

**Epiphany +4B/January 29, 2012**

*Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ*

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111

I Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

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In the movie *Bedtime Stories*<sup>1</sup> Adam Sandler plays Skeeter, a man whose father raised him on healthy dose of lively, imaginative bedtime stories. When, as an adult, Skeeter is called upon to babysit for his niece and nephew, he draws from that deep well of experience to provide delightfully surprising entertainment for the kids. It is the children, however, who end up surprising Uncle Skeeter, for when Skeeter's story endings fail to satisfy, the children create story endings of their own... stories which come true in Skeeter's life the very next day. Gumballs fall from the sky, Skeeter saves a damsel in distress, and Skeeter and the maiden escape a rainstorm by fleeing into a magical cave which has Abraham Lincoln in it.

Children are somehow born knowing the power of words to create reality. They inhabit a world filled with magical beings and wonderous creatures. A simple tent made from sofa cushions and blankets becomes an enchanted castle... A fallen log in the forest becomes a mighty steed... A simple stream becomes a raging river.

It is only as we age, it would seem, that words lose their power to create wonderful new realities. Oh, sure, we continue to read fiction novels and allow the words to dance around in our heads, to create mental pictures of what could be, but

we stop believing that what we can imagine can really happen. “Maturity,” as we call it, dictates that we leave behind childish things and live in the “real world.”

We adults live in a world of words. Words are all around us – words on TV, words on the radio, spoken words by family and friends, words printed in newspapers, books, on computers, and words on the Internet. The world of words has turned us into a people who have been overwhelmed, suffocated, and buried in the mounting pile of words. With so many words around us, words tend to lose their meaning, they become unimportant, they no longer have any real value or influence in life.

Case in point: A New York columnist set out to prove that no one really listened to what anyone said at a cocktail party. When he was invited to such a party, he always would arrive late. When he arrived and was greeted by the hostess he would explain why he was late: “I had to stop for a moment and murder my mistress, and it took longer than I thought.” Without blinking an eye, the hostess said she understood perfectly. “I was almost late myself,” she said, “Everyone is quite busy. Enjoy yourself. Have a good time.”

As he mingled around the party, someone asked the journalist what he did for a living. “Oh, I’m the executioner for the State Penitentiary.” The person continued, “Well, that must be an interesting line of work How does business look this year?”

We are caught up in a maelstrom of words. More and more words seem to mean less and less. For instance, you and I can both read the same book and come to completely different conclusions as to what all those words on the page mean. We can listen to the same speech, and both have heard completely different – and sometimes contradictory – messages. The author’s intent is not important, we say; what’s important is how we each, individually, interact with the words. There is no more objective meaning, no more objective reality, no more objective truth. Truth is only what each of us, individually, declare is truth and is authoritative for our own lives. All truth claims are relativistic – everything in the world is subjective and open for debate. There are no more ultimate authorities; the self is the ultimate authority.

And yet, is that true? Is there no single, objective truth which pertains to all?

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Last week we heard the story of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. He called the first disciples, and began to preach around Galilee, saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

[Mark 1:15]

Today's Gospel text centers around Jesus teaching and preaching in Capernaum. We're told that Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. We're also told that the people "were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." [Mark 1:22]

The scribes in Jesus' day were originally people who copied the scriptures – they inhabited a world crammed full of words. Through their work they became experts in the law, possessing an encyclopedic knowledge the scripture and tradition. Their teaching usually consisted of reciting the opinion of many rabbis on a given topic. The scribes could recite forth words all day long, but the only authority they had came from their ability to recite the tradition that had gone before them.

We're told that Jesus' teaching had authority, in contrast to the teaching of the scribes. We're not told, however, exactly *what* Jesus taught. What was the content of Jesus' teaching? We don't know.

There's a reason we're not told *what* Jesus taught – it wasn't so much about *what* Jesus taught, the words he said, as it was about how he taught. We're told that he taught *with* authority.

We, as readers of the Gospel, know from whence Jesus got his authority, what made his teaching special. We know something that those people listening in the synagogue didn't know. *We know that Jesus' teaching had authority not because of what he taught, but because of who he is: the Holy One of God.* He had authority, the authority of God himself. John's gospel says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." [John 1:1, 14]

Jesus' authority is borne out by what happens immediately after his teaching: He is confronted by a man with an unclean spirit. Jesus speaks, and something happens. Jesus speaks, and the unclean spirit leaves the man. Jesus' authority is borne out, because when he speaks, things happen. Jesus' words have the power to create reality.

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In this postmodern world where people believe there is no absolute truth – where people no longer trust authority and reject any institution which claims to have the truth<sup>2</sup> – Christianity is an anachronism: it doesn't fit with the *zeitgeist*, the spirit and mood of our era.

Is it possible, however, that even in our postmodern age, some words do have special meaning and authority? That some words have the power to create and convey reality – a reality that is the same for me as it is for you, and you, and you?

The more and more that postmodernism attempts to deconstruct reality as we know it, the more and more fervently ought we to cling to the power of the Word present in the scripture. While the sands of meaning are constantly shifting underneath our feet, and authorities and institutions crumble all around, the Word of the Gospel is unchanging.

In this world of words, there is one clear, loud, gracious word which stands out against all others, a word that has the power to create reality – that is Jesus' word of grace in our lives, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." With these simple words, new possibilities are created, a new world is opened to us, a reality in which we are forgiven and loved children of God, redeemed by the power of the Word.

Blessed be his name forever. Amen.

<1,314 words>

<sup>1</sup> Adam Shankman, Director, *Bedtime Stories*, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *The Postmodern World*, [http://followingjesus.org/invitation/postmodern\\_world.htm](http://followingjesus.org/invitation/postmodern_world.htm), downloaded 1/28/12.

*For futher reading:* N.T. Wright, *The Bible for the Post Modern World*, [http://www.biblicaltheology.ca/blue\\_files/The%20Bible%20for%20the%20Post%20Modern%20World.pdf](http://www.biblicaltheology.ca/blue_files/The%20Bible%20for%20the%20Post%20Modern%20World.pdf);

Matt Powell, *Sola Scriptura in the Postmodern World*, <http://wheatchaff.blogspot.com/2004/10/sola-scriptura-in-postmodern-world.html>; *Postmodernism* in Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernism>.