What's he saying? What's the word?" The headmaster, adopting a condescending there-there-little-man tone, said to the boy, "Now, now, tell our guest what you had for breakfast." Nervous, not knowing what he'd done wrong, and wanting to burst into tears, the young Bernard said once more the only answer he could honestly give: "Matzo brei!" After an exchange of awkward glances between the headmaster and the celebrity, the terrified little boy was sent back to his place. For him it was a horrible ordeal.

In this little drama we have a child's word, a clear word, a simple word spoken to uncomprehending men, a word for a sustenance of which these educated adults were unaware. In short, a Jewish word, spoken to an uncomprehending audience. If you think about it, this sounds like a script written by John! *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... and the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it; and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him; He came to that which was His own, and His own did not receive Him."*

In this prologue John is saying two things (*about two hundred things, actually, but I'll focus on just two*): First, that the Incarnation of the eternal Word was the event which the people of God had long been waiting for; second, the people were quite unready for it when it transpired. Like the celebrity and headmaster hearing a little boy speaking truth in a language they didn't understand, Jew and Gentile alike cast anxious glances at one another upon hearing of this strange Word. In John's literary style, he describes what happens as it all plays out. He comes to His own, and His own don't receive Him. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't get it; it doesn't comprehend it. He speaks the truth in plain and simple words, like the little boy saying what he had for breakfast, and many people, uncomprehending, can't decide whether He's wacky, or weird, or both.

John's prologue sets the theme for the subsequent chapters of his gospel. Each scene that John portrays ... for example, the call of the first disciples, the cleansing of the Temple, changing of water into wine, the confrontation with Pilate, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection ... John means for his readers to look at these scenes and think to themselves: *"This is what it looks like when the Word becomes flesh. Look at this man of flesh and learn to see the living God!"* The Living Word speaks living words throughout John's gospel, and the reaction is often the same. *"This is a hard word,"* say His followers when He tells them that He is the bread come down from heaven (*John 6:60*). *"What is this word?"* asks the puzzled crowd in Jerusalem (*John 7:36*). In *John 8:31-32*, *"If you abide in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free,"* *John 8:37*, *"My word finds no place in you, because you can't (or won't) hear it"* (*John 8:37, 43*). In *John 12:48*, Jesus insists, as the crowds reject Him *"The word I spoke will be their judge on the last day,"* And John tells us when Pontius Pilate hears the Word, he is afraid, since the word in question is Jesus' claim to be the Son of God (*John 19:8*).

According to John, Christmas isn't only about fulfilled hope, love, peace and joy. It's also about incomprehension, rejection, darkness, denial, stopped ears, and judgment. It's about people loving darkness rather than light. John's Gospel isn't about Jesus speaking the truth and everyone saying *"Of course! Why didn't we realize it before?"* It is about God shining a bright torch of light and life and truth into the darkness of our world, and the darkness not comprehending it. It's about God, God in human flesh, speaking words of truth, and people not knowing what He's talking about. However, along with John's theme of incomprehension and rejection is a parallel theme of grace, a theme of people who do hear and receive and believe the WORD, of people hearing and receiving and believing the WORD's words ... discovering, as Jesus says, that His words really are life and spirit and hope and love and joy and peace. *"Yet to all who received Him, to all who believed on His name, He gave the right to become God's children, children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."*

What's the WORD for Christmas? What's the WORD as we enter a new year? It's the WORD that brings illumination, liberation and celebration through incarnation ... the WORD that brings *illumination* in our darkness, an illumination that will lead to *liberation*, setting people free, and that liberation leading to *celebration*, and all of that is wrapped up in the hope and the reality of the *Incarnation*, the Word made flesh.