

Hello everyone! And welcome to our Wednesday Word devotion for today, May 20, 2020. Goodness, that's a lot of twenties. Anyway, thank you so much for being here today and for taking this moment out of your day to center yourself on God.

Today's devotion actually came to me through a loss. My college campus pastor Brent Christianson died last week after a long battle with an illness. He was a huge support for me in some of my most formative years, and his way of doing ministry certainly planted the seeds for what I envisioned ministry could be as a pastor. For the many of us who were part of the Lutheran Campus Center at UW-Madison in his season there, shepherded by PB and joined together in community, for over two decades, this is a significant loss. I continue to hold Pastor Brent's family, friends, and huge fellow flock of student sheep over the years in my prayers.

So today I will begin a theme that I'll continue for a couple of weeks, in honor of Pastor Brent and inspired by his ministry. That theme is the Word. And particularly, today I will talk about poetry.

So please join me in a word of prayer as we begin our time of devotion together:

God of all time and place, we give you thanks for the mentors, leaders, shepherds, and pastors that you provide for us throughout our lives. Thank you for the unique gifts that each of these leaders is blessed with, and the ways that they bless others through these gifts. Lord I lift to you our brother in Christ, Brent Christianson, as he departs from this world and joins the communion of saints. For his unique gifts in ministry, the gifts of words, deep thought, community, and joy, I give you particular thanks. Help us all to be inspired by your Word, made known and accessible to us in all ages, and may the light of your Son Jesus shine forth in all we do. It is in your Son Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Today I want to talk about poetry because Pastor Brent knew its power and pastored through those written words. He was an academic and the most heartfelt and compassionate wordsmith. The power of poetry is this: Poetry allows the full power and complexity of a word to be made known. It's a way of weaving together meanings and images to create something entirely new. Poetry gets at a depth of words, speaking to the core of what it is to be human. Poetry is the art of words.

One of the most important and life-giving things that Pastor Brent taught me was that he helped me to be unafraid of scripture. He was deeply unafraid of scripture and embraced it in ways I could hardly believe. The way many of his sermons were crafted was by the students' choice of a topic and a scripture to fit that topic. There was an extemporaneous element that impressed me - he could say such profound and reassuring things about God and how God was working in the world with confidence and very little prep time. But I suppose that's the power of the Word in the hands and mind and spirit of such a shepherd - the meditations of their heart and the words of their mouth are surely pleasing to God, and do the holy work of loving God and their neighbors, their flock.

Being unafraid of scripture is the way we start to really let it minister to us and feel the power of the Word of God. We need not be afraid of scripture - it is a gathering of stories, dreams, wisdom, letters, and poems about the God who created us, Jesus the Son who has saved us, and the Holy Spirit who comes alongside us as our Advocate in all things. While this can seem like a lot, truly the Word is for us, in us, and about God, on whom we can always rely. When I was younger, I certainly thought scripture was a lot. I was nervous and unsure how to even think about scripture other than as the Holy Bible. But Pastor Brent's ministry with the Word helped me see it as more accessible. As an example, I found it initially intimidating and odd that Pastor Brent would actively choose to write a devotional book about the Song of Solomon, due to its, um, physically intimate nature. But his pastoral confidence and gentleness in approaching a topic that makes most of us blush is a testament to the reassurance the Word provides us, particularly in the biblical books of poetry. Truly no human experience is left out of the scriptures. All things are known by God, and are empathized through Christ Jesus who lived among us as human.

Pastor Brent's ministry through the Word and especially through the Word in poetry left a lasting impact on me. Whenever people ask me what my favorite book in scripture is, I often say the Psalms (along with the Gospel of John and Romans - very Lutheran, I know). The reason I love the Psalms so much is because they are written from the perspective of humans, of people. It's our spiritual forebears' (including many by King David) insight on what their experiences of God and life were. They knew God on such an intimate level and could not help but lift that intimate knowing up to God in the power of the Word. The Psalms are also all poems, all songs, that have been chanted and sung and interpreted and served as artistic inspiration for thousands of years. And they still provide such power for us too. Such comfort and insight, wisdom and understanding, goodness and mercy, love and lament, power and might. Really no human experience, at its core of feeling, is left untouched by the poetry in the Bible. Poetry is found throughout the Old Testament, especially, including the books of Job, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, and of course, the Psalms.

And that aspect of the Word, of scripture, that no human experience is left untouched, is what inspires and compels us to gather as the body of Christ, no matter what time or place or season we are in. One of Pastor Brent's gifts that had a huge impact on me was his ability to create community. UW-Madison is not a small school, by any means, but I always felt like I had a home at the Lutheran Campus Center. It was such a balm for my anxious spirit, that amidst all the newness and scariness of being at college in a huge place, that I had a consistent community, a place, a people on whom I could rely and to whom I could belong. We all gathered at the LCC with that desire for community and what a gift that it was the Word and our faith that joined us together. Many of us feel that deep need and long for community these days, now in this time of physical distancing more than ever. The sense of community we do find in our church family is balm for us amidst all the newness and scariness of dealing with this unprecedented season of global pandemic. And what a gift that we have these abilities to connect to one another, with technology, with calls, with online worship, with all the ways we are learning to be the church in

new ways and get at the core of what church is for us. It's spiritual food, connecting to one another in faith and by the Word, giving us what we need to live through each day.

The scripture that I want to share with you today is indeed a poem, and it's been ministering to me a lot lately. It provides images of God in truly all corners of creation, and that comforts me amidst these uncertain and often anxious times of pandemic. It's even longer than the part I will read to you today, but I hope these poetic words from Psalm 104 minister to you too:

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

O Lord my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honor and majesty,
2 wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
3 you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
4 you make the winds your messengers,
fire and flame your ministers.

5 You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.
6 You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
7 At your rebuke they flee;
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.
8 They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys
to the place that you appointed for them.
9 You set a boundary that they may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
25 Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.
26 There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

27 These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
28 when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

29 When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
30 When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

31 May the glory of the Lord endure forever;
may the Lord rejoice in his works—
32 who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke.
33 I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
34 May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the Lord.
35 Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and let the wicked be no more.
Bless the Lord, O my soul.
Praise the Lord!

So this week, for our spiritual practice, I would love for you to try a practice to celebrate the Word and the power of people who minister to us. I would encourage you to write something for the sake of someone you love. Actually write it down on paper or type it on your computer or phone, either way is great. But write for the sake of someone you love. This could be as personal and simple as writing down your prayers to God to strengthen your relationship with God. You could take a stab at writing a poem yourself, playing with words and weaving them together for a new creation. You could write a journal entry to put words to feelings deep in your heart or spirit, what it is to be human in your particular place and season. Or it could be a letter to someone you love who has passed away. What would you want to say to the person for whom you grieve?

Whatever prompt or style you choose, write it down. There is power in making your thoughts tangible and externally accessed - there is an organization, release, and peace that comes from letting the truth of what's inside of you hit the outside air. Take a deep breath and breathe in, knowing that the power of God in the Holy Spirit empowers you in that breath. You are so strong for embracing what's really going on inside of you. And this is an amazing opportunity to pray over the person you are thinking of as you write. Bless them with your words. Know the Holy Spirit connects us all in the body of Christ. And be assured that the Word of God provides life for us, because in the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God. God is present in our words. May that peace of God which surpasses all understanding, be with you as you write.

And now my dear brothers, sisters, siblings in Christ, let us join together in praying powerful words, the words Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen.

Go in peace dear friends in Christ. Have a beautiful day. Amen.