

I

There's a dispute in my household about whether or not our sons' first words were "mama" or "dada," but I distinctly remember the first time my infant son looked at me and said, "Da."

II

First words are often important and memorable words, aren't they? And not just the words of children or grandchildren. Perhaps you remember the first words that someone important ever spoke to you, or the first words first words spoken by the protagonist in your favorite book or movie; maybe something like, "Call me Ishmael," or "Bond, James Bond." In literature, first words are often important words because they set the stage for so much that is to come.

You and I live in a culture that is dominated by words. In the interconnected age in which we live, words can rocket around the globe in nanoseconds.

And of course, we know that words aren't always just hot air. Words can and do mobilize people to action, for good or for ill. You and I know, perhaps better than any generation that has ever come before us, that words matter. You and I know, perhaps better than any generation that has ever come before us, that the truth matters.

III

And that brings us to our story for today, a story about first words. This winter and spring, we are reading and preaching our way through the gospel of Luke. Of the four gospels in the bible, Luke is often a favorite of modern readers because Luke gives us more biographical details about the early life of Jesus than do Matthew, Mark, of John put together.

But it's important to remember that while each of the four gospels contain some biographical details about the life and times of Jesus, a gospel's intent is not merely to record biographical facts. The gospels are intended to communicate to us, their readers, that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is "good news" – for that is literally what the term "gospel" means – good news. As Luke himself tells us in the very first paragraph of his gospel, he is writing not just to give us anecdotes about an interesting historical figure, but rather, and I quote, "so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed."

The story before us this morning is the only one in the bible about an event in Jesus' life from the years between his infancy and his adulthood. In today's story, Jesus was 12 years old, and his family made the pilgrimage from their home in Nazareth to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. But I submit to you that Luke's intention in sharing us this story is about something deeper than an

anecdote about a mishap on a family road trip.

So with that background in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Luke 2:41-52.

*Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.*

*And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Any parent who has ever been accidentally separated from their child, even for a few seconds, can relate to Mary's mixture of consternation and relief when she found her son again.

And we modern readers may raise our eyebrows or cluck our tongues at Mary and Joseph for not noticing that Jesus was missing until the end of the day, but in those days and in that culture, it was not uncommon for faithful Jews to making the Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem to travel from their hometowns on foot in large groups, with the children of the families scampering and scattering and playing together only to getting sorted out and reunited with their parents at sunset.

But I don't think that's really what Luke is after as he's sharing this story with us. I don't think Mary's exasperation and relief at finding Jesus again is the point, nor is it that the boy Jesus impressed the teachers in the Temple.

In this passage, Luke records the first words spoken by the subject of his gospel. If you have one of those red-letter bibles, where the words of Jesus are in red type, as you read Luke's gospel, the first time you see those red letters, you'll read this, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

Or another way that Jesus' first words can be translated is this – "Why

were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's interests?"

And I think that's a better, more accurate English translation – because I think Luke is telling us something important here, for these are the first words we readers ever hear Jesus speak. "Why are you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's interests?"

Luke is foreshadowing much of what is to follow in the story. This is not the last time that Jesus will make a pilgrimage up to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. This is not the last time that Jesus will amaze people in the Temple with his understanding. This is not last time that Jesus' very presence in Jerusalem will cause consternation for his friends, family, and foes alike. All of those events are yet to come, and they're foreshadowed here with Jesus' very first words in the gospel – "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's interests?"

Words, especially first words, matter.

The truth matters.

As Luke himself tells us, these things are written so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

#### IV

And so here we are, my friend, the first Sunday of a brand new year.

There's something that's exciting and refreshing about a new year, isn't there? There's a sense at which we get to turn the page from what has been and to begin thinking about what will be. The year 2020 wasn't all bad, of course. Children were born. Couples were wed. Milestones were reached and goals were accomplished. But I think it's safe to say that all of us are looking forward to brighter and better things in this new year.

And so my friend, my question for you as we stand at the beginning of a brand new year, is this: How will you use your first words?

For your words have power, my friend. Your words have the power to build up or to cut down. Your words have the power to shine light upon the truth, or to obscure it. Your words, whether spoken aloud or written by hand or typed on a keyboard, can rocket around the globe in nanoseconds. Your words have the power to move people to action, for good or for ill.

So how will you use your words this year in the interests of God? How will you use your words in the service of the God who created you, the God who saved you, the God who sustains you, the God who has called you by name?

How will you use your words to serve the interests of the kingdom of God in your home, in your classroom, in your office, in your social media accounts? How will you use your first words to serve the interests of justice? How will you use your words in the

interest of loving kindness? How will you use your words in the interest of walking humbly with your God?

Words matter.

The truth matters.

V

And what about us, as a community of faith, as we stand on the brink of a new year, and for this congregation, a new century of mission and ministry? I'm mindful that one year ago, as we started 2020, there were so many words that we had no idea we would soon come to know. A year ago, few, if any of us, had ever heard the word "coronavirus," but now none of us will never forget it.

A year ago, none of us knew what it would mean to kneel in silence for 8 minutes and 46 seconds.

A year ago, none of us knew that our beloved state of Georgia would become the focus of so many words in our national conversations.

Words matter.

The truth matters.

And who knows what words or phrases we will come to know in this new year? We can't predict or control much of what is to come in this new year. But, dear church, make no mistake – as the events of this new year unfold, people outside the church are listening carefully to our words. Not just the words that come from this pulpit, or that

come from our Web site, or from the denominational offices.

They are listening most carefully for the words that come from you – from the people who claim the name of Jesus Christ, from the people who claim to be about serving the interests of the kingdom of God.

As the events of this coming year unfold, they will listen carefully to what you say, and what you don't say. And they will watch to see if what you say with your words matches up with what you do with your actions.

And then they will decide for themselves if the church is about serving the interests of the God who was and is to come. They will decide for themselves if the church is about what it says it's about, or if the church is about serving the interests of something else.

Words matter, my friends.

The truth matters.

May the church be faithful stewards of our words in this new year, so that we, too, might increase in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.

In the name of the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.