

# **Creative Spirituality: The Poetic Word**

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### **NPMC – March 27, 2022 – Lent 4**

*Scripture: Psalm 33:1-12; John 1:1-5, 14-18*

*Hymns: VT 403, 404*

#### **Psalm 33:1-12 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup> Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous.

Praise befits the upright.

<sup>2</sup> Praise the LORD with the lyre;

make melody to [God] with the harp of ten strings.

<sup>3</sup> Sing to [God] a new song;

play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

<sup>4</sup> For the word of the LORD is upright,

and all [God's] work is done in faithfulness.

<sup>5</sup> [God] loves righteousness and justice;

the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.

<sup>6</sup> By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,

and all their host by the breath of [God's] mouth.

<sup>7</sup> [God] gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;

[and] put the deeps in storehouses.

<sup>8</sup> Let all the earth fear the LORD;

let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of [the Divine].

<sup>9</sup> For [God] spoke, and it came to be;

[God] commanded, and it stood firm.

<sup>10</sup> The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;

[God] frustrates the plans of the peoples.

<sup>11</sup> The counsel of the LORD stands forever,

the thoughts of [God's] heart to all generations.

<sup>12</sup> Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD,

the people whom [God] has chosen as [God's] heritage.

#### **John 1:1-5, 14-18 (NRSV):**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

“A word after a word after a word is power,” wrote poet and novelist Margaret Atwood.<sup>1</sup> The power of words is something we are quite familiar with as Christians, even if we don’t talk about it much. Those who belong to our faith tradition, along with Judaism and Islam, are called “People of the Book,” because we hold written Scriptures with such reverence. Every week, we gather to read, hear, and sing the words of this sacred text, immersing ourselves in its narratives and, of course, its poetry. These form the very centre of our worship services, most times including a selection from the best-known kind of biblical poetry, the Psalms. Though these poems have roots going back almost 4,000 years (to 1600-1200 BCE),<sup>2</sup> they continue to inspire, comfort, and disturb us, resonating with our own journeys of faith millennia later. Like all good poetry, they have the power to move us. As we continue in our worship series on Creative Spirituality, I invite us to delve into the creativity and spirituality of poetry – both in God’s Word and in its incarnation among us.

## The Word of God

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,  
and all their host by the breath of [God’s] mouth.

<sup>7</sup> [God] gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;  
[and] put the deeps in storehouses.

<sup>8</sup> Let all the earth fear the LORD;  
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of [the Divine].

<sup>9</sup> For [God] spoke, and it came to be;  
[God] commanded, and it stood firm. (Psalm 33:6-9)

The very first event of the Bible is of course, creation. Genesis 1 tells us that God’s Spirit hovers over the chaos of the void and then begins to create the world. The

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<sup>1</sup> From her poem, “Spelling,” <https://internetpoem.com/margaret-atwood/spelling-poem/>

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), xiii.

method? Speech. “Let there be light,” God said, and there was light. Verse after verse begins with, “And God said....” God spoke the world into being, God’s poetry became light and darkness, water and sky, earth and leaf, feather and fin, fur and skin. The poetic words from the Divine became a whole world, enfleshed and come alive into a living, breathing planet with all its diverse, intertwined ecosystems of life. And we have the beautiful poetry of Genesis 1 to remember it by.

Perhaps we don’t think of it often because Genesis 1 is so familiar to us, but it’s quite remarkable to think of the creative power of God’s word as God’s method of choice for the work of creation. Commentator Cheree Hayes says, “So let’s consider the significance of speech. God could have nodded, or blinked, or motioned with [God’s] hand, but instead [God] is described as speaking. Words express the mind, will, and character of a person. Words reveal identity. We can observe much about a person based on what we see, but we can’t begin to know them personally until they speak to us. When God created the universe, [God] spoke it into existence. ‘The Word became flesh’ (John 1:14).”<sup>3</sup> And this assertion about the God who speaks things into being was a major statement in the Ancient Near East, as well, where myths about warrior gods creating through violence, out of the corpses of other gods, were not uncommon. In this context, our poet-God, who creates with words, also shows us the profound power of peace to birth and nurture and sustain life. As Chilean poet Pablo Neruda says, “Peace goes into the making of a poem as flour goes into the making of bread.”

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<sup>3</sup> Cheree Hayes, et al., “How Do God’s Words Create?” *The Bible Project*, <https://bibleproject.com/blog/john-1/>

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**-Pablo Neruda**

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the word of the Lord continues to make its appearance. God speaks to God's people through mysterious visitors and burning bushes; the "Word of the Lord" comes to the prophets as messages about justice and following God's ways; God's word, as we've seen, is praised in the Psalms as that which gives life, brings delight, and saves us. And then John steps in with his Gospel and its famous prologue, an ancient hymn about Jesus as the very Word of God made flesh to dwell

(literally "tent" or "tabernacle") among us.

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In this labyrinth of a poem, John attempts to convey the utter mystery and paradox of the incarnation, God's Word and Wisdom – that power that created the very world – becomes flesh, alive and walking among us, present with us as God and human, both. "This vision of incarnation, the Word made flesh, is a central aspect of the biblical imagination," writes Margaret Loewen Reimer. "It holds in tension the mystery of divinity with the solid immediacy of human flesh. ... That is also the defining motive of art – to make the invisible visible, the untouchable, touchable."<sup>4</sup> Or, coming back to Margaret Atwood's poem "Spelling," she says, 'A child is not a poem, / a poem is not a

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Loewen Reimer, "Mennonites and the Artistic Imagination" (Winter Lectures, Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg, MB, 1998), 8.

child, / there is no either/or. / However.” God speaks God’s Word into the world as an act of love, of re-creation, of redemption. And it shines with a life-giving light.

## Call & Response

“Free creativeness is the creature’s answer to the great call of its Creator. [Our] creative work is the fulfillment of the Creator’s secret will.” (Nikolai Berdyaev).<sup>5</sup>

As we are made in the image of God, the Creator-Poet of the world, it only makes sense that there are those among us gifted with words as well. And poetry, says Dorothy Sayers, is “an act of love toward the poet’s own imaginative act and toward [their] own fellow-beings. It is a social act”<sup>6</sup> to express oneself and communicate that through precise and beautiful words. It is an act of reaching out, of connection. So God calls with God’s Word, and we as creatures answer with our own words, and our own lives as poems, multiple, diverse variations on the theme of God’s Word.

In quite practical terms, maybe you have experience of words as a prayer practice, the spirituality of reading, journaling, praying the prayers of others or your own, writing cards to bring comfort and warmth to others. And words have the power to sustain us spiritually, even through very deep grief, as poet and prayer-writer Jan Richardson knows. We often use her prayers in our worship services here at NPMC; she has a wonderful way with words, and specializes in writing poignant blessings. But part of what led her to focus on blessings was an experience of grief and loss: her husband, Gary, died unexpectedly, and she was heart-broken. She says, “I have begun to suspect ... that one of the primary reasons that I began to compose blessings is

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), 61.

<sup>6</sup> Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, 42.

because I am in such need of them myself. I learned this most especially after the unexpected death of my husband nearly two years ago. An astounding source of grace and blessing in my life, Gary died at the beginning of Advent, several weeks after experiencing complications during what we had anticipated would be routine surgery. We had been married less than four years.”<sup>7</sup> She went on to write a book entitled *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*, which turned her grief into beautiful words that continue to speak to so many.<sup>8</sup> So this moment of deep loss in her life ended up becoming a redemptive source of beauty, encouragement, and spiritual nourishment for others. So blessings, as she says, “do not typically work in a linear way. They twist and turn, make their own paths, and spiral back to find us when we most need to receive them. Healing the fractured past, provoking us to act for a more whole future, opening our eyes to the God who meets us in the present ... [Blessings] are the stuff of poetry and mystery, of *kairos* and thin places, made of the most ordinary moments yet holding the power to open us to eternity.”<sup>9</sup> So she asks us, “[W]here do you see the Word taking flesh in this world? ... Are you listening for where and how Christ might be seeking to take form in you, to bring life to you, to illuminate you?”<sup>10</sup>

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. God spoke, and the world came alive, a distillation of poetic power. God the Poet called, and we answered with our own poems and songs; images of the Word made flesh in our words. “A word after a word after a word is power” – the power to heal, to reach out with love, to bless. Thanks be to God, our Divine Poet. AMEN

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<sup>7</sup> Jan Richardson, *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* (Orlando: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015), ix.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.janrichardson.com/books>

<sup>9</sup> Richardson, *Circle of Grace*, xx.

<sup>10</sup> Jan Richardson, “Christmas Day: Shines in the Darkness,” <http://adventdoor.com/2012/12/25/christmas-day-shines-in-the-darkness/>