

Where Justice Gets Done, Words Matter  
2 Kings 22:1-10 & 14-20, 23:1-3  
First Sunday in Advent  
Dec. 1, 2019  
Rev. Dr. Marcia Bailey, preaching

How many of you remember this saying from when you were a kid: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names/words can never hurt me?” I remember thinking that that was the *dumbest* saying; it just isn’t true! It was our comeback when someone was picking on us, particularly calling us names. It was supposed to communicate how ineffectual name-calling was, how indifferent we were to its effects on our spirits. How many of you remember being verbally picked on? How many of you remember a name you were called that was hurtful or you didn’t like? What’s crazy about this saying is not only that it didn’t usually do anything to stop the taunting, but even as a kid I knew it just wasn’t true. Words *do* hurt. And while the bumps and bruises “sticks and stones”, now unfortunately replaced by guns and bullets, might have had on our bodies eventually healed, for many the deep wounds inflicted on our minds and spirits took much longer, if they ever healed at all. Words *do* matter and as we begin this Advent season thinking together about how the world changes when justice comes, we consider just how important words are to wellbeing and the healing and wholeness of the world.

Words matter. They matter on the playground, school bus and classroom. They matter on our jobs and in our relationships with partners, kids, family members, neighbors. Words matter on the bus and train, in the mall and over coffee. Words matter because they have power: the power to build up and the power to tear down. The power to heal and the power to wound. The power to express solidarity and the power to divide. The power to show love and the

power to show hate. Words, consciously or not, reveal our values and beliefs, about ourselves, about others and about God.

Josiah was only 8 years old when he became king! But by the time he was in his twenties, he was ruling on his own. It helps to remember that the two kingdoms had been divided. Israel, in the north, had already fallen to the Assyrians. The southern kingdom of Judah remained, but under the leadership of unfaithful kings it had wandered far from the covenant with God. Idol worship was the expression of the day; shrines, statues, offering and idols were everywhere, and no one cared that the Temple was in disarray. Josiah begins to make his mark by ordering the high priest to resume work on the Temple, entrusting to the craftspeople the financial resources needed to get the job done. No accounting was necessary, says Josiah, evidently because he trusted them. And so, he sets out to refocus the people and the nation to realign themselves with God.

In the midst of this action, the writer tells us of a discovery: a “book” has been found, perhaps in the restoration process. It most likely would have been a scroll of the Deuteronomist. The priest gives it to the secretary, who reads it himself and then to the king. And we are told that when the “king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes.” (vs 11) Surely this was not “good news”!

It’s clear here that words matter. On the word of the King, the workers were given money to complete their jobs, no questions asked. This says something about the power Josiah had to direct where the money went, as well as the evident confidence he places in the workers. But

then consider Josiah's response when he heard the words of the recently discovered book; if he "tore his clothes" then it's clear that those words brought him great grief and concern.

It's likely that the words in the book reminded whoever read it of the consequences of not being faithful to God. The later part of Deuteronomy has more than one admonition to obey followed by vivid descriptions of what would happen to those who did not. Presumably, Josiah is convicted here of punishment which will ensue for his kingdom; he sends the book to the Prophetess Huldah for her verification. He has to be sure that these words are true.

And indeed, they are. Huldah affirms that God will "bring disaster" on those who "made offerings to other Gods." But, for Josiah, because he has heard these words and has sought mercy, he will "be gathered to his ancestors in peace." She promises that he won't live to see the disaster God will bring on "this place."

Words mattered in this text! Josiah's words started the rebuilding of the Temple. The words of the Prophet Huldah compelled Josiah to begin a relentless campaign to purge his nation of the wickedness and idolatry that had consumed it. The rest of the text tells of the persistence of Josiah's efforts to find and destroy any and all who diverged from the path of God and his restoration of the commemoration of the Passover, a powerful reconnection with the words and acts of justice and freedom for their people. Words mattered when Josiah gathered *all* the people, read the book to them and then made a covenant with God-- a lasting promise that they would "follow the Lord, keeping God's commandments, God's decrees, God's statutes, with all [their] heart and with all [their] soul to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book." Everyone joined in.

Words matter in the cause of justice. It's all too tempting so say, "oh she was just blowing off steam" or "he doesn't know any better" when someone defames another or uses racist, sexist, or ageist language. "They didn't really mean it," we excuse. But the fact is, they *said* it! And unleashing our projections and fears and ignorance and hatred *is damaging* in ways we need to seriously consider in this age of over-communication if we are to take seriously the work of justice in our society.

It is damaging every time national leaders take to Twitter and Instagram to belittle and berate one another. It's damaging every time scientific facts are replaced by fallacies. It's damaging when we start "cancelling" people because of their past indiscretions. It's damaging when we fail to recognize each other's humanity by calling each other names that dehumanize and distance others from ourselves.

It happens when we label people by inappropriate pronouns, racial slurs and slang; when we call each other 'stupid' or "lazy" or "dumb". Words matter when we expect women to assume their included when we call all people "mankind" and when we blame the poor for their poverty, African Americans for their systemic oppression, Native Americans for defending themselves, Latinx for speaking another language. We who wait for the advent of the Christ need to "watch our language"; what we say matters for the coming of God's reign.

Maybe you were told that, too, as a child: "watch your language." What does that mean for us now? What does it mean for when justice comes? It means that we who seek to be bearers of God in the world need to be attentive, to ourselves and to those around us, advocating for speech and written language that includes and uplifts, that builds relationship and opportunity, that opens and invites people to live into their fullness as images of God. Justice demands

inclusion; it requires the opportunity for all people to experience respect and dignity. It requires us hearing what we may not want to hear (like Josiah) and then taking responsibility for righting the wrongs of our communities in order that justice might take root and flourish. (again, like Josiah!). It asks us to make space for those whose words have been silenced, left out of the conversation, talked over, ignored. It asks us to listen attentively to others, to what it both said and left unsaid; to ask questions with an inquiring, learning heart and to take in without speaking—thereby truly hearing---the pain and hurt, the wounds and potential of those who have been marginalized by our own privilege, our own verbiage, our own writing.

When justice gets done, words matter. We will be sensitive and inclusive; we will be advocates and one's who accompany others. When justice gets done, we will be thoughtful speakers, active listeners, proactive doers. As we enter the Advent season, make way for justice. Be mindful of your own words and the words of others. Speak and write as if it matters, not only to you but to everyone who is not you, not like you. Prepare the way, starting with yourself.

We come to this table, so graced with words of welcome, words of inclusion, words of mercy and of hope. Hear them for yourself; may they be a balm to the wounding words past and present, and may they be a model for your own words today and moving forward. Where justice gets done, words matter. In this be the season we begin to speak words of new life.

