

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

January 24, 2010

Rev. Roger Rapp

Worship Theme: Word Power

Luke 4: 14-21

One of the speakers at last Monday's Martin Luther King walk in Cheyenne was the commander of Francis Warren Air Force base.

He mentioned that he had grown up in Brooklyn, New York City, in the 1970's. He remembered the racial tensions that he experienced in his hometown as a young man. But he also remembered a quote from Dr. King, which he has taken as a lifetime lesson: "If you aren't willing to die for what you believe, you don't deserve to live." The commander recognized these words as powerful truth.

Later in the program at the depot, while listening to an amazing essay written and delivered by a young man, a senior at East High, I heard him mention the lessons that Dr. King learned from Mahatma Gandhi, who led India to independence through non-violent resistance. This young man was also inspired by the life of Dr. King, as well as the force of his words from this American martyr who changed the world for the better.

Word Power is real, whether they are words of Adolph Hitler leading a nation to believe that they could take over the world, or whether they are the words of Martin Luther King, eloquently making the case for a world in which all of God's people have a place to live out their dreams. Words can hurt or destroy. Just remember seeing (or perhaps experiencing) a bully on the playground making another kid feel worthless. Words can destroy self esteem, as in emotional abuse from one spouse to another, or from an adult to a child. Words can cut you to ribbons, so that you want to retaliate in kind. Much of talk radio today spews out words of anger and bitterness, casting a spell of despair and resentment to all who listen.

But words can also build up, strengthen, and bring hope. A word of encouragement, a word of comfort, a word of genuine caring can be like medicine, healing the soul and the spirit.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus brings a word of hope and healing to his hearers. In his hometown, and in his home town church, he opens the Bible (the Old Testament) and utters words from Isaiah that were first recorded over 500 years previously:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go

free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

These were familiar words to those who heard them. How wonderful, how inspiring, how great to hear this promising young rabbi bring the words of Isaiah to those who remembered Jesus as a boy, working in his father's carpenter shop, running through the streets with his friends, and of course hanging out with the rabbis at the temple, going toe to toe with them in theological debates.

Why, some remembered, once he was so engrossed in his visits with the teachers of the temple, his folks wondered where he was. My, such a wonderful young man. Many of the Galilean's had probably forgotten that this young man was born out of wedlock to Mary, his mother. They had forgotten, thanks to Joseph, who took Jesus into his home, into his shop, and into the community. Joseph, the unnoticed hero in the life of Jesus, was also probably very proud of his adopted son, listening to him read the words of Scripture. The words of Isaiah. Good choice.

Perhaps some began to get a little nervous when Jesus closed the book after his reading with these words of his own:

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

What.. isn't this Joseph's son? O well, he really likes Scripture.

We can cut him some slack for sounding a bit entitled.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. By the time he was finished with his comments, they were ready to throw him out.

In fact, they wanted to take him outside and throw him off a cliff!

What happened? As you read the shift in the attitude of the congregation, you begin to see. It is Word Power, wielded by Jesus himself.

So, why the rejection of the folks in his home town? Why does he never return there again? Well, part of the answer is that at first, Jesus seems to be promising that God's blessing would be poured out on them, and only them. But then he tells them that God's blessings would be poured out on any who have faith, and who believe. No historical or ethnic boundaries would contain or limit what God was about to do.

This moment, in his hometown, immediately following his temptations in the wilderness, gives us a glimpse of how the Word Power of Jesus cast a ripple far beyond his original home. So, Jesus is rejected by his own people because of the words he spoke to them. And the power of his words continued to butt up against the powers of entitlement of those who felt they alone had a claim to God's blessings. It's important to remember that Jesus does not go elsewhere because he was rejected by people from his hometown. He is rejected precisely **because** he goes elsewhere. His ministry is for the sake of the world. The whole world.

Word Power reminds us that God is God and that the Word Power of God means that the words of the prophet Isaiah are not just nice comforting words from the Bible, but words that say that God's kingdom is not necessarily the kingdoms that we build to ourselves, oftentimes at the expense of others. God's Word Power delivered by Isaiah, Jesus, and those who follow are words that can shake us up and surprise us with hope, but also cut our self righteousness and our entitled notions to ribbons. Word Power that still resonates with clarity, conviction, and credibility. Words that give new life to those who thought there was no life. Words that challenge us to look at the world through God's eyes. A world that God cares deeply about. And a world that we also are called to care deeply about.

Last Tuesday, the day after Martin Luther King marches all over the country, there were the words of modern theologian Cornel West, speaking at Ebenezer Baptist church in Atlanta, Dr. King's home congregation. Cornel West challenged his listeners, and us, to not sanitize Dr. King's message and put him in a museum somewhere. I was struck by his quote, as reported: "I don't know about you, but I don't even mention King's name without shivering and shuddering."

Many who heard Jesus reading Scripture back in his home church went from being consoled to being challenged. Some were probably shivering and shuddering at these words. Others decided it was too much for them to bear.

We want to hear God's word, but when the Word Power of the Gospel hits us with its message, do we really want to hear it?

We say we want to be a disciple of Christ, but are we willing to die for what we believe? At least, are we willing to allow the Word Power of Jesus to cause us to make some changes in our priorities, our lifestyle, or even our own words that we utter?

When Jesus invoked the prophet Isaiah, he was not hoping or asking for God's New Age. He was ushering in God's New Age.

And he brings it to us once again, on this day:

Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Luke 4:21

Amen....and Amen