

Would join me in singing a verse of the beloved Christmas hymn, "Silent Night." Beautiful. It's a great hymn for so many reasons. But when I was much younger, I had a love/hate relationship with it. I had no issue with the music and even the lyrics were great – until the very end. Because while I learned later in life that we were singing about heavenly peace, I thought for the longest time that we were singing about sleeping in heavenly peas. And I hated peas as a kid. I didn't want to eat them; I didn't want to smell them or look at them. And I, for the life of me, couldn't imagine why anyone would want to sleep in peas, heavenly or otherwise. So whenever we sang "Silent Night," I would scrunch up my face with a look of disgust that the poor baby Jesus would have to sleep not only in a barn, but lay in a manger filled with heavenly peas. And that we should somehow be happy about it.

Words are important. Words matter. And contrary to the old playground saying of sticks and stones, words affect us, including sometimes in hurtful ways. Words are not inert. Words do something. Maybe you've listened to a song or read a book or poem and it drew out an emotional response. Maybe you've heard a speech that stirred up something in you and you felt compelled to take action. Because words affect us. Words are powerful.

So when John begins his Gospel by talking about the Word of God made flesh, who came to live among us, when John speaks of a God who wants to be with us, we first have to ask ourselves, who is this God and what kind of Word does God offer? If it is God's Word, then it must testify truthfully to the nature of God. It must accurately reflect what we know about God through Christ. What is it that God is saying through the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ? What does God want to say to the world? What Word is spoken through Christ, God with us? You are loved. And God is with us because we are loved. That's it. Pure and simple. That's the good news of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. We are loved by God who wants to be with us because we are loved. That's the Word.

The Word of God is the Word of love. IN Christ, we see that this Word is nothing less than God's Word of deepest, incomprehensible, unending love for you and for me and for all who live in this God-so-loved world. But there's a temptation to add things to it, to make it less, to make it something earned or

deserved. There's a temptation to make it more of an exchange, a transaction. Too often, the message of cultural Christianity is that you are not worthy of God's love, unless... You can't possibly be loved by God, unless... You're not truly a Christian, unless...

But here is why I love the Gospel of John. I love it so much because even with all of its allegories and philosophical jargon, it is spelled out so abundantly clear for all who need to hear this Word of God again. You are loved. Period. Add nothing. No unless-es about it. You are loved. For in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void. Then God spoke. And everything changed. There was God and there was nothing. But God, in infinite and divine wisdom, believed that something was better than nothing. And so God spoke. And everything that has come into existence has been because of this word. God's Word.

Because when God speaks, things happen. When God speaks, things change. When God speaks, life flourishes. When God speaks, love abounds. Because that is who God is. God's Word is who God is. Because words matter. And in this Christmas time, we remember how God's Word became so real, so active, so moving, that it actually took on human flesh. Because God loved. That's why. Because God loved and wanted others to be included in this love, and wanted others to share this love. No one is exempt from it, no one beyond it, no one unworthy of it. God loved. That's the Word. That's it. Simple enough and yet plenty for us to dwell on our whole life long.

Words mean something. More importantly, they do something. As followers of Christ, the words we say and the things we do as representing God will have an impact on others, for good or for ill. When we put up barriers, when we add ifs, buts, and unless-es, we have strayed from the grace-filled Word of God. But when the Word of God's love in Christ is spoken, and all are welcomed into such love, God shows up. Things change. Life abounds. May our words, our actions, and our whole lives be as the Word of God that has come to live among us: love. Let us speak it, let us be it, let us live it. For the Word became flesh and lived among us. May it continue to live among us today in and through our lives. Amen.