

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 7, 2021; Year B
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud
Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22; Psalm 19

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, *
O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.*

When I was about 12 years old—so in 1969, perhaps, our Episcopal Church in Reno, Nevada hosted a seminarian for the summer. His name was Bob, and he was in his mid-twenties, and of course, I thought he was very cute! This was the summer before his last year in seminary—so he still had a way to go before ordination. I remember his first sermon that summer, because the prayer that I just offered is the prayer that Bob offered that morning, and that was the first time I had heard it. I was beginning to wonder if I saw ordination in my future, although since the church did not yet ordain women, it was pretty hard to picture.

Bob stood up in the pulpit and offered this prayer: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, *O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.* And I thought, “How beautiful! I could definitely pray that prayer.” I did not yet know that Bob was praying by quoting Psalm 19. The first time I preached—several years before I was ordained, I offered the same verse from Psalm 19, and remembered Bob, and his first sermon.

I tell you this little story because I think that words are important. This prayer moved me. And also, relationships are important. Even though the last time I saw that young man was on the day of his ordination to the diaconate, some 50 years ago, his public prayer in the presence of me and all the people that I went to church with back in my childhood—Bob’s prayer helped me to form a vision of how God might see me, and how I might see myself.

Words are important. And words spoken by those whom we love and care about are even more important.

20 or so years after that sermon, I was the mother of three little children, and one day, one of them did something mildly naughty and definitely disruptive, and I said, “Hey! Don’t be such a fool!” And the dear lady who was there to clean my house shook her finger at me. “Nancy! Don’t ever call him a fool! He will remember forever what his mother thinks of him today!” And oh, how I thank God for Inez, who taught me a thing or two about mothering that day.

Words are important, and words spoken by those who love us are even more important.

One more story. About 35 years after I first heard Bob preach, and about 15 years after Inez taught me about mothering, I was ordained. It was, and continues to be, very satisfying to live into this particular vision of myself. And it continues to be a spiritual challenge to live into what I discern may be God’s vision for me.

From the moment of my ordination to today, I am often asked a question that begins with a statement: “A woman priest! Cool! So, what should I call you?” My answer has been pretty much the same for the last 16 years: “Please call me Nancy. If you would like to use

a title, I prefer Mother. So, Mother Nancy.” I cannot tell you the number of people who respond to my response by saying, “Okay, Reverend.” And invariably I think, “Then why did you ask?” But I almost always hold my tongue. I don’t respond with that snark out loud—because I remember my old friend Bob, who offered a prayer before speaking in public. And I remember my old friend Inez, who taught me that people will remember what I think of them based on what I say to them.

Words are important, and words spoken to those whom we love are often remembered even when our actions are not.

So, what are we to do with the words spoken in our Holy Scripture today? Twice today we have heard the Ten Commandments. First, we prayed them, and then we heard them read as a lesson. Those two versions were recitations of the same Biblical text—but the words in English are different—because they were translated in different decades of the 20th century. And some of those words are hard to hear in this decade of the 21st century. And words are important.

God spoke all these words, we are told. And then we hear God say, *I, the Lord your God am I jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents*. And I think, well, that doesn’t sound like the God of love. I will get really cranky if I am punished for my parents’ sins. I have enough to worry about with my own sins, after all. But the reader has moved on and I hear, *you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife*. And I think, well, no problem there, but some people might actually covet a woman who is married to someone else, so am I off the hook? Or does this imply that I cannot covet my neighbor’s husband, even though God doesn’t say it?

Friends, words are important! And these are words spoken by God! *You shall not covet your neighbor’s . . . male or female slave. . . or anything that belongs to your neighbor*. Words are important—and so is context. People do not belong to people. Slavery is wrong. But there were different cultural norms about possessions and slavery when God was speaking to Moses than when God speaks to us today. And the language in which these texts were first written was different and has been translated with different words through the millennia.

So, words are important, yes! But so is *meaning*. What did God mean those thousands of years ago, back when God actually spoke in the language of a people who were living the way they lived? What did God mean then—and if these writings are truly holy—if this is Scripture that has been set apart for us to let us know how much we are loved by God, how are we to interpret them today?

One more story. When my oldest child was 12 years old, I got a call from her godmother. “I have volunteered to teach Bible School,” she said. “I was wondering if Julia would like to come visit me for a week and help me out.” I believe that the invitation also included tickets to the Kennedy Center and the promise of dinner in a restaurant. So, off she went.

A week later, Julia was home, full of stories about her time away. When I asked about Bible School, she said that it was great—the kids were cute—and she had fun with her godmother—but! “Mommy! We sang the most dreadful song! It was about the B-I-B-L-E, and how we stand alone on the Word of God. Mom! I can’t understand that stuff by myself! I *need* to stand with the whole community, right?”

And even though I knew then (and Julia knows now) that the little ditty she found so offensive was really about Martin Luther declaring that no one of us needs a priest or a

bishop or even a parent to get between us and our relationship with God—even so, I also know that words need context, and understanding, and that words shape us!

In our Gospel today, John is writing to a community of Jesus-followers some 60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. John constantly refers to “the Jews” in a way that sounds harsh and offensive to my ear. After all, I was shaped by the woman who taught me not to call my three-year-old a fool for fear he would believe it. All these millennia later, we don’t know who John is referring to when he says, “the Jews.” Jesus himself was a Jew. John was a Jew before the resurrection and subsequent spiritual life of those who followed the Way of Jesus had created a new religion.

John could have meant: the religious authorities, or the people who were irritated by Jesus’ preaching. It’s also possible that John’s community in the year 90 was being persecuted by a Jewish community—and his irritation at that colored his writing. One thing we know for sure is that John was not writing about 21st century Jews and how people who follow that religion and people who follow Jesus ought to consider one another today. In our cultural expression, I would say that John is using “othering language.” It sounds like he is saying that WE are better than THEM. And that is just plain wrong.

All human beings are created through the love of God, and by the love of God, and for the love of God. If you hear no other words today, please hear these. **All human beings are created through the love of God, and by the love of God, and for the love of God.** And the truth is, that even though most of you are not here in the same room with me, I know many of you who are hearing this sermon today—and I trust that you already know and believe this about God.

And so, together as a community, we dig deep into what these holy texts mean to God, and what they mean to us. John tells us a story of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. This is interesting, because Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that this story happened just before Jesus was crucified. But words and context were just as important to John as they are to us. And it is really important to John to let us know early on—in just the second chapter of his story, that human death does not have the last word. Jesus will suffer. Jesus will die. When Jesus cleanses the temple, Jesus is preparing himself for what God is calling him to do. (It’s not a huge surprise that Jesus shows anger. Getting ready for what was to come must have been gruesomely difficult.) Jesus’ own body will become the temple—the house of God—for all of us who love God.

Before John even had a chance to write it down, Paul, another follower of Jesus, called the whole thing foolish—and called us who follow Jesus fools. He included himself, by the way. And he doesn’t mean the same thing that the harassed mother at the end of the 20th century meant. Paul means that God’s foolishness is to love us—disobedient, and unloving, and power hungry as we are. *For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.*

Words matter but understanding matters even more. And to truly understand the ancient wisdom of Holy Scripture, we need to stand with one another. We need to struggle over these texts together. We need to remember what we have heard from those who love us. And we need to remember what we have heard from those whom we love. *God spoke these words* to show us that we are loved and to call us to love one another in Jesus’ name.

And so we pray, *Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable in your sight, * O LORD, our strength and our redeemer.*