

Title: Words Make Worlds
Date: 1/16/2022
Genesis 1.1-5 & Mark 1.40-45
Series: Tools For New-Year Living
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Mark 1:40-45 (NRSV)

⁴⁰ *A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean."* ⁴¹ *Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!"* ⁴² *Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.* ⁴³ *After sternly warning him he sent him away at once,* ⁴⁴ *saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."* ⁴⁵ *But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.*

Once a month, or so, when I was in grade school, the teacher would pass out a Scholastic Books order form and if I could convince my mom or dad to give me 50 or 75 cents, or maybe even a whole dollar and a quarter, I could order a book or two to have and to read as my very own! One of the books that came to me this way became an all-time favorite – *The Cricket in Times Square*, by George Selden. This is the story of Chester Cricket, who comes to live in the newsstand that belongs to the Bellini family in the Times Square subway station. As you might imagine, Chester is an unusual cricket. Unlike the chirping sounds that most crickets make, Chester plays classical music with his wings, and over the course of the book, his playing becomes so popular that the Bellini's had to schedule regular concert times to handle the crush of New Yorkers who want to hear Chester play.

When my own children came along, I delighted in being able to read *A Cricket in Times Square* to them. One night, as I was reading about Chester Cricket to our youngest son, Jacob, we were finishing a chapter near the end of the book and the world that the author created with his words was so alluring and magical that Jacob and I were transported in time and space to the Times Square subway station where we listened in our own hushed awe to the music of an imaginary cricket--music that was so powerful in its beauty, that it brought busy, noisy New York City to a quiet and peaceful standstill on a warm summer evening.

Indulge me for a few moments, and let your imaginations roam all the way to Times Square while I read about Chester's concert: Chester's playing filled the station. Like ripples around a stone dropped into still water,circles of silence (flowed through those gathered around) the newsstand. And as people listened, a change came over their faces. Eyes that looked worried

grew soft and peaceful; tongues left off chattering; and ears full of the city's rustling were rested by the cricket's melody.....No one dared break the hush that had taken hold of the station.

Above the cricket cage, through a grate in the sidewalk, the chirping rose up to the street. A man who was walking down Broadway stopped and listened. Then someone else (stopped as well). In a minute a knot of people was staring at the grate..... "What's happening?", (someone asked). Whispers passed back and forth in the crowd. But as soon as there was a moment of silence, everyone could hear the music.

People overflowed the sidewalk into the street. A policeman had to stop traffic so nobody would get hurt. And then everyone in the stopped cars heard Chester too. You wouldn't think a cricket's tiny chirp could carry so far, but when all is silence, the piercing notes can be heard for miles.

Traffic came to a standstill. The buses, the cars – everything stopped. And what was strangest of all, no one minded. Just this once, in the very heart of the busiest of cities, everyone was perfectly content not to move and hardly to breathe. And for those few minutes, while the song lasted, Times Square was as still as a meadow at evening, with the sun streaming in on the people there and the wind moving among them as if they were only tall blades of grass. (pp. 144-146)

When I stopped reading, Jacob and I sat in silence for a few minutes caught up in the world George Selden crafted with his words. Caught up in the hope and the possibility of a world reshaped by the beauty of music. There is a power in words! We all know this. Words can paint a picture which we can enter and dwell in. Words can speak a world of hope and new possibilities into existence. Words can damage people, and destroy trust, and shred the fragile threads that bind us together.

In this new year, as we consider what it means to be wise and consider how our individual wisdom, and our collective wisdom might enable the year that stretches out before us to be more faithful, and filled with deeper meaning--as we consider what it means to be wise children of God, and disciples of Jesus, who soak in and then practice the wisdom of our faith--as we work at being wise, I believe we must pay careful attention to the use of words...attention to *our* use of words, and attention to the words offered by anyone who claims to speak on our behalf. For the right words correctly used, can help us imagine freshly, and build up justice, and broaden our horizons just as the wrong words used with malice and spoken in fear, can tear down, and narrow perspectives, and cut off futures, and possibilities, and life itself.

My sense is that most of the time, the words we use aren't big enough. They don't imagine or create a big enough world, a kind enough world, an abundant enough world, a faithful enough

world, a loving enough world. Our Genesis lesson tells of God beginning to speak creation into existence.....God's words are literally making a world – our world! As those who are created just a little lower than God, according to Psalm 8...What might we be able to do to make our world a more just, more caring, more compassionate place by using words as full of creativity and poetic beauty, and fresh possibilities, as those spoken by God into the wet and windy darkness of creation's dawn?

The scope of our words – how broad they are, how narrow they are –give or take away our ability to approach each other. And in this time in history, when narrow words and tiny worlds seem to be in the ascendency, I would venture to guess that most of us are starved for fresh words that help us to approach each other--fresh words that are worthy of the world God desires for us!

Jesus gives us the words to imagine and shape God's kingdom, God's beloved community, here on earth. Words that call forth our better angels, our best selves--words like compassion, grace, healing, mercy, listening, hope, joy, abundance, love. And while we must certainly use these world-shaping words in our conversations with each other, and with all others, it is just as important, I think –maybe even more important – for these world-shaping words to guide our actions, to focus the ways we live toward all others.

In our Mark lesson, Jesus speaks words that paint a new world of possibility for the diseased man. 'I do choose,' says Jesus, "Be made clean!" And then, when the newly cured man opens himself to the new world of Jesus' words, he can't stop offering his own words of hope and possibility to others. His small words get much bigger through his encounter with Jesus. His small world is overwhelmed by the generosity of God! And yet, despite this call to use and embrace words that lift-up, and empower, and remind us that we inhabit a world of God's creating, our humanness tends to attract us to other words--narrow words which we believe offer us greater control; words that do not scare us like God's broad words often do. Words like power, and fear, and safe, and secure, and first, and great, and strength--words that invite us to look back over our shoulders to the confines of an imagined past rather than words that draw us forward into God's ever-unfolding future!

As children of the God who spoke such a generous and abundant world into existence.....as disciples of Jesus who expects us to speak and live words that offer life to all.....we cannot accept the picture of a small and bigoted world that so many are trying to paint these days, and I think we must be especially wary of those who would use the words of scripture in ways that degrade, and abuse, and exclude others.

But a response on our part to those who use words to create a small and mean world.....a response from us that is only name calling, and ridiculing and screaming words of disgust and protest, is not enough, is never enough. For when we allow our words to become narrow as we attempt to

counter the narrow words of others, we fail to speak as broadly and imaginatively and as lovingly as God expects us to, as Jesus has taught us to.

And so, as guardians and keepers of the broad, loving, grace-filled words of our faith, we must respond to narrowness and ugliness and mean-spiritedness with the same expansive imagination God spoke at creation, and Jesus spoke to one seeking healing. We must respond with energy and vigor and passion; with words that call for abundant life and tender-hearted mercy.....with words that speak and expect the broad, imaginative, life-giving world of God's creation is for all people, everywhere! We must speak with caring words that demand action and then we must use our bodies to make God's spoken world a real and tangible place.

The world of a hushed New York City that George Selden painted with his words was a world grounded in the tangible and concrete reality of that specific city in the late 1950's. While he certainly crafts an inventive world, it can capture our imagination because it is rooted in reality.

The world that Jesus paints for us with his words, is likewise rooted in the reality of real people made whole, of real lives transformed by God's purposeful love. The mantle of carrying and speaking these words of power and truth and grace-filled new possibilities falls on us in this time. This time when it is our privilege to speak broad and bold words to counter the narrow and mean words of those who would have us live in fear.

As our Spiritual Homework this week, let us pay careful attention to our words.....that every word we both think and utter aloud may reflect the glory and the generosity of the world that our God spoke into existence for us and for all!

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George Selden, *The Cricket In Times Square*

Krista Tippet, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry Into the Mystery and Art of Living*