

Still Speaking

Good morning, friends, I'm glad you're all here. Today I'd like to share a few words about words.

My mother and father and sister are here this morning, and I have to admit that I'm a bit shy of speaking about words in front of this, the assembled wordy wing of my family. My father had a distinguished career as a publisher, and published (among many other books) the American Heritage Dictionary; my mother was a teacher of college English and an editor, when not raising three wonderful children; my sister, with an advanced degree in English from Harvard, is a freelance editor and novelist and playwright. Speaking about words in front of them is like speaking about Catholic theology in front of the Pope.

Nevertheless, I shall endeavor it, and I'll start with the word *prophet*.

What does a prophet do? For many of us, the first thing that comes to mind is that a prophet tells what's going to happen in the future, like Nostradamus or Jeane Dixon. The Old Testament prophets sometimes did that. Another thing the prophets did (and far more often than telling the future) was to criticize. Sometimes the ways of the Old Testament peoples can seem very foreign, but in this at least they were much like us: they liked to complain about the government. Like newspaper columnists, like political bloggers, they exercised their fluency by criticizing the policies and morality of the people in general and the leaders in particular.

We know a lot about the foretelling and complaining done by the prophets, because many words of that kind were written down. The Hebrews were an unusually wordy people. Not that their literacy rate was very high by modern standards -- perhaps less than ten percent. But those who could write seem to have written down everything. Other ancient peoples wrote down the pronouncements of royalty, but the Hebrews also wrote down the responses of the critics. Yet there is one more important thing prophets did that was rarely written down, a thing that just doesn't lend itself to writing: prophets *babbled*.

The Old Testament sometimes mentions bands of roaming prophets. There's a story about King Saul in 1 Samuel. This is Samuel speaking to Saul in chapter 10:

After that you shall come to Gibeath-elohim, at the place where the Philistine garrison is; there, as you come to the town, you will meet a band of prophets coming down from the shrine with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre playing in front of them; they will be in a prophetic frenzy. Then the spirit of the Lord will possess you, and you will be in a prophetic frenzy along with them and be turned into a different person. Now when these signs meet you, do whatever you see fit to do, for God is with you.

So here's a band of prophets, complete with instruments, coming down from the shrine in a prophetic frenzy. What are they singing? Is it predictions about the future?

Tomorrow there's a chance of rain,
With thunderstorms in the afternoon,
The fish will not be biting then,
But mend your nets, you'll need them soon.

-- no, probably not. Or are they singing criticisms of the king?

Enemies are all around,
And our backs are against the wall,
We prayed to God for a competent king,
But Samuel picked this idiot Saul.

-- no, probably not that either. The most likely thing is that they are singing nonsense. It's like that tradition of nonsense rhymes in folk songs:

There was a frog lived in a spring,
Sing song kitty can't you kye me oh,
He was so hoarse he could not sing,
Sing song kitty can't you kye me oh,
Kemo kimo where oh where,
Mahee, mahi, and in come Sally singing
Sing song pennywhistle ling tom nippy cat
Sing song kitty can't you kye me oh.

That's the prophetic frenzy, prophecy without content, ecstatic utterance, glosalalia, speaking in tongues -- but in the tongues of angles, not of men. In other words, this band of prophets is babbling.

Nor was it just the Hebrews who were given to ecstatic prophecy. There's this passage in 1 Kings, chapter 18, during a contest between the Prophet Elijah and the priests of Baal. And it turns out that Baal's priests babble too:

Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

In ancient Greek religion, gods and goddesses often spoke through the ecstatic utterances of women. The famous oracle at Delphi was of this kind. Homer wrote of "frenzied women from whose lips the god speaks." Heraclitus, writing in the fifth century BC, wrote "The Sibyl, with frenzied mouth uttering things not to be laughed at, unadorned and unperfumed, yet reaches to a thousand ears with her voice by aid of the god." Our word *prophet* is from the Greek *prophetes*. That was the man who interpreted the woman's ecstatic utterances.

And while we're looking at word origins: the Hebrew word for prophet is *navi*. The word *navi* seems to have been borrowed from the Akkadian language, though the original Akkadian word is unclear. Professor Amy-Jill Levine (a Biblical scholar some of us saw in the video lecture series *Saving Jesus*) thinks the Akkadian root was a word that meant, "to rave like a lunatic."

The audience for which the Book of Acts was written was familiar with the tradition of ecstatic utterance -- more familiar with it than most of us are today. This is the context within which we should understand today's reading, the Pentecost story.

This is quite a story, even without the whole speaking-in-tongues part. Those same followers of Jesus who denied knowing him, who kept their heads down and their mouths shut while he was being tortured to death -- here they are in a public place, speaking Jesus' dangerous message to anyone who will listen. What made them grow so much backbone? Clearly, there was something important about Jesus that did not die. I don't mean his body -- I trust indeed that Jesus is not saddled with a human body for all time; a bothersome appendage; I hope to lay mine down some day (though not yet, O Lord!). But the Pentecost story teaches that the fire of Jesus, the spirit of Jesus, could not be extinguished. Trying to put it out was futile. It came back, and it spread. To me, this Pentecost story is a resurrection story, the best of the resurrection stories, though it has no empty tomb.

Now some of us see this story as factual: a historical description of a supernatural event, in which the power of God manifested actual tongues of flame and gave people the ability to communicate in languages they couldn't otherwise use. And this is a good way to see it -- I'm sure the world is full of wonders. Others of us see it as poetic license: a dramatized description of a perfectly natural event, in which the followers of Jesus, glowing with excitement, struggled to communicate in many languages. And this is a good way to see it -- I'm sure the inner fire is miracle enough.

But however you see this Pentecost story, I think it helps to understand it within that ancient tradition of ecstatic utterance. Through this story the early Christians claimed the ancient traditions of sacred speech --

claimed them and began to shift them in a new direction.

Yes, says the story: like our ancestors, we are ecstatic at times -- beside ourselves with God. We burn with tongues of fire. But we try to channel that ecstasy into intelligible utterances -- because that's how Jesus wanted it. Ecstatic utterance requires an intermediary: a prophetes to stand between you and the divine. That wasn't Jesus' way; Jesus didn't do intermediaries. In fact, I can't imagine Jesus babbling at all. I can imagine myself babbling; you'll probably hear me do it; sometimes, when I'm trying really hard to communicate, the pressure of what I want to say exceeds my capacity to say it, and extra stammerings and syllables spray out like jets of water from punctures in a high-pressure hose. But we have no stories about Jesus babbling. Our traditions about Jesus represent him as communicating very clearly, and overcoming all kinds of barriers to do so.

And yes, says the story: like our ancestors, we use language for sacred purposes. But we don't believe that the words are sacred in themselves. For the Jews, Hebrew was the sacred language, the privileged language of ritual, God's own language. Hebrew was the language in which God was said to have inscribed the tablets given to Moses on Mount Sinai -- which, as it happens, is the event celebrated by the Jews in festival that brought all those pilgrims into Jerusalem in the Pentecost story. For many modern Muslims, the sacred language is classical Arabic, the language in which they say God dictated the Qur'an to the Prophet Mohammed; no translation can have the same cosmic significance. For orthodox Hindus, the Sanskrit language of their scripture is sacred and timeless, the very breath of God. But the Pentecost story introduces a different notion: there will be no privileged language for Christianity.

Finally, the story emphasizes speaking to each listener in his or her own native language. Now this wasn't at all necessary, because almost all the people gathered in Jerusalem for the festival would have spoken at least two languages: their own cradle speech, and Greek. The listeners weren't just helplessly wandering around the city, unable to communicate, like American tourists in Paris, hoping to blunder into someone who will admit to speaking English. Here, today, in the middle of America at the height of its imperial power, many of us end up speaking only one language, because one is all we ever need. I must admit that I fall into this category; in spite of my high-school and college language courses I can converse now in only one language; I stand before you a wretched monoglot. But in New-Testament times, Greek served as the lingua franca, the common speech for travel and commerce, and the disciples could have made themselves understood by speaking Greek. For simple communication, for mere intelligibility, Greek would have sufficed. Yet the Pentecost story emphasizes that it isn't enough to be merely intelligible -- each listener is addressed personally, in his or her own tongue. A person's cradle-speech is the best vehicle for communicating from heart to heart. For me, that cradle-speech is English. The words of English will always echo with the loving voices of my parents, and that gives them, for me, a power that could not be matched by any second language of utility, and a sanctity that could not be matched by any official language of ritual.

In short: the best language for sacred speech depends on the listener. That's a new twist in the history of religious thought. The Pentecost story introduces this personal dimension of Christianity, and it's an aspect of our religious tradition that I really like. We do not think of God as an entity who babbles, making sense only to himself. We do not think of God as a vain king who insists on being addressed in a language reserved only for speaking with the king. We think of God as Immanuel, God-with-us; and directly to our hearts, in our own innermost languages, God is still speaking.

God bless you.

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