

Date Preached	13-Mar-2022	Date Initiated	01-Mar-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Lent 2, Yr C

" [Bring us] to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word "



We began the season of Lent talking about sin: not that we're in any danger of not being forgiven or saved ... but the still-uncomfortable truth that our human sinfulness constantly bends us more and more selfward ... and, thus, away from God's grace: away from the deeper, more loving relationship Christ desires for us, both with Him and with all others. We observed that the calling of Lent is for us to reconcile ... to re-connect¹ ourselves to ... God, once again; to turn our hearts and our beings in a more Godward direction and be renewed.

With this understanding of sin and of Lent's invitation, we're undertaking an exploration of 'sin,' tracking, each week, the familiar wording from the General Confession: WE HAVE SINNED AGAINST [GOD] IN **THOUGHT, WORD, AND DEED**: BY WHAT WE HAVE DONE, AND BY WHAT WE HAVE LEFT **UNDONE**. We continue, today, with **WORD**.²

Now, the first thing that comes to mind when we think about how we sin "in **WORD**," may be fairly literal and direct. Many of us have been taught from childhood not to say certain impolite words or take the Lord's name in vain or tell crude jokes. And, to be sure, we *do* sin—fall short of God's aspirations for us—if we regularly include in our speech words that are disrespectful, ugly or hurtful. Undoubtedly, there are some who might profitably ponder repenting of this particular type of **WORD**-sin.³ But a more fruitful Lenten inquiry, I think, is to consider the *totality* of the **WORDS** we string together on a daily basis: to acknowledge how we sin via our choice of what—or *Whom*—we talk about ... *or* leave out of our conversations altogether.

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¹ The etymology of the very word **RELIGION**, from the Latin for "to tie up again," is quite apt here.

² **WORD** is a tricky term in the field of Christian theology. When we speak of the **WORD OF GOD**, we can mean two things: either Holy Scripture—the Bible—as the revelation of God's speaking to human creation, across several millennia and multiple cultures (including the covenant God makes, dramatically, with Abram in today's Old Testament lesson); in this sense of **WORD**, we typically don't capitalize the *W*. Or, with a capital *W*, Jesus, the Son of God, Who, St John tells us in the very first sentence of his Gospel, is the Word who has been, and been with, God from the very beginning of all things.

This distinction—**WORD** *versus* **WORD**—is, in fact, critical for Christians. Other faiths (Judaism and Islam, for example) believe that what we would call the **WORD** resides in Scripture: God is present, in a way we might refer to as sacramental, in the **WORDS** of the holy book. Christians, however, while believing in the truth and dependability of Holy Scripture, do not believe that Jesus resides in the **WORDS** of the Bible. Rather, we believe that God has made God's primary and ultimate revelation of Godself to humanity in the manifestation of Jesus—the **WORD**—upon earth; the **WORDS** of Holy Scripture are vitally important to our interpreting this divine revelation, but still secondary to it.

³ I recall being in several job settings—both 'blue' *and* 'white' collar—when I was a young man where the daily *patois* was salted with enough *F*-bombs and "Christ Almighty"s to make even a pirate blush. I gamely tried to play along, but I have to admit: I never felt very comfortable speaking this way. It just wasn't in me (not that I don't utter the occasional expletive!).

A quick query on the always-authoritative (!) internet indicates that an adult typically speaks anywhere from five- to eight-thousand words per day. Each day, our speech runs from the banal to the bracing: from the weather to the Russian invasion. Using WORDS, we rehearse the past and dream the future ... update and comfort and complain to friends and co-workers ... praise the two-legged members of our family and discipline the four-legged (↓ and *vice versa!*). We tell stories, tell jokes, and maybe even tell a few white lies. We talk politics and we talk sports; we talk current events, and we talk shop.

But amidst this daily deluge of words, consider: ↓ How often do we *talk Jesus*? How many stories do we tell others about our faith or our being saved? We are comfortable, in this day and age, sharing with others intimate details of medical procedures ... or baring our souls in grief or rage ... or announcing our opinion about virtually any matter under the sun: from the coffee at Wilson's to the fate of humanity in the face of global climate change. Why is it, then, that so many of us—and I *don't* exclude myself here—clam up or get flop sweat at the prospect of bringing into a conversation even a *brief* mention of the One in Whom we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28)?

In our defense, there are a couple of cultural explanations for this reticence. One is good manners: We've been trained from youth not to talk about religion for fear of stirring up an argument or sowing division or disrespecting diversity. Another is modernity itself: the highly secular, science-driven age we live in. Speaking about what Jesus has taught us or the depth of our love for Him ... let alone introducing a divine and mysterious⁴ God into a discussion of the brutal reality of world affairs or the unrelenting objectivity of science ... might get us branded as 'quaint' or 'superstitious' ... even 'foolish.' But such silence takes a toll on us. We have been conditioned to suppress the basic, primal Christian instinct to share the Good News: the WORD of God, in Jesus; the WORD that we delight to read and pray and sing and eat and drink in this space, every single Sunday ... but that rarely, if ever, crosses our lips any *other* day of the week.

This Lent, we have been talking about sin as *selfwardness*: as the force in us that warps our souls back toward ourselves, rather than allowing them to be carried toward a more open, more conscious communion with God. And the selfwardness of editing Jesus out of our WORDS is two-fold. For one thing, it is *selfish*: Jesus expressly tells us to go out and make disciples of all the world (Mt 28:19); not to hide our light—*His* light—under a basket, but to set it on a lampstand, for everyone to see (Mt 5:14-16). In not giving voice to Jesus in our daily WORDS, we are guilty of keeping Him all to ourselves.

For another—and this is more subtle—when Jesus doesn't live in our daily WORDS, we stunt our faith; deprive it of the deepening and blossoming that take place when we speak His Name to others. A fundamental—and life-changing—aspect of our faith life is *saying* with our mouths what we believe in our hearts. The import of the Creed in our faith formation lies *at least* as much in the *act* of our saying at every Sunday at Eucharist ... as in our intellectual subscription to its every doctrine. What we pray ↓ shapes what we believe.⁵

⁴ Cf the Greek μυστήριον, a word that can mean "sacrament."

⁵ This is the formula of Prosper of Aquitaine from the fifth century: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*—how we pray dictates (or influences) what we believe. (Technically, Prosper wrote, "*ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*": so that the law (or way) of praying [he's referring to the liturgy of the Church] may constitute the law (or way) of believing."

Likewise, the WORDS we say, outside of worship, *also* form and shape our faith. I can't tell you how many times I've been in a passionate discussion with a friend, or a pastoral conversation with one of you or a time of grief with a member of my family and I've said something about Jesus—the 'pull' of His teachings and values ... the everywhere-ness of His presence with us ... His co-suffering all our pains and sorrows—that I've never consciously thought about before. Suddenly, having said it out loud, I know it to be truth. And I've taken one more small step closer to Him. Having gotten my *self* out of the way—my reticence; my embarrassment; my fear of being judged or misunderstood—I've enabled Jesus to use my own mouth to say exactly what He longs for me to hear.

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So, let me suggest a little Lenten experiment. Set yourself a goal to SPEAK JESUS three times a day, to someone—anyone—else.⁶ You might literally say His name: for example, if someone asks you who your hero is or what gives you security in life. Or maybe SPEAK JESUS by voicing one of His precepts. If someone is goading you to scorn the faults of another, say you have trouble paying attention to the speck in their eye until you've removed the log from your own (Mt 7:3-5). Or maybe SPEAK JESUS by countering the secular hopelessness that's in vogue right now with His divine hope: "I'll give you," you might say, "that the world looks pretty bleak at the moment, but I'm convinced that God's will *will* prevail; that, in the end, God will rescue humanity from our own worst tendencies."

When the words we say SPEAK JESUS, either explicitly or implicitly, we share His love and grace with others. And we also let Him take hold of our tongue—our own reflexively selfward voice—and turn it, once more, toward God.



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⁶ It is, of course, important to pray and say Jesus' name in prayer. But private, silent prayer is not outward, spoken witness of Him to others.