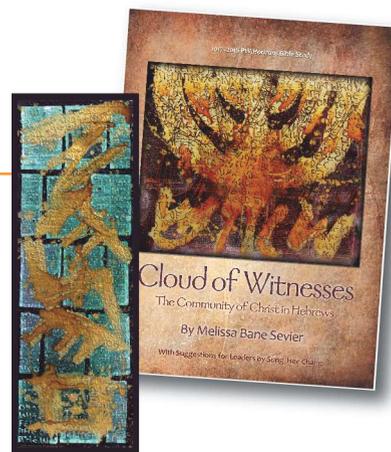


The Whispering Word

BY PATRICIA K. TULL

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Scripture: Hebrews 1:1–3a; Genesis 1:1–5; Ezekiel 37:1–14; John 1:1–5, 14; Hebrews 4:12–13

In the 1984 movie *Amadeus*, that musical connoisseur Emperor Joseph II of Austria commented that Mozart's music was “an excellent effort” but contained “too many notes.” It's a comment that often runs through my own mind during Presbyterian worship. Except in a Presbyterian worship service it's “too many words,” too much to think about, too much to digest in an hour. That's why I love the music there—Mozart's or any other, the organ prelude on which my meditations float, the anthem overflowing with harmony, the hymns. Presbyterian hymns are packed with deep thought. So, although they are very familiar, it's possible to hear an old line in a new way every time.

I also think about the phrase “too many words” when I write sermons. Mozart responded to the emperor with young arrogant genius, saying, “I don't understand. There are just as many notes, Majesty, as are required. Neither more nor less.” Perhaps that was so for Mozart, but I find I can do without all the words I am tempted to pack into every sermon, overloading hearers' brains and patience. As the emperor said, “There are in fact only so many notes the ear can hear in the course of an evening.” And only so many words ears can hear in the course of a morning.

Mozart sarcastically asked his king to choose the notes that should be omitted. But as a preacher I don't have that luxury. I have to decide before Sunday which words to leave out. Sometimes whole paragraphs can go.

Mindful of Jesus' advice—“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their

many words” (Matt. 6:7)—I'm drawn to simplify the liturgy as well. The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving doesn't have to rehearse all of salvation history every single time. The petitions of the congregation can indeed be expressed without heaping helpings of thee and thou. Spaces can remain between words, moments to breathe and be, in blessed silence.

Power is not in many words, but in the right words. According to Genesis 1:3, God set the universe in motion with two of them: *yehi* 'or, “Let there be light.” That was all the prompting the world needed. John the Baptist set Jesus' ministry in motion, according to Matthew 3:2–3, with a two-sentence sermon, half of which was a quote from Isaiah. The question is not where to find more words, but how to choose a few words well.

What is the one sentence that will set healing in motion today? What is the word or two that will comfort or encourage? Which words can and should be omitted?

During college I took long shuttle bus rides to campus and often used the time to memorize scripture from flash cards, both to get to know the Bible better and to exercise my mind. More than half a lifetime ago, it came easier. Today, remembering where I put my phone is exercise enough. But I do remember some of those verses, often whispering just the word I need to hear. “I am with you.” “Rejoice in the Lord always.” “Consider the lilies.”

As an environmental theologian, I visit congregations interested in jumpstarting their environmental ministries. Church members ask what they can do when the ecological challenges seem insurmountable, when many large forces—governmental, economic, ideological—seem arrayed against

sustainable solutions, when other members seem indifferent, when they wish their green teams were twice as large. I tell them what scripture whispers to me. Things like the parable of the sower, how one seed falling in the right soil—and we never know which soil that might be—grows thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold, but only if we're sowing. I describe to them the tiny mustard seed from which a huge bush grows. Perhaps it's whistling in the dark to say these things. But it is short sentences like these, scripture's

vivid words, not long windy sermons, that whisper to us and keep us going day by day.

The word of God is like that. It's not imperious or longwinded or vague. It's just the right phrase at just the right moment in just the right ear. Living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, the author of Hebrews said. The word of God judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart, and sustains them as well.

Questions

1. Recall a time when a single word or phrase made things right for you and redirected, comforted, or revealed something important to you. Where did it come from? What made it stick?
2. How often does something you read from the Bible pop up in your mind at just the right moment? How can you encourage that to happen more often?
3. Images in scripture, like the image of the valley of dry bones coming to life in Ezekiel 37, can also be powerful. What are some scriptural images that communicate God and life in God to you?

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