

Psalm 19  
James 3:1-12

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
September 12, 2021

### **Three Things Come Not Back**

#### *Introduction to the Psalm*

In singing our Psalm for this Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, God's people would celebrate his law, the Torah, which revives the soul. Creation itself speaks of its Maker. The psalm closes with a familiar verse that expresses a humble response. Listen to these words from Psalm 19...

#### *Introduction to the Epistle Lesson*

Former Columbia Seminary Professor Beverly Gaventa suggests that parts of our Epistle Lesson might have been written by columnist Ann Landers, as easily as an early Christian, for it contains much that is common knowledge. We focus on words from what has been called The Lone Book of Wisdom Literature in the New Testament. Words have the power to bless and to curse. Use them wisely. Listen to these words from James 3:1-12...

#### *Sermon*

“Sticks and stones may break my bones,  
but words can never hurt me!”

With these brave words, countless kids have warded off the taunts of their peers. But Professor Gaventa says that the lines carry their own contradiction, for if words did not really have the power to hurt, the lines would not be necessary. We know from our own experience that words can indeed hurt very much.

In the very first chapter of his letter James has anticipated the topic of the power of the tongue—for good and bad.

Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” (1:19)

And here in our Epistle from chapter three, he follows that admonition with a relentless warning about the power of the spoken word, and the difficulties of controlling the tongue. For like the bridle of the horse, or the rudder of the ship, or a small fire, the tongue can accomplish far more than would seem possible.

In Proverbs 21:23-24 we are told:

To watch over mouth and tongue  
is to keep out of trouble.  
The proud, haughty person, named 'Scoffer',  
acts with arrogant pride.

With the bit in the mouth of the horse, we can control not only the mouth, but the whole body of the horse. And James teaches that if we can control the tongue, we can control the whole person. But if the tongue is uncontrolled, one's whole life can go wild, like a raging wildfire.

Likewise, the rudder. With just a little pressure on the rudder, the pilot can alter the course of a great ship, leading it to safety, or leading it to disaster. And just so the tongue. Without the tongue being controlled by the mind, and the mind being controlled by Christ, the tongue can cause great harm. And according to James, teachers have a special responsibility in this regard.

Now James doesn't say it, but I will: "Silence can be golden." But silence today seems more and more to be forbidden. Go to a college sporting event. At every pause, the loudspeakers bellow out something remotely akin to music. Go to a restaurant for an enjoyable meal and pleasant conversation, and you may barely be able to hear one another talk because of the loud music. Earlier in our service today, when we observed a moment of silence for personal confession, that was a good thing. Not only because confession is good for the soul, but because

the silence can help us to be able to hear God’s unspoken word, in a “still small voice.” Moments of silence in worship can help us to seek and cherish moments of silence in our everyday lives.

Hear again the first four verses of our Old Testament Lesson from Psalm 19:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
 and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
 Day to day pours forth speech,  
 and night to night declares knowledge.  
 There is no speech, nor are there words;  
 their voice is not heard;  
 yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
 and their words to the end of the world. (vv.1-4)

Looking up at the sky, the Psalmist did not see God; he saw the glory of God. The heavens and the firmament tell of God’s glory and handiwork continually—“day to day” and “night to night,”—all the time. Their voice goes throughout the whole earth and their words to the end of the world. And yet there is “no speech,” no “words,” and no “voice.” Just silence. Silence that speaks so marvelously, so majestically. As each day hands the trumpet to its successor to blow the same triumphant note, while as evening falls and the stars come out, each night does the same—enwrapped in silence.

Joseph Addison in his 1712 hymn, “The Spacious Firmament on High,” expresses it well:

What though in solemn silence all  
 move round the dark terrestrial ball?  
 What though no real voice nor sound  
 amid their radiant orbs be found?  
 In reason's ear they all rejoice,  
 and utter forth a glorious voice;  
 For ever singing as they shine,  
 "The hand that made us is divine."

It has been said that what you *say* and what you *don't say* are both important. Proper speech is not only saying the right words at the right time, but it is also controlling your desire to say what you shouldn't. Ecclesiastes said there's “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”

(3:7b) Examples of an untamed tongue include gossiping, putting others down, bragging, manipulating, false teaching, exaggerating, whining, flattering, and lying.

The damage that the tongue can do is like the damage caused by a forest fire. William Barclay says that the picture of a forest fire is common in the Bible. For example, in Psalm 83 we read of the psalmist's prayer that the wicked be destroyed, "as fire consumes the forest, as the flame sets the mountains ablaze." (v. 14) It was a picture the Jews of Palestine knew well. In the dry season the scanty grass, low-growing thorn bushes and scrub were as dry as tinder. Set afire, the flames would spread like a wave that knew no stopping. Many people today in the Northwest are sadly familiar with forest fires that can destroy homes and property, that can even take peoples' lives.

Likewise, the damage of the tongue is far-ranging. It can cause damage at a great distance. A chance word dropped in a conversation at one end of the county, can wind up bringing hurt and heartache at the other. A word of gossip, a rumor, a scandalous story. A half-truth here, can cause great damage miles away.

Furthermore, like the fire, the tongue's damage can be uncontrollable. There is an old saying, "Three things come not back—the spent arrow, the spoken word, and the lost opportunity." Once a word is uttered, there's no getting it back.

In *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, his former student Eberhard Bethge says that Bonhoeffer had one rule for the community of his underground seminary students in Finkenwalde: no one was to speak about another student in his absence. The former students recalled the many times they broke this rule and how they learned from their mistakes. Gossip damages the body of Christ, inflicting shame and doubt on the community.

James notes that while man has tamed beasts and bird, reptile and sea creature, he has not tamed his tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* John Bunyan told of a man named Talkative. “He was a saint abroad and a devil at home.” Sadly, there are those who speak to strangers with honor and respect, while later the same day, at home, snap with anger, impatience, and disrespect, at a member of the family. There are people who go to Worship, Sunday School, or Bible Study, and display graciousness to all, yet go out and murder another’s reputation with gossip and a malicious tongue.

Note Jesus’ words in Matthew 12:

“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. (vv.34b-35)

Our passage from James 3 closes with two illustrations about the use and misuse of the tongue:

With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. (vv. 9-10)

The very same gift of speech that enables us to sing God’s praise in worship, also enables us to curse our fellow human beings. For James, a “double-tongued” Christian is unthinkable. Thus does he link two uses of speech: cursing or praising God.

Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. (James 3:11-12)

My friends, our lesson from James today does not really offer an antidote for the poison of the human tongue, yet even so, his words in the very next passage (3:13-18) may point us to a cure. For there he tells us that true wisdom has its origin in God:

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. (vv. 17-18)

What is needed is a teachable spirit. A willingness, a desire, to learn to control our speech. Then, by God's grace, will we be truly wise. With a wisdom that comes from above, a gift of God.

So, it is the gifts of God, his wisdom, his love, his truth, that provide us with the means to tame our tongues. If we dedicate our talk, our speech, our words—to the glory of God, good will follow. We will know forgiveness, and we will be forgiving. We will seek to love our neighbor, as we love ourselves. We will seek to be doers of the word, and not hearers only. We will build up, and not tear down.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable to you,  
O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.  
(Psalm 19:14)