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Epiphany 4 – Year C
Jeremiah 1.4-10
Psalm 71.1-6
1 Cor. 13.1-13
Luke 4.21-30

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

That famous theologian Eliza Doolittle, in the musical “My Fair Lady,” sings, “Words! Words! Words! I’m so sick of words! I get words all day through; first from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do?” Well, too bad for Eliza, but today’s Scripture readings are filled with words – the need for words, the use of words, the power of words, the absence of words. If you don’t have words, what do you have?

Jeremiah was thinking the same thing when God called him to be a prophet. Jeremiah said, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” But God replied, “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak.” Then God touched Jeremiah’s mouth and said, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.”

The mouth is the vehicle for words. But St. Paul was more concerned with the type of words that come from the mouth. He was concerned with childish speech that did not reflect maturity in the faith. He was concerned with people in the church at Corinth who did not speak in love but spoke in tongues –a gift of the Holy Spirit by which people engage in ecstatic speech in a language unknown to them. St. Paul wasn’t opposed to speaking in tongues because, genuinely received, it’s evidence of the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit. But he was more concerned with having the power to interpret someone who speaks in tongues, because that’s what builds up the church, the Body of Christ. Paul will go on to ask what good is it if someone offers blessing or a thanksgiving if people can’t understand it well enough to affirm it with an “Amen.” The

person may offer the blessing or give thanks well enough, but the rest of the congregation, the Body of Christ, is not built up. St. Paul further contends that if he prays in a tongue, his spirit prays but his mind is unproductive. So what does he suggest? When he prays with the spirit, he will pray with the mind also. When he sings praise with the spirit, he will sing praise with the mind also. And, in typical Paul fashion, he boasts that he speaks in tongues more than anyone, but he would rather speak five words with his mind, in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue!

Paul has a way with words, doesn't he? What's your way with words? What are the words you need to pray? What are the words you need to sing praise? What are the words you need to express your faith? What are the words you need to instruct? What are the words you need to be understood?

And where do you get the words you need? Do you ask God for them? Or do you protest, like Jeremiah, and say you don't know how to speak? Does God touch you and put words in your mouth? Do you speak what God commands you?

Or are you like Jesus, and the words are handed to you? Jesus, at the beginning of his public ministry, was in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. The attendant hands him the book of the prophet Isaiah and he begins to read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." He closes the book, sits down, and then says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, Jesus is the Anointed One, the Messiah, who has just opened his mouth to proclaim good news, release, recovery of sight, freedom, and the Lord's favor to those assembled.

Jesus has a way with words, too, doesn't he? He begins his public ministry by teaching in the synagogues of Galilee, and he is praised by everyone. Reports about him spread throughout the surrounding area, so when he comes to Nazareth, his hometown, people are expecting great things. And they get great things. They hear that the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled right there on the spot! And all speak well of him and wonder at the gracious words that came from his mouth. Gracious words, words full of grace and truth, from the Word [made flesh], full of grace and truth.

But that's not enough for them. They "wonder," suggesting skepticism or disbelief. They remember Jesus' parentage. They expect that this self-proclaimed prophet will stay on in Nazareth and take care of their local problems. But Jesus has a few choice words for them. Jesus uses words that the crowd doesn't want to hear. Citing the models of Elijah and Elisha, who refused to use their powers among their own people but did so with foreigners, Jesus indicates that he, too, will be moving on, uttering those famous words, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country." The crowd is furious that he would not stay among them, but would instead use his powers among non-Jews.

And not by words, but by sheer force, they get up, drive Jesus out of town, and lead him to the edge of a cliff so they can throw him off. There's Jesus, standing on the precipice, facing the chasm below, and inexplicably, miraculously, without words, the crowd parts, he passes through the midst of them, and goes on his way. He lives to speak another day. Sometimes actions are louder than words. And on his way he goes – to Capernaum, where he teaches in the synagogue. And the people there are astonished – not wondering, but astonished – because he speaks with authority.

When you're standing on the precipice, facing the chasm below, what words do you use? What prayers has God given you? What words has God given you? What words do you use to express your faith, to express your fears, to express your hopes, to proclaim the Gospel? Do your actions speak louder than words, or are you left speechless, without words?

In those dark times in our lives, when the world closes in on us, when we feel we have no place to go but over the edge, we can use our words, we can use our actions, we can turn to God in prayer. It doesn't matter if we haven't turned to God for awhile. It doesn't matter if we don't know what words to use. We can still turn to God in prayer. The Catechism, the Church's Outline of the Faith, defines prayer as "responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words." (BCP, p.856) Think about that. Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.

God is constantly trying to break through to us – break through our fear, break through our doubt, break through our busyness – to reach out to us. By our intentionally responding to God, by our reaching out to the Love who has first reached out to us, by thought and by deeds, with or without words, God has promised to hear us, and we feel God's presence with us. We receive God's good news, we receive release, we receive recovery of sight, we receive freedom, we receive the Lord's favor.

In prayer, God gives us the words we need. As with Jeremiah, God puts words in our mouth to sustain us. As with Paul, God gives us the spirit and mind to pray. As with Jesus, God hands us the words with which we can fulfill God's plan for us. Or, as with Jesus, God gives us the force of action to speak louder than words, to step back from the edge, to part that which presses in on us, so that we can pass through the midst of it and continue on our way in God's path, to live and speak another day. Amen.