

When No Words are Needed

(John 1:1-18)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
The First Sunday after Christmas, December 30, 2018

In the name of the one God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.

Excluding the four verses added on to the end of this morning's reading from John, this is the same passage included in the lectionary selections for Christmas morning. And on that morning I preached from this passage about the power of words – and how, to paraphrase and abbreviate the words of the Swiss educator Jean-Baptiste Girard, we move from word to life.

Since that day, I have had more time to reflect on the many ways in which God is revealed to us ... through words, of course, but in other ways as well. I have done so based on two particular things: an experience I had on our family vacation and on a verse from today's Gospel reading.

First, my experience. A few days ago, while the girls were enjoying some down time in the hotel swimming pool, I decided to head out for a walk around the neighborhood. Just a short walk up the street from where we were staying is the beautiful St. Paul Cathedral, the mother church of the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh built in 1906. It was late in the day and I assumed the building would be closed to visitors.

My assumption was incorrect. I was delighted to find that the building was still open, and so I walked into the vast, dimly-lit sanctuary. The only light in the entire space were the lamps spaced out along either side of the nave and the sections of prayer candles lit at the small chapels flanking the high altar. And I was the only one there ... no priests, no people in the pews praying or reflecting, no greeters, no one seeking confession or absolution. It was just me ... and God.

Unlike the moment I experienced at the Trappist abbey in Kentucky several years ago – a moment that I have talked about in the past – there were no words ... none spoken by me and none that I heard. Despite that, God ... was ... speaking. God was speaking to me through the lingering scent of incense drifting in the air. God was speaking to me through the flickering light of the candles. God was speaking to me through the shadows and through the muted colors of the stained glass grown dim at sunset.

God was saying a lot to me and did not need to speak a single word. No, he was speaking through images. He was using pictorial language ... speaking through what I was seeing, not what I was hearing. In the vastness and emptiness of that cathedral, on a night in which I was the only person to come through the door seeking a bit of time apart from the world, I was not apart from God. He was very near ... and he was speaking in the silence.

There were no words ... but there was The Word.

And then I spent time considering a portion of the final verse in the reading from John: “No one has ever seen God.”¹ There were some who came close; if you look in the Old Testament, Moses was exposed to the glory of God in what is described as seeing God face-to-face, and Elijah wrapped his cloak around his face before looking at God. Aside from those almost-encounters, however, or the countless unnamed times when God dwelled in the innermost part of the Temple attended to and worshiped by the priests, the first time anyone saw any image of God – as we learn in this reading – was at the birth of Jesus. And even then, it was not seeing God in the sense we might expect; it is humanity seeing God as he was made known through the Son.

But while we may not see God in the same way you and I see one another, do we nonetheless not see signs of God everywhere we look? The beauty of the birds of the sky, the creatures of the land and sea, and of all that is part of creation. The brightness of the daytime sun and the dim light of the nighttime moon. The face of a loved one. The sight of a newborn baby. The smile of someone in need who has received help. The tears of someone experiencing loss. The wide-eyed wonder of a young child making an exciting discovery about the world around them.

In as many things as we can experience about the world, God is there. In all that we ever experience in this life, God is there. God is here. And at this point I circle back to my experience in that silent cathedral. We may not hear God speak. We may not see God in the miraculous way that we may often wish for – the moment of lighting and trumpets and a grand revelation.

But through faith we have no need of those things. Through faith no words need to be used, and no revelation needs to be (if you will pardon the phrase) Biblical in scope. Through faith we know that the language and vision of God have been inscribed on our hearts. In a world when nothing ever seems to be enough, through faith it is enough that we have the incarnate Son ... The Word. Through faith it is enough that while we do not see God as a person, we see God in all persons.

In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was with God ... and the Word was God.²

And the Word is with us.

Amen.

¹ John 1:18 (NRSV).

² John 1:1 (NRSV).