

The Rev. Smokey Oates

Quote Lk 3:2b-3.

The English language has a lush vocabulary of about 600,000 living words and a few hundred thousand more in various stages of oblivion, according to a lexicographer's research reported in Atlantic Monthly a few years ago.

We have borrowed heavily to get our words.

From Arabic we get the words: cork, alcohol, magazine;

from Dutch: golf, uproar, wagon;

from the Italian: balcony, duet, granite, umbrella;

from Persian: check, lemon, paradise, spinach;

from Greek: acrobat, magic, catastrophe;

from Spanish: canyon, mosquito, alligator;

and from the American Indian: chipmunk, chocolate, potato.

People have given their names to words, giving their names a certain endurance. The fragments of an exploding shell are named after Henry Shrapnel, an English artilleryman under Wellington. Poinsettias are named after an American ambassador to Mexico, Robert Joel Poinsett, who brought the beautiful Mexican flower back to his South Carolina home.

The watts in our ceiling lights are named after James Watts, a Scottish instrument maker.

Although our language has over half a million words, the average person has a hard-core vocabulary of 1,000 words. In addition, there are another 500 words a person knows but seldom uses. What's surprising, according to the lexicographer, is this: half of everything we say or read may be accounted for by only 43 words; and ¼ of all spoken and written English requires only 9 words!

We may find such a claim doubtful, but the writer of the article proved it for himself. At random, he selected an assortment of texts from around his house: everything from Alice in Wonderland to an auto warranty, from the Ritz-Carlton Cookbook to the Boy Scout oath. He subjected these to a methodical and somewhat skeptical investigation, only to find that even this random sample proved the point— more than ¼ of all the texts consisted of 9 little words: and, be, have, it, of, the, to, will, you. That's it. When you think about it, it's remarkable how much reality can be compressed and preserved in such small margins. Of course, some words are more important than others.

Quote Lk 3: 2b-3.

Last night I did some doodling and figured out that so far in my ordained ministry, I've preached about 28,000 words. I can't help wondering sometimes whether any of those words have had any lasting value, whether they made any difference. I'm not fishing for compliments nor am I asking for any "constructive feedback." I'm simply offering a confession: most preachers, I suspect, have similar feelings now and then. So much of our preaching seems to go in one ear and out the other, at least when you ponder the actions you see in the lives of the ones who heard. And, for that matter, we preachers don't always act like we recall much of it ourselves.

I'm reminded of a preacher who struggled with just this issue:

An old country preacher had a teenage son who, since his birth, had heard many a fine sermon. He was an older teen, and his father was aware that it was getting to be the time the boy should give some thought to choosing a profession.

Like many young men, the boy didn't really know what he wanted to do, and he didn't seem too concerned about it. One day, while the boy was away at school, his preacher father decided to try an experiment. He went into the boy's room and placed on his study table 3 objects: a Bible, a silver dollar, and a bottle of whiskey.

“I’ll just hide behind the door,” the old preacher said to himself, “and when he comes home from school here directly, I’ll see which object he picks up. If it’s the Bible, he’s going to be a preacher like me, and what a blessing that would be! If he picks up the silver dollar, he’s going to be a businessman, and that would be okay, too. But if he picks up the bottle, he’s going to be a no-good drunkard, and, Lord, what a shame that would be.”

The old man waited anxiously, and soon heard his son’s footsteps as he entered the house whistling and headed for his room. He tossed his book bag on the bed, and as he turned to leave the room he spotted the objects on the table. With curiosity in his eye, he walked over to inspect them.

Finally, he picked up the Bible and placed it under his arm. He picked up the dollar coin and dropped it into his pocket. And he uncorked the bottle and took a big drink.

“Lord have mercy,” the old man whispered, “he’s gonna be a congressman!”

Quote Lk 3: 2b-3.

In the time of John, the word a person spoke was thought to be an extension of that person. That same thinking applied to God. When people

thought about how God's will was to be made known, it was assumed that God literally had to speak his will. For the invisible God to be heard in the physical world, the "word of the Lord" had to be transmitted from the mouths of people – holy people or prophets elected to speak the Divine will. John is grasped by this "word of God." The vision seizes him, impassions him, and does what visions are supposed to do: that is, impels him to action. So John leaves his isolation in the wilderness and sets out to call his world to a new way of being – God's way of being, living Kingdom values as found in the 10 Commandments and the Summary of the Law – through the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

This is also our way of being, which we're being called to set out for in faith this Advent. We're called to leave the land of our bondage – old sins, old grudges, old regrets, to set sail for our true destination: the Kingdom of God.

But mark my words: Advent, this season about the coming of Christ as judge, as infant, and into our lives daily, belongs to the dissatisfied. Advent, deep down, means most to the ill-at-ease. Only the unfulfilled: those disquieted by their exiled condition from their holy home; those who heed the holy summons to pilgrimage;

those who see that without God, they are without vision in their lives and hence without hope;

those for whom life seems to be unwinding in quiet desperation;

those who recognize that they are alienated from God and from one another;

those who are frantically searching for meaning and purpose in all the wrong places,

only such as these who, like the Prodigal Son, “come to” themselves, yearn for a new reality. Only the discontented are looking for a new destination, a new dispensation.

A “promised land” means hope only to the displaced. Return and redemption are empty images to the full and protected, the satisfied and content. Jesus spoke words about this when he said: “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God” (Mk 10:23).

Advent is for everyone; but only the sharp-eared obedient leave the shore and venture on the journey. Maurice Friedman makes the point in a little Hasidic tale:

Once the Kotzer rebbe surprised a group of learned men by asking, “Where is the dwelling place of God?”

“What a thing to ask!” They laughed at him. “Is not the whole world full of God’s glory!”

But the Kotzer rebbe said, “God dwells wherever people let him in.”

Quote Lk 3: 2b-3. Extraordinary words then...and now.