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The Thing About Words

Texts: Philip K. Dick, from **Valis**; **Ephesians 1: 3-14**; **John 1: 1-18**

On a trip up to Toronto that my family took a few years ago to visit my parents, I was struck by the number of languages that were around us. Just riding the elevator up and down from my parents' condo on the 36th floor, I heard Hindi, Arabic, French, Greek, Russian, German, Chinese, Persian, and several other languages I couldn't identify. Oh, and we heard lots of English, too! Words were all around us, people talking, people communicating, miscommunicating, speaking with someone who mostly understood what the speakers were saying even if we sometimes couldn't. People were talking about the weather, about their plans for New Year's, about the holidays, and about who was vacationing with whom and where, or why they weren't vacationing but working, and whether they had to do that to keep their jobs or whether they were working by choice and whether that was the right choice, and what did their girlfriend think about the choice, and did it matter, and of course it did! Some people were upset with each other about something, though I couldn't say what. Some were clarifying a misunderstanding, others were making promises for the future or making apologies for the past. They were talking about world events and family events, about love and hate, about everything and nothing.

It was an amazing thing to ride that elevator, watching the comings and goings of human existence, the ascent and descent of humankind. Words, words, words are everywhere, from our first word to our last words, and all the words in between, we live in a sea of words, kind words, harsh words, garbled words, hurtful words we remember decades later, loving words we will never forget, healing words that changed how we thought about ourselves and about our world. Words make us human and allow us to share ourselves with others. Words tell others what we are thinking. Words share with others what we are feeling. Words open up our inner worlds to the outside world. Words let that outside world know what on earth is going on in here in our crazy old heads. Without words, it's just about impossible to know!
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God likes words. Typically God communicates in words. Whether it's the call of Abraham out of thin air, or the mysterious voice speaking to Moses from the burning bush, or the thunderous voice from the mountain which shakes the people of Israel, or the still small voice which speaks out of the silence into Elijah's mind, or even words written on stone tablets, when God is communicating with humanity, it's usually with words.

But wherever there are words, there is the possibility of misunderstanding. Did you say you went to the park and saw a nice man, or that you went to the park and saw an ice man? Was the kind man made out of flesh and blood, or was he made out of snow? I'm not sure I quite understood. When you say we should keep the Sabbath, God, is that to honor you, or to give us a rest, or both? Were humans made for the Sabbath, or was the Sabbath made for humans?

The whole Old Testament is full of “No, wait, you didn’t quite get it, that’s not what I meant” moments. It’s full of prophets coming to clarify, coming to remind, coming to upbraid, rebuke, and call to repentance a chosen people who just aren’t getting it, who can’t seem to stick with the program no matter how many blessings God offers, or curses God threatens with, or instructions God gives. Sometimes it seems like all of God’s words fall on deaf ears, or misunderstanding ears, or I-am-not-listening-I can’t-hear-you-lalalalala ears.

And into this mess of words comes the Word, just as John says: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” and then “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” Instead of trying to be known through words that float in the air and disappear, God will now be made known through a Word which has taken on flesh and dwelt among us, that is, through a person and a life. This is John’s way of saying “Christmas”, without the baby talk! There’s no manger, no shepherds, no room at the inn. Instead, John goes straight to the harder, grown up version of God coming into the world, talking about the Word taking on flesh instead of saying God was born among us as an infant, Immanuel. The Word is God’s meaning, God’s intention, what God is trying to communicate to us. And that Word took on flesh, and dwelt among us.

It’s different, but it’s the same good news as in Matthew and Luke: God came into the world as a person whose name was Jesus. Instead of talking about a baby, John talks about the Word and God. And the funny thing about God’s Word for John is that it doesn’t stay a Word at all, but becomes a person. That’s the point. This expression of God’s intentions, this communication from God, is a living person whom we can watch and observe. It’s not like other words which die as soon as the sound disappears. It’s a Word that takes on flesh and lives and breathes, and walks and talks, a Word which acts in the world and changes it forever. Instead of saying something, like “Thou shalt not ...,” God will now live something before our eyes. It’s as if God is taking up the old writer’s adage: “Don’t tell, show!”

The invisible God is now visible, and the right way to live is now lived out before our eyes. Through Jesus and in Jesus, God is communicating who God is, who we are, and how we should relate to God. God shares God’s own inner life with us, the promises, the warnings, the intentions, not with words only, but with actions. God is communicating with us person to person. This works itself out in some strange and wonderful ways. Let’s look at some examples: God shows us that God hates hypocrisy, not just by making speeches against hypocrites, but by taking a whip into the temple and driving the hypocrites out! Nothing unclear about that. God was communicating! God shows us what forgiveness is, not by telling us forgiving is good, but by standing in our midst to defend a woman caught in adultery, so that she is not stoned to death, and then telling her to go, uncondemned, to sin no more. My friends, that’s communicating! How about when God shows us what reconciliation means, not just by urging people to get along, but by going to a dinner party and inspiring a thieving tax collector to offer back all the stolen money and more to his community, or by meeting an outcast Samaritan woman at a well and making her the

messenger of salvation to her village? No one who saw it will ever forget what happened that day. The outcasts became incasts! Communicating. And God shows us that God wants to be with us, not by telling us God wants to be with us, but by actually, you know, coming and being with us. It's hard to misunderstand what God is like, what kind of people God wants us to be, when we see these things.

Jesus is the Word of God in human flesh, not just because he speaks, but because he acts. He makes real what he says by being himself. He doesn't just make promises, he is the promise. He doesn't just talk about resurrection and new life, he *is* the Resurrection and the Life! Even today, God is still communicating with us through the Word made flesh and blood, though now the flesh and blood of Christ is the bread and the wine. God is still speaking! God is still saying, "here I am, near you, calling you, ready to enter into you and become a part of you. Here I am, still offering myself to you, offering forgiveness, offering eternal life. Here I am, ready to heal the hurts in your life, ready to speak the word of acceptance, the word of admiration, the word of love you need to hear. "There you are, just as you are, chosen, by me, to be my child; chosen, by me, to be loved; chosen, by me, to overcome death and live forever. There you are, just as you are, and I embrace you, I love you, I accept you. Yes, here I am, and there you are, and I have given everything to be here, to be with you, no strings, no conditions, just me offering myself to you as sheer gift, and that is all you need to know, that is my life lived for you, given for you."

For God, a key word now is 'remember.' "Remember what I have done, remember what I have said, remember who I am. When you do this, remember me, because here I am and here you are, and no matter what will come, we will face it together, you and I, and we will win, yes, we will be more than conquerors together, and we will never be apart again, you and I and all whom you love, never again." This is what God says to us in Jesus Christ, in the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, in the bread and the wine which become for us, by the Spirit's power, the Word's body and blood. This is the Word God speaks to us, in every language and in no language, in bread and in wine.

Long ago, John said, "he came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." Right here, right now, God is still speaking God's eternal Word to us in Jesus Christ through his presence in the bread and the wine. Now is the time to hear him. Now is the time to receive him. Now is the time to believe in his name, and become a child of God.

Amen