

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Voice-Our Choice: Why the President Can't Cast Out Demons
Rev. Amy Morgan
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Genesis 3:1-7, Mark 1:21-28

Word counts, fact checking, emotive graphing – all these methods and more have been applied in the last few days to the President's State of the Union Address on Tuesday evening. One Washington think tank even developed a State of the Union Address machine where you could mash up parts of previous addresses by the current and past presidents.

But in the midst of the media frenzy surrounding this event, the Washington Post dared to ask, "Do we even need a State of the Union Address anymore?" There are more effective means for the President to communicate is policy priorities. His approval ratings tend to droop following the address. The President's political opponents on Capitol Hill have already crafted their rebuttals before the speech begins. Effectively, the speech accomplishes nothing. They are just words.

And while we may have come to expect impotency from the words of politicians, we know that some words carry power. Some people speak with authority. Some words mean action. When a military commander speaks, soldiers attack or retreat, orders are carried out. When a mortgage lender speaks, a loan is granted or denied. When a hiring employer speaks, someone has an offer or a rejection. Some people speak with authority because their words result in something actually happening.

That's how we see God's Word in scripture. God's Word has authority because it actually accomplishes something. God's voice is indistinguishable from God's activity. In the creation story, God speaks, and the universe comes into being. In the book of Revelation, God speaks, and heaven and earth collide.

God's Word has power and authority. God's words mean action.

But we don't always recognize that power and authority. We don't always trust that what God speaks will come to be.

Our story from Genesis begins with God's words being twisted by the serpent – "Did God say you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?" The serpent's words are meant to make the woman suspicious of God, distrustful, resentful even. Did God put all this life-giving food all around us and then forbid us to enjoy it? Did God create us just to starve us to death? Are we just part of some cruel joke?

Wait a minute! Is that what God said?

The woman has the wherewithal to remember God's actual words - "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"

But now that the seed of mistrust has been planted, the serpent can contradict God. “You will not die.” And God’s motives are questioned. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

And with that, the balance is tipped in favor of sin. Greed, cupidity, and pride drown out the Word of God.

But the power and authority of God’s Word is not diminished. God’s Word is action. So when God says, “Eat of this tree, and you will die,” it is so. Twisting, doubting, and ignoring God’s Word leads to sin and death, to the disruption of the goodness of creation.

But God’s Word continues to speak, guiding and directing the world back toward that ultimate goodness. God makes a covenant with Abraham and gives the Law through Moses. God sends prophets to help people hear and understand, believe and live out the Word.

And finally, God gives the Word a human voice. The voice of an ordinary man from a no-where town. A man with no earthly power or authority.

And this man walks into a synagogue, and people are amazed at his teaching because he teaches with authority. We don’t know what he says or how he says it. But people somehow immediately recognize that his words mean action.

And then, he proves it. In the midst of the synagogue, unnoticed, is a man suffering from an unclean spirit.

Now, understand that there is no judgment implied by this term “unclean spirit.” This simply referred to a spirit contrary to God’s spirit, something unholy, and these spirits could reside in anyone for any reason.

Some people believe an “unclean spirit” would equate to modern-day mental illness, and that may be so. But I think that misses part of the point of this story. This is understood to be the first of Jesus’ healing miracles in the Gospel of Mark. And it is clear that a man who was suffering and broken is made whole.

But we cannot dismiss the central notion here that something contrary to God is able to recognize and obey the voice of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus speaks God’s Word, and the spirit obeys. And the voice of Jesus, the authoritative voice of God, disrupts the evil that has plagued this man.

Ignoring or denying the authority of God’s word leads to the disruption of goodness. Obedience to God’s word, recognition of God’s authority, leads to the disruption of evil.

Now, all of this can live safely in our imaginations, in a fantasy realm of talking serpents and magical trees, or in the genre of horror films about demon possession and spiritual healings.

But God’s voice is speaking still today. And we can deny it, ignore it. Or we can recognize it and obey it.

We hear the powerful Word of God in the disruption of evil and the disruption of suffering and oppression – when a child who has been placed in the care of the state is given a safe and loving home and a wraparound family of faith; when a child who has no educational support at home is given the time and attention of a tutor who helps them learn and grow; when folks respond generously and enthusiastically to pleas for resources for people in need; when the lonely are visited; when children who are excluded from many social circles are

embraced and loved by peers – we hear and obey the Word of God. The authority of this Word, this teaching, is the activity it causes.

But we also hear the Word of God twisted. We choose to ignore, deny, or disobey the voice of God – when self-righteousness keeps us from hearing another point of view; when self-importance keeps us too busy to be present to God and one another; when self-interest allows us to hoard our gifts rather than use them for God; when self-consciousness causes us to exclude those who make us uncomfortable – yes, we deny and disobey the Word of God and disrupt God’s goodness.

And in so doing, we undermine our authority as Christians who claim to follow in the ministry of Jesus, and we diminish the authority of the church, the body of Christ, in the world. Studies show that younger Americans who have given up on the church have primarily done so because they don’t see the church doing the things Jesus did. They see the church twisting God’s word, using scripture to support what they want to believe rather than challenging the status quo. They see the church denying God’s authority in order to protect and preserve the institutional authority of the church. They see the church ignoring God’s call to care for the suffering and the marginalized, choosing instead to cater to the comfortable, reinforcing the values of achievement, accomplishment, and accumulation.

To people outside, and even inside, the church, we look more like the serpent and the scribes than like the body of Christ.

But, friends, I am here to tell you that I believe the word of God is spoken here. I believe the authority of God’s word is recognized, understood, and obeyed here. Perhaps imperfectly and inconsistently. We have our inherited and accumulated sin. Our ignorance and selfishness and faithlessness.

But the real beauty of this story from Mark, is that the one who recognizes and obeys the authoritative voice of God is the unclean spirit, the one who is unholy, the one who is broken. Wholeness, goodness, and holiness are not requirements for hearing and doing the Word of God.

I’m not enough of a political pundit to know if we need a State of the Union Address. But I do know that we need the Word of God. I know that evil can be disrupted and goodness can be restored. Because the word of God is the activity of God. And God in Jesus Christ has said, “This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, poured out for you for the forgiveness of sin.” God in Jesus Christ has said, “Come to me you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” God in Jesus Christ has said, “I will be with you always.”

And so it is that God is with us in temptation and doubt, in greed and despair. God is with us to disrupt whatever evil inhabits our lives. The scribes were amazed at his teaching. My friends, prepare to be amazed.