

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen*

Orally Speaking

When you give a sermon, you are supposed to stand up, and speak. Sounds simple enough. Stand up and use the power of spoken language to move people. Usually the priest does not use a lot of visual aids; the preacher just stands up and speaks.

We rarely use visual aids in our sermons. [They use Power Point in many churches—during the service and the sermon—to enhance the message. We use visual aids in our homilies for children. We use visual aids when we substitute a religious pageant for the sermon. I've seen dancing in church, both during the service and substituted for a sermon, at St. Mark's Capitol Hill, and at Good Shepherd in Burke, VA.]

But, the sermon is usually the part of the Eucharist where someone speaks. So, the priest usually uses only the power of oral language to move people. At least it should move people—if the sermon does not move you inside, then the connection was not made. A sermon works if the listeners are moved inside.

There is no scientific check, no laboratory test, to see if we are moved by the words of God. No psychologist can analyze us and see if in our listening to the spoken word, we are being moved by the Spirit. The apostles did not do a test to see if God was the one moving them to speak His Word. They stood up, and spoke.

But we are not left without guidelines. St. Paul lists the fruits of the spirit for us, so we can always check ourselves to see if in our listening, we are in line with the Spirit. Check out Galatians 5:22-23, for Paul's way of seeing if we are responding to God's spirit.

We can tell if the Holy Spirit moves us, for example, if, we hear the spoken Word of God, and it moves us inside, by:

- Lifting our mood
- Clearing up our thinking
- Leading us to charitable action

Then we can thank God that we are moved by his Holy Spirit.

God moves people, and as we will see, He moves the world, by his spoken Word. God creates, and he guides by his words. And, just as Jesus is once described in the New Testament, God speaks with authority. He does not suggest, discuss, elicit input, open a referendum, or organize a focus group, He speaks ... and that's it. In today's reading from Isaiah, "I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

The spoken word can move people. Jesus's words alone heal people. In today's gospel reading he heals a woman with an illness, with his words alone, "When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.'"

In today's gospel, Jesus's words were so powerful that, "When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing."

In the seventh chapter of Luke, we hear that Jesus healed the centurion's servant with his just spoken word.

In last Sunday's reading from Jeremiah, we heard "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces."

And the most momentous of all, in the first chapter of Genesis, God's word alone is sufficient to move the world, to create the universe. In all the other creation stories of the ancient world, some sort of limited deity made the world out of pre-existing material. But for the Hebrews, God spoke and brought forth the world where there was nothing before.

- “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”
- “And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures.’” And they appeared.
- “Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image.” So God created humankind.”

God’s spoken Word is powerful enough to bring the universe out of nothing.

I heard a story once about a preacher, who kept a Bible passage on a little piece of paper, taped on the inside rail of the pulpit, so he would see it each time he preached. He wanted to be reminded, each time he preached, of what the purpose of a sermon was. The passage is from John 12.21. “They came to Philip, ... , and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’” So when you give a sermon, the listeners should be moved by the power of language to see Jesus.

I’ve been trying it for 40 years. The success or failure is determined by whether the power of language moves people.

I was told one time that when you give a sermon, you should remember that a sermon is about three things:

1. It’s about the Word of God in the readings for the day
2. It’s about how the readings relate to our daily life
3. And, it’s about 15 minutes.

I do not know what Father Malm’s rule is for sermons at Grace, regarding length. But the first time I gave a sermon at Grace Church was several years ago now. Immediately after the sermon, during the announcements, Father Malm said a “Thank you to Father John, for a short sermon.” I’m still pondering the possible implications of that momentous assessment.

They tell us that language started out being only oral. People spoke. Writing came many millennia later. When writing came, people only read aloud. St. Augustine said he was shocked when he first met Bishop Ambrose—the bishop was sitting alone and reading silently. Augustine had never seen that. Monks who took a vow of silence still read inspirational material aloud during meals and other gatherings.

Language needs a voice. Language needs a person to put their own individual soul into language, by acting it out with meaning. Father Malm has always told us, when we read the lessons, “Read it like you love it.” And Lectio Divina teaches us to read the meaning, not the words. So to read is not to repeat aloud what is written. To read with Lectio Divina is to put yourself into it. To show with your voice, the meaning of the language.

In multiple places throughout the Book of Acts, the apostles are said to just stand up and speak.

- acts 1.15-16 - In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said
- acts 2.14-36 - But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them
- acts 4.8-12 - Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them,

“When Peter saw it, he addressed the people.” That’s all it said. I find this very disconcerting. It did not say that he began during the week ahead to organize his notes, consult his concordance, and work on his final draft. He stood up, and spoke.

- there are a total of 21 instances in the Book of Acts of the Apostles, where the apostles spontaneously begin to speak with

power that moves people at the deepest level. Only with the power of spoken language.

An actor can do this. An actor would be able to provide the power of language that moves people. I once heard a Southern Baptist preacher described as so good with the power of language, that the birds in the trees outside the church window would get quiet and listen.

You've heard an actor say the opening lines of Shakespeare's *Richard the Third*. The play opens, usually with a bare stage, the actor alone in the middle, and he begins to speak. He has nothing but spoken language to connect with the audience.

The speaker is Gloucester, the future Richard the Third and he is commenting on how Edward's victory (at the battle of Mortimer's Cross) has freed England from a kind of civil war. It is said that at the precise moment in the battle, the sun came out at the right time to aid them in their victory. So in this passage, York is the family so Edward is the son of York, but Edward is also the sun of York that came out at the right time to win the day. Winter is the dark time before the battle, Summer is when the son/sun comes out to bring victory.

The actor, alone on the stage, says simply:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York.
- Richard III (1.1.1)

The winter of our discontent. Winter of discontent continues in Haiti. It is said that Haitians used to live in abject poverty ... and then the earthquake came. The children at Haiti Micah Project, with Father Constant's leadership, are more privileged; they get food, clean water, medical care, and education.

But if you watch the documentary entitled, "Lift Up!", you see Haitian's after the earthquake telling their story in compelling spoken language, and then they sing. Mother Lauren Stanley said that she saw Haitians immediately after the earthquake join into a circle to sing and thank God for their lives. Their glorious colorful Creole speaks and sings with the power of vocal language. They lack the necessities, they do not lack spiritual power. And they attribute their power to God and not to themselves.

Si se Bondye ki voye. Li peya fre ou.
If it is God who sends you, he'll pay your expenses.

Bondye do ou. fe pa ou, M a fe pa M.
God says do your part and I'll do mine.

Nanpwen lapriye ki pa gen "Amen."
There is no prayer which does not have an "Amen".

Haiti has known the winter of their discontent. And within it they have known God's presence. And they express it through the power of spoken language. And we can hear it too, in their words, and in ours.

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this Son of Nazareth.