

“A Word to the Wise”  
Exodus 3:1-15  
August 30, 2020  
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What does it take? / What does it take to set things right?

What is enough? / What is enough to get the job done?

When is enough - - enough?

Have you asked yourself any of these questions lately?

If you have - - then this sermon is for you.

Today the Biblical text helps us get a handle on these questions.

And we start by thinking about WORDS - - and how people RESPOND...

Most people have heard the phrase: “A Word to the Wise”.

It’s an old expression.

Apparently a word - - can be heard differently by someone who is wise and someone who is unwise. / There are words. / But the question behind the old saying is - - who hears them, and what do they make of them?

Actually the phrase is only the first HALF of the old saying. / Do you know the whole saying? / “A word to the wise...is...”

The whole saying is: “A word to the wise is - - sufficient”.

A word to the wise is - - enough.

But - - as I asked at the beginning - - what really is enough?

Which suggests - - that at least in some situations recently - - there is a problem.

It seems like things take - - more effort than they should.

Or words - - of wisdom - - don’t get heard.

Or they GET heard - - but they aren’t enough.

But if the old saying has any truth in it - - the REASON why a word - - or wisdom - - is not enough - - is NOT because of the word! / It's just a word - - and it MAY even contain real wisdom - - and truth.

The reason - - why a word to the wise is EITHER - - enough or not enough - - is about the experience and response of the person HEARING the word.

IF- - a person is WISE - - THEN - - a word - - is enough.

But...

What do we do - - when a word - - is NOT enough?

Our scripture reading for today - - asks - - basically - - THIS very question.

Pharaoh - - was NOT wise.

And OVER and OVER - - Moses brought him a word.

It was a word right from the mouth of GOD.

Words of warning - - and pleading - - to do the right thing.

But over and over - - it was not enough.

Moses stuttered - - and he tried to follow God - - and bring a word of wisdom.

Moses had Aaron's help bringing the word.

And Moses - - with his stutter - - and his questions and fears - - did not QUIT.

Interestingly - - as an aside - - Adolf Hitler was a great orator. / Hitler did NOT stutter - - and he did NOT have a speech impediment. / But we know how that turned out.

Words - - of wisdom - - are enough - - when people are WISE as they LISTEN.

And then - - when they act in response.

There are a lot of words in our culture.

Not all of them are wise.

We believe strongly in the freedom of the press - - as a way for everyone to get heard and as a guard against tyranny. / But there are problems right now - - with HOW the press is heard in this country - - at least in my opinion.

The internet and social media connect us with people across the world - - including family and loved ones. / And - - it can connect us with more GARBAGE than we can imagine. People type stuff in before they think and hit “send” or “post”.

Meanwhile there are REAL problems in our world.

People are hurting.

People are struggling.

There is fear - - and loss of jobs - - and deep rooted systemic racism - - and a global health crisis - - and we can sometimes feel disconnected and isolated.

The book of Proverbs in the Old Testament says, “wisdom cries aloud in the street”.

In the markets she raises her voice...

On the top of the walls she cries out...

At the entrance of the city gates she speaks...

Wisdom is not just a list of old sayings.

Wisdom is out in the markets and the streets.

For those - - with ears to hear.

It SHOULD be enough.

Shouldn't it?

But WHAT is enough?

What is sufficient - - in our world as it is today?

A WORD - - should be enough.

A TRUE word - - IS enough - - for the WISE to know what to do.

Supposedly.

But as the Old Testament reading shows us - - sometimes WISDOM is difficult to come by. / And it takes time - - and repetition...

Let's look more closely at the beginning of story of Moses in chapter 3 of Exodus.

I will be reading and preaching through the book of Exodus in September and October.

So this is the beginning of that story...

Look at what happens - - maybe you remember some of it...

Moses was born in Egypt to a Hebrew woman who was in slavery. / Hebrew children were in danger - - and so she put him in a basket in the river - - and he ended up being adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. / So he was influenced BOTH by slave heritage - - and by inheriting the power of the empire. / Chapter 3 opens after he has FLED Egypt as a murderer - - because the TWO sides of his personality came into conflict. / He WITNESSED police brutality - - and he was TORN - - between his allegiance to the police force - - and the person who was brutalized.

So he ran far away to a place called to Midian to avoid facing the situation.

But God sought him out.

And God called him to RETURN and face the situation and take a stand.

Moses' job was to deliver a WORD of TRUTH to the Pharaoh.

"Pharaoh, let God's people GO!"

But that word - - was not enough.

At least not at first - - and not just once.

10 times Moses and Aaron tried. / There are not ONLY 10 repetitions of God's WORD - - these are accompanied by 10 PLAGUES. / But over and over - - it is not enough.

Pharaoh was in power - - and he did not want to listen.

Pharaoh - - it seems - - was not wise.

Because a word was never enough.

But - - before we come down too hard on the poor Pharaoh - - remember that LOTS of people had problems believing the word too. / The people of Israel - - are the ones who stand to GAIN by this - - - and yet they go BACK and FORTH - - between believing and doubting.

Compare chapter 4 verse 31 to chapter 6 verses 9-10:

In chapter 4 it says, "...when they heard that the Lord had visited the people of Israel - - and that he had seen their affliction - - they bowed their heads and worshipped."

HERE it seems like a WORD IS enough.

They WERE wise - - and they HEARD the word - - and believed.

BUT - - then in chapter 6 it says: "Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did NOT listen - - because of their BROKEN SPIRIT - - and their cruel bondage."

Here a WORD is just NOT enough. / Because they feel - - crushed in spirit.

So they go - - back and forth.

Wisdom - - comes and goes.

Moses also goes back and forth too.

Moses trusts God - - and then doubts himself.

Back and forth through the story.

So WHAT does it take? / When is enough enough?

Well - - the people finally escape through the Red Sea - - after the Passover.

The angel of death.

Facing their own frailty and mortality.

It seems to take a plague - - to get everyone's attention.

Sound familiar?

Look at what happens:

God hears the cry of the people, and Moses does speak, with Aaron's help.

And at the heart of Moses speech is this word from God:

“I AM”

When all is said and done - - God IS.

No matter what - - God IS.

No matter how bad it seems now - - God IS.

God IS - - and was - - and will be.

It's a pretty SIMPLE sentence - - grammatically speaking: a noun and a verb.

God IS.

Words are usually pretty easy to understand.

But wisdom - - is NOT words.

Wisdom is the experience behind the words.

Wisdom is actually LISTENING to the words.

Wisdom is making a difference in our lives.

Wisdom puts an end to BOTH systemic racism AND senseless violence.

Wisdom is acting responsibly and living out the words we hear.

As a draw to a close today I offer a comparison between TWO people and their response to religion in America. / There are lots of religious words out there. / But the question is: where is the wisdom?

These two books provide a contrast by describing the lives of two very different people:

In “Who Moved the Stone” a lawyer named Mr. Morrison, sets out to DISPROVE the resurrection. / The resurrection is a central part of the Christian faith. / It is part of the wisdom that doesn’t make logical sense - - but makes STREET sense - - if you are a person of faith - - and have ever faced death - - or overcome adversity.

The book tells the story of how his quest for proof AGAINST faith - - led this logical lawyer - - to discover his faith. / At one point he describes his struggle as he began to grow in faith and he writes, “I loved what God was doing in my life - - helping and teaching - - but I was REPELLED by the ETHICAL demands Christ placed on my life”.

The thought that his faith might actually MAKE A DIFFERENCE - -

...that he might actually CHOOSE differently...

...that frightened him!

But in the end - - it WAS ENOUGH.

And it changed his life.

The other book was written by the religion editor for the L. A. Times. / In 2009, William Lobdell wrote a book called, “Losing My Religion”. / The subtitle is: “How I lost my faith while reporting on religion in America, and found unexpected peace.”

The second book is both disturbing and profound.

Lobdell was a man of words. / He wrote for a living - - and thought he had found his DREAM job - - when asked to report on religion in America. / But instead he discovered so much hypocrisy and misconduct - - he renounced his faith after 25 years of doing it.

And after 25 years of reporting on religion in America - - he quit his job - - and his faith - - and says he has never been happier.

I get it.

I don't think the writer of this book is crazy - - or out to lunch.

I get disappointed too.

By politicians - - and by the church - - by leaders and by family and friends.

And I go back and forth like Moses. / I listen and then I screw up.

And then I listen again...back and forth... I reform and then I backslide.

But...I have NOT given up MY faith.

And... I would like to think - - if William Lobdell who wrote that book - - had discovered Plymouth Church - - he would have had a different experience - - than he did at the L.A. Times. I like to think - - that at Plymouth Church he would have discovered people - - for whom - - WORDS of WISDOM - - ARE enough.

People who live the words. / People who hear and respond.

So - - WHAT - - is enough?

What does it take - - in our world ?

Are there enough WISE people - - for the WORDS to be heard?

I hope that Moses - - and the Israelites - - and Pharaoh are NOT our guide.

Rather - - I hope they are a CAUTIONARY TALE.

They ARE our forbearers - - in the history of our faith.

We all stumble - - and make mistakes.

But in the end - - I pray - - that a word to the WISE - - IS enough.

May it be so. / For you and for me.

Amen.