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**TEXT: Nehemiah 8:1-10; Luke 4:14-21**

My granddaughter called me a racist recently. Four of our family, Maya included, had gone to see *Mary Poppins Returns* after Christmas. After the movie, over lunch, I questioned the historicity of having a black man working as a lawyer in England in 1935, the year in which the movie is set. Furthermore, I had the audacity to challenge the movie in portraying white people serving black people—as maids, butlers, etc.—in the London of that time. Maya exploded. How dare I question the legitimacy of black people being equal to white people! Why shouldn't black people be given every opportunity white people have, including the privilege of being waited on by white people. "Grandpa, you're a racist," she said.

I was stunned. This past Monday, Civil Rights Day, Mary read me a quotation by Martin Luther King, Jr. which I found profound and inspiring—but it reminded me all the more of Maya's accusation. Am I a racist? I suppose all of us are to some extent but I think Maya got emotionally mixed up in the matter of my questioning the accuracy of what was portrayed in the movie.

Anyway, my point in sharing this story with you is to introduce the subject about which I'd like to talk with you this morning, that being: The power of scripture.

We've all heard the playground proverb, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." 'Tain't so. Words can hurt a lot. I experienced just a little of that from my granddaughter but words can affect us powerfully—hurting, blessing, encouraging, discouraging, making us laugh and cry, giving us courage and pride, shriveling us into nothingness. Words are powerful.

We see that in the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible, don't we? "*And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light.*" God goes on to speak the whole world into being. "*And God said...*" "*And God said...*" *And God said...*"

God spoke through the written word, e.g. The Ten Commandments. God spoke through the prophets. And finally, the Bible says (Hebrews 1:2), God spoke to us through His Son, Jesus—whom the Bible calls the Living Word.

Words. Incredibly important. The book of James says this: “*So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.*” (3:5) James compares the little tongue to the rudder of a great ship, saying that just as a small rudder can steer a great ship, so the tongue can steer a human being. He goes on to say, “*From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.*” (3:10)

Words surround us and, as James said, can be used for blessing or cursing. With what kind of words do we surround ourselves? Who and what are we listening to? Because, you see, words are shaping us—all the time. Just like at the beginning of creation when God spoke and things were created, so, too, is our perception of reality shaped by the words to which we are exposed. Words are people-shapers.

Mary and I have been going to the gym lately, trying to get in better shape. But our physical bodies aren't the only thing that need shaping. Our self-image, our understanding of the world, our identities, how we relate to God and others are all shaped by words. Those words we accept. Those words we reject. Those words we appropriate to ourselves.

The movie *I Feel Pretty* came out last year. I don't really recommend this except for the movie's premise—and that's very good. This slightly overweight, plain young woman, unsuccessful in career and romance, is hit on the head and as a result of that experience wakes up to see herself differently. Instead of hearing words of condemnation and thinking of herself in only negative terms, she sees herself as pretty—hence the name of the movie—and now all she can hear are good things about herself: She's pretty, she's smart, she's competent, she's desirable. It's a good story in the sense that it shows us how words—in this case, words about self-image—affect us, negatively and positively.

We have before us, in our very hands, God’s Word (pick up the Bible). If we avail ourselves of it, God’s word comes to us in so many ways: written, told, sung, through art. What wealth is ours because we have access to God’s words so readily!

That wasn’t the case at the time of Nehemiah and Ezra. We don’t know a lot about these books, do we—small books tucked into the front of the Old Testament between the Pentateuch and the Psalms. Today’s Old Testament reading from Nehemiah is the only time in our three-year lectionary cycle in which a portion of Nehemiah is read. But Nehemiah and Ezra, one book in the Hebrew scriptures, are fascinating and powerful words of God to us—and I want us to pay some attention to Nehemiah today.

Here’s the situation. The year is about 440 BC and the Jewish nation had fallen on hard times. Their proud capitol, Jerusalem, had been besieged by the foreign nation of Persia (today’s Iran and Iraq). All the Jewish leadership had been taken captive to Susa, the Persian capitol. They were living in exile. The temple and the walls surrounding Jerusalem had been broken down. The city was in ruins. After 100 years in exile—the original generation had all died; the second and third generations had only heard about their ancestral homeland—a new Persian king allows the Jews to return to their homeland. They return and find it still in ruins and occupied by others. Discouraging. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people begin to rebuild their ancestral homeland. A sense of pride begins to emerge. Despite attacks by those who do not welcome them back, the work continues and, in time, the city is rebuilt.

But now the important part and that which was read as our Old Testament lesson this morning: Ezra reintroduces God’s people to God’s word. Over the course of their exile, the people had gotten away from God’s word. They had forgotten it. Other words had come to shape their identity, their sense of who they were. But now, back in their homeland, God’s word is read to them—and they’re overwhelmed.

*“<sup>5</sup>And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. <sup>6</sup>Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and*

*worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.*” Do you wonder why we stand for the reading of the Gospel? It’s in honor of God’s Word most clearly revealed in the Person of Jesus. Do you know what the word, “Amen” mean? (Solicit response.) Yes, it means, “Yes, let it be so!” Do you wonder about the various postures we assume in worship—standing, kneeling, bowing, raising hands? All as responses to God and His powerful Word.

Listen to this: *“For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.”* Imagine coming to understand, perhaps for the first time, who you are—that you belong to the Creator God, that He has a plan for your life and that it’s a good plan. Imagine coming to realize that you’re not just an animal but a creature made in God’s image and that’s He’s chosen you from the beginning of time for His purposes. I think we take this for granted because we hear it so often but, oh my people, let’s not do this. Look at the power that infuses the Jewish people when they come to realize who they are and Whose they are! They weep. The passage concludes: *“do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”* Oh my people, there’s power in the words of God. Power to shape our lives and give us all we need to live this live as we move toward eternity.

You’ve heard the word “abracadabra,” right? We associate that word with magic and genies and the like. There are various theories about the word but one that makes sense to me is that the word is based on the Aramaic (remember this is the vernacular Jesus spoke) which, translated, means, “it will be created in my words.” In other words, say the word and—abracadabra—it’s true!

While that was certainly true at creation when God spoke and—abracadabra—the world was created, it takes a lot of words, repeated with intention, to bring about shaping us into who we are. Words make us into who we are, for better or worse. If we’re constantly told we’re no good, we’re a loser, we’re dumb, we’re fat, we’re incapable, we begin to believe that, don’t we? Those words come to define us, if we let them.

But if good words are spoken over us, repeated with sincerity, what a transformation takes place!

I had a very interesting conversation with Debbie Karges at Caleb and Sophie’s wedding reception a few weeks ago. Debbie is my neighbor—a good LDS woman—and the reason she was at that

wedding was because she was the caregiver, the babysitter, for Sophie when Sophie was a baby and child. Debbie not only looked after Sophie but a lot of other children. Debbie told me that she'd read a lot about the influence of words over children—even babies—and so, from the time she got a hold of them, Debbie would talk to her little ones—telling them that they were beautiful, smart and precious. She would move their little legs when she'd change a diaper, constantly talking and “blessing” them with her words. Debbie wouldn't have said this herself, being a modest woman, but her friend sitting between us, told of some amazing results in the lives of Debbie's little charges, whom she babysat for years. Most graduated as the valedictorians and salutatorians of their high school classes and have gone on to acclaimed careers. Now certainly there were other factors that came into play, I'm sure, e.g. genetics and home life and parental example, but I'm convinced there's something to this business of “blessing” people with words.

Two things:

1. What words do you use with and over the people in your life, be they children, spouse, relatives, friends, co-workers, employees, neighbors? Do you use your words, as James said, to bless or to curse? Are you using your words to build up or tear down others?
2. What kind of words are you allowing yourself to hear, be exposed to and immerse yourself in? Are they words that remind you that you are God's child—created, loved and redeemed by Him? Or are you listening to trash talk, trash radio, trash TV? What books are you reading? Are they building up your character as a Christian or do they fill your mind with profane, not-so-good things? What movies are you watching? What TV shows to you listen to? What people are you conversing with? Are these people and are these media building you up or tearing you down? Are the words that are being poured over you and into you blessing or cursing you?

If we allow the Word of God (reference the Bible) to shape us, we'll find identity, we'll find hope, we'll find purpose, and as Nehemiah wrote, we'll find joy and strength. But that means knowing this word.

In our New Members Class last Sunday afternoon, we talked about the trouble that the Church got itself into when it wandered away from the Word of God. And that still happens today. When churches and individual Christians are ignorant of God's word, when they drift from what this book teaches, they start to shape God in their own image—and that invariably leads to trouble.

Do you hold to a Christian worldview or a secular worldview? If you allow the world to pour its words into you and over you, you're going to look at life, at others, at the world and at yourself quite differently than if you allow God's words to pour into you and over you.

My granddaughter is a product of public education—and I'm not badmouthing public education here; I'm a product of public education and there's much good to be had there—however, Maya's been shaped for twelve years now by the values and the words that have been poured over her and into her by her school without much countermanding by her parents. She's been immersed in words like inclusivity, acceptance, tolerance, equality. These are good words. I'm glad Maya has the convictions she has but she, like so many others, has not had the exposure to God's words and a Christian worldview and, consequently, words like truth and accuracy and reality are suppressed in favor of those words which are considered more important. And so history is revised and distorted in favor of what the world now thinks is better.

Jesus, in our Gospel reading today, unrolls the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads a passage aloud in Nazareth's synagogue. He concludes his rendition by declaring, "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" It's another epiphany, another revelation of Himself. He is God's word in the flesh! And, in so doing, He affirms the value of God's word. God's word is not thrown out, not replaced, not superseded but rather fulfilled. It is validated in Jesus. Jesus was declaring to His listeners that day that those words of God via the prophet Isaiah were alive—and they were shaping His mission.

As we come to know God's word more and more, may we find power and life-shaping potential in these wonderful words of life! Amen.

Songs:

Opening	“God, Whose Almighty Word” (ELW#673)
After O.T. Reading	“Ancient Words” by deShazzo
Sermon	“Wonderful Words Of Life”
Special	“Remind Me Who I Am” by Ingram and Gray (Worship Team)
Closing	“O God Of Light” (ELW#507)