

"When Our Words Fail Us"

Isaiah 9:2-7; Matthew 2:1-11

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

January 4, 2015 – Epiphany Sunday – Rev. Ronald Botts

There is a story about an old missionary who had struggled alone in his foreign assignment for many years. He had done remarkably well there, but age was beginning to catch up with him. Finally the mission board wrote to tell him that they had raised enough funds to send him an assistant.

They assigned a young fellow who had just completed seminary, but whose training had been limited to the classroom. He had promise, but no practical experience. When the young man arrived at the village the old missionary greeted him, then called together the chief and all his people. The villagers asked the young man to say a few words.

Since the new man could only speak English, the old missionary stood up and offered to translate. The young fellow looked around at the town square which was filled with people, took a deep breath, then began: "Greetings. We must always remember that there is an infinite and qualitative distinction between the eternal gospel and all the historical manifestations of it under the contingencies of human existence. Therefore, so I regard my posting here and see my endeavor in that imperative context. A reciprocity of work spheres and cultural mores may, in my intent and estimation, be plausible through a transcendence of that which constitutes our limited natures."

Well, the old missionary stood there a moment as all the townsfolk eagerly awaited the translation. Finally, this wise and experienced pastor turned to the people and responded, "Friends, he says he loves you and he's glad to be here."

How often our words fail us just when we seem to need them most! It's not really a question of vocabulary. We have plenty of words; in fact, maybe that's the problem. Because we know so many words, we're tempted to use them whether they're needed or appropriate.

We can take something simple and make it so complex that it loses comprehension. Scientists are particularly skilled in this area. Doctors seem to take special courses to make the understandable, obscure. Reluctantly, I'd have to admit even clergy are also gifted with this ability and maybe that shows a bit in our Presbyterian ordination and installation liturgies today.

Turning now to our Old Testament passage from the prophet Isaiah, we have an insight to God at work in the world. Here Isaiah points to the future when a new king will come to rule over Israel, and he shall be known to the ends of the earth. He will bring peace of a kind which the world has never known before.

Isaiah struggles to put a cosmic-size message into a very limited space, so he uses some compelling and direct words; yet, it's how he strings them together that gives them such strength and magnificence. "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority

rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

This prophecy dates to the eighth century B.C. If Isaiah's intent was to celebrate a temporal king, no man could ever be great enough to fulfill the promise. It's no wonder, then, that early Christians went back to this familiar text and saw in it a foretelling of the Messiah. This passage to them was further evidence that Jesus, who had been crucified and then overcome even death itself, was indeed the one of God's own choosing from the outset of time.

The words of Isaiah were greater than he would ever know. They went beyond his intention, beyond his knowledge, to bring a message some 800 years later. The words fell on a people who could identify with those who "walked in darkness [but] who have seen a great light." The words move forward another 2000 years—to us today—as we recognize in Jesus the one whose "authority shall grow continually."

The words of Isaiah have such grandeur that, in a way, they are in danger of being heard more for their sound than for their sense. So we might do well to take the message on this Epiphany Sunday and recast it in simpler language. In the example of the old missionary, we might reduce the passage from Isaiah to simply this: "Friends, he says that the promised one is here and peace is the sign of his kingdom. Go and celebrate!"

In today's Gospel reading we hear again the familiar story of the Magi, those learned men, who followed the movement of the bright star overhead. Theirs was a long and arduous journey and must have begun days or even weeks before. Astrologers were particularly adept at studying the sky and looking for any variations that might be read as omens. Perhaps these men were attached to the court of some other kingdom and the highly valued gifts they brought were from a foreign ruler.

The account says that their presents were gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Conceivably these might be considered tribute offered from one king to another, a gesture of good will acknowledging a new sovereign. Of course gold was considered the most desirable of metals and frankincense and myrrh were used as fragrance in incense, perfume, and anointing oils. Their presentation to the child would be a sign of his favor to both God and humanity. Our story is interesting, though, in that it tells what they did but not what they said; and offers no explanation for this.

Could it be that they didn't know the Aramaic language of Jesus' family? Maybe they felt that the gifts spoke for themselves. Perhaps it might have been that they had addresses prepared for the occasion, but were so humbled by this holy child that they were left speechless.

Words often fail us at the time we could use them the most. There's not enough of them or there's an excess. They say too little or they say too much. Or they just don't seem appropriate for the circumstance. That said, I still want to leave you with a few sincere words to close our Christmas season this year.

My wish to you this Epiphany is that the fullness of Christmas, everything that prepared us for it, and everything that follows it, might make it the most wonderful holy season of all for you; that the complexity and mystery of the Christ event may cause you to ponder its meaning in

your heart and for the consequences of your life; that the wonderment of family and friends be celebrated for the unsolicited gift it is, both for what has been planned and what may come about spontaneously; and that your pastor extends to you greetings, salutations, and affections appropriate to the solemnity and exaltation of this time of the year.

Yes, that's what I might say except that I seem to have this old missionary over my shoulder today and believe he would put it a bit more simply, maybe like this: "Friends, he says that he loves you and wishes you a Christmas joy that will last all year long."