

The Twenty-third Sunday After Pentecost, Year C
Isaiah 65:17-25; Canticle 9;
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

The Rev. Charlie Bauer
The Baptism of Sophia Anne Grogg
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church, Toano, VA
November 17, 2019

“For I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your
opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.”¹

We all know the old adage: sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.

I think that’s a flat out lie.

Words have great power! Words can wound us; perhaps you can remember a moment, even long ago, when somebody said something to you that still echoes in your mind. Words can heal; a heartfelt apology, an expression of gratitude – these words too have power.

Even though our older daughter turned four a few months ago, I am still developing my voice as a parent. I suspect that will always be true: as a family we are constantly growing and learning and through trial and error finding our way. But a while back I landed on one phrase I have tried to instill on our older daughter, and soon will on our younger daughter, too, as she starts to speak more. It contradicts that old phrase about sticks and stones. I know what I tell her is not unique, but I think it’s significant:

Your words are your most important possession. Use them well.

Words matter. And so, when we hear this morning’s gospel story, well, this is not a warm and fuzzy moment. Especially on this day as we prepare to baptize Sophia into the Christian family, this might not be the type of gospel you were expecting to hear.

Nations will fight one another, we will endure natural disasters, and then Jesus gets personal: *we* will be arrested, persecuted, betrayed even by parents and friends.

And over all of this, the temple, where Mary and Joseph presented the baby Jesus, where Jesus learned about God as a young child, where Jesus defends against the profanities of life in the form of the money changers, where Jesus teaches these very words – even this holy place, the temple, will be destroyed.

Now, you may know something that those who were listening to Jesus speak about the temple in this gospel story did not know: the temple, this glorious, ornate structure built for the glory of God that was the central focus of the Jewish faith of God – the temple was indeed destroyed, some thirty or so

¹ Luke 21:15 NRSV.

years after the crucifixion of Jesus. The Jewish people revolted against the Roman Empire, and as part of a larger response by the Romans that saw much of Jerusalem destroyed, the temple was ruined at the hand of Rome.

But even the first hearers of Luke's Gospel knew this too: though the dating of biblical texts is a bit unclear, the author of Luke's gospel likely wrote these words within a decade or two following the temple's destruction.²

So even the first to hear Luke's gospel understood something about this story: when Jesus speaks of destruction of the temple, they know these words are true, because, well, that's what happened.

What follows gains believability because of this bit of rhetoric by the author of Luke. Jesus' focus in this text, then, is even more clear: Our story, today, then is one of endurance, wrestling with this in-between time when Jesus lives yet is not seen on earth, while Jesus promises to deliver us to that day when Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead.

How are we, then, to live this life awaiting Jesus' return, a life that Jesus tells us today will be, to say the least, a struggle?

Today, at the 9am service, we welcome Sophia Anne Grogg as the newest Christian into the great multitude of the faithful. We do so with powerful words: invoking God as Trinity after we affirm our call of how we ought to live in this world through the words of our Baptismal Covenant – words we'll all repeat in just a few minutes. Through these meager words, God is present: we are assured that when we say these words and pour the water and anoint with oil, the Holy Spirit is at work in that moment, welcoming the newly baptized, strengthening us all.

And we need strength: though I pray that your life is not as bleak as the world Jesus portrays in today's gospel, we do not live in a world completely at peace. We do not need to turn far in the newspaper to see too many accounts of war, famine, disaster. And in our own individual lives, we each have our own challenges. Though I hope few of us know the sting of betrayal "by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends,"³ some of us know that pain far too well.

But we have hope on this day: by virtue of our baptism, Sophia today joins a vast family of believers that transcends time and place. We who are members of this family, ourselves welcomed in our own moment of baptism, greet her with open arms with the reassurance that she will now be part of a family who will stand by her, no matter what happens. This is part of our story, too; These words of baptismal promises are our words, our hope.

Through all the trials and tribulations of life, we are assured by Jesus, "I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict."

We do not have to look far to understand what words will be given to us: from John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . What has come

² For one discussion on the dating of the authorship of Luke: *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version: Fully Revised Fourth Edition* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 1827.

³ Luke 21:16.

into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”⁴

These words, The Word, is our most important possession, given freely to us at our baptism, ours to possess at God’s invitation. Jesus promises to sustain us, even to the point of our earthly death, that in the eyes of God “not a hair of your head will perish.”⁵

Jesus does not promise us a life free from difficulties – far from it, as we are reminded today. But Jesus does promise us that through those difficulties, we will never walk alone.

“For I will give you words” – the Word, your most important possession. Use it well.

Amen.

⁴ John 1:1, 3b-5.

⁵ Luke 21:18.