

Venite Adoremus

By Bobby Schuller

So today's the fourth Sunday of advent, and the fourth Sunday is the Sunday of love or adoration. And the idea is that part of advent is not only giving but receiving God's love, sharing that love with our neighbor, and sharing that love back to God as a form of praise and adoration.

Today, I want to look at a story and I preach on it every year, but it's awesome and it's the story of Zachariah's encounter with the angel Gabriel, and it reinforces the idea and the power of words. All of us deep down understand and experience the power of words every single day. Within every word is an idea that's either true or false. And many of us will take these words and internalize them; good words, bad words. So much of how we view ourselves are the words that we were spoken, that we received when we were children. Some of us carry some pretty dark words around with us as adults that frame how we see the world. Words of fear, for example. Insults that we received. Maybe somebody really important in your life called you ugly or stupid.

I realized a long time ago that there are certain things that some people don't get offended by, but there are certain like words that really get them. Like for me, when I was a kid, I was called stupid and clumsy.

When somebody as an adult calls me stupid or clumsy, it affects me more than if they called me ugly or something. I think that many of us, we have that. We have things like that that we carry, sometimes from our childhood that feel extra painful. When those words that we still carry in our body are reinforced.

Many of us carry with us wonderful words that were maybe spoken over you by your grandparents or your parents, your mother, your father, words of love, affirmation, encouragement, wisdom and insight. And it's so important that these are the words that we hold dear. More important than that, though, is to understand if words have this kind of effect on us, imagine the words that we speak the kind of generational impact it has on others, on our friends, our family, and yes even our enemies.

How many of you have been troubled by what an enemy said about you? I can tell you there have been many times where I was up late at night because of some random stranger said some random thing, it kept me up at night. Why should I even care? This person doesn't know me, I don't know him or her, and yet it does. So words have power.

We use words to build things. Somebody looked at a plot of dirt where this church stands and said "church" and it became so. And in fact that is how God created the whole universe. The same way a computer programmer would create a software program, God began to just speak things into being and they became so. He said "bird" and

there was one. “Earth” and there was one. The creation story we see in John, Jesus is actually called “the word.” In the beginning was the word, the logos, and the word was with God, and the word was God, and the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

And because of that, disciples of Jesus Christ, and people who follow His way, and Jews in particular, believe in the power of the word. That whatever we speak kind of fills the air around us. It creates an environment that when we speak words of encouragement to other people, when we build people up somehow we get built up ourselves. Have you ever done that before? Have you ever noticed how if you say something loving to one of your children or to your spouse or a good friend, all of a sudden you sort of feel love, in a way. I don't know how else to explain it. But when you encourage someone, you yourself sometimes feel encouraged.

In the ancient world, they believed that when you blessed other people, you yourself got a little blessing splashed on you. They also believed that if you cursed someone, there was a price to pay, and that price was you yourself would also get a little cursed. It really is true, I think that when we speak good things a lot, it's almost like the actual air around us becomes more lofty and joyful, and loving and kind. When we're negative and critical and judgmental and angry and cursing other people, and foul, it's like the air around us.. it's not good.

This is something James said in the book of James chapter 3. He actually asks this question. He said, "From the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?" See it's so important that we understand that if you're at the family dinner table, and you scream at one person, and then you look at the other person on your right and you say something sweet, that scream you just launched is still kind of in the air.

It's important that we understand that we train our words because they create, in a way, the spirit around us; that create the feeling in the room, and even what we carry in our bodies. So we want to internalize good words, we want to express good words, and that we always want to tell the truth, and we want to have empathetic friends, and we want to feel angry sometimes, it's important that we don't impassionately just launch out judgment at people, always trying to fix others, angry, cursing, mean-spirited things, but instead we encourage others.

The Bible says encouragement is a spiritual gift. People need it! People need encouragement and you're an encouraging person and I'm proud of you. Keep doing it. Keep using your words.

The story today that reiterates this very important Biblical message, the power of the word, of the spoken word, is especially poignant in the prophecy and the birth of John the Baptist. So we'll talk about that today. Now before we get into that, Judaism had and still has

this rich sense of hope for a Messiah. And the Bible says, the Old Testament, that there will be a fore-runner who will be Elijah, or in the spirit of Elijah, that'll come before the Messiah to pave the way and prepare the hearts of the people to receive Him.

In Judaism, you might remember the story of Elijah. He had a mentor Elisha who he passed his mantle to, and after he passed his mantle, a chariot of fire came and swooped him up and took him up to heaven. So the idea in Judaism is that Elijah never died. He just sort of got raptured into heaven and someday he will come back to prepare the way for the Lord. So for hundreds of years, up into Jesus' point, there was this looking for the return of Elijah who would come and pave the way, and that prophecy becomes true in the story of Zachariah.

So Zachariah is an older man, we don't know how old, and he's married to Elizabeth. She's also a bit older. And it seems like they really love each other, which I think is sweet. They're close, they're kind and the Bible says that they're both righteous, they're both descendants of Aaron, and they both love the Lord with all their heart, but they were never able to have a child. They've prayed, they've asked the Lord, but now Elizabeth is becoming advanced in years, and they think that hope is lost, and she'll never have a child.

Now because they're both descendants of Aaron, Zachariah is a Levite and anyone who's a descendant of Aaron automatically has to be a priest and the priests are in charge of running the temple. Now when

there are 50 or 40 descendants of Aaron, this works out really well, but by the time we get to Jesus' day, there's about 20 to 25/30 thousand descendants of Aaron, whose sole job it is to run the temple. And so they're like well we only have a few things for them to do. How do we get 25/30 thousand priests to run the temple.

Now in Jesus' day the temple was the heart of Judaism. Its where the center of worship was and everything. And the way they did it is they broke up these priests into 24 groups of about a thousand. Zachariah was in a group called Abiathar or Abijah, and of that thousand, they would get two weeks every year in which they would lead the worship service. So they would pick one of the maybe thousand priests, and the way they would do it was by like casting lots, which is like basically rocks that look like dice. And they'd pick one out of a thousand for 14 days of the year. Because of this, most priests never got to do the incense burning in the temple ever in their life. It's very likely that Zachariah had never done this in his whole life, even though he was an old man.

And what they would do is they would go into the temple, into the sacred space, and they would burn the incense and do all the rights and rituals. When they were done, they would come out and they would do the blessing where it looks like this. They would make this hand gesture which is the symbol of Sheen, which is for El Shaddai. It has five gaps: one, two, three, four, five for the five books of the Torah. And they would put this shroud that was over their head over their hands, so you

actually couldn't see their hands, so it looked like wings of eagles, and then they would say 'the Lord bless you, the Lord keep you,' etc., etc. Okay? And that would be kind of the end of the service.

Zachariah, it's part of one of those two weeks every single year where he has a one in a thousand chance of being able to burn the incense. Maybe when he was young, he got all excited that maybe it'll be me today, and then his 30's came, and his 40's, we don't know how old he is. Now maybe he's an old man. Never in his life he's gotten it. He's not even expecting it to come and all of a sudden all of these rocks are thrown and everything happens, and everybody's reading, everybody's figuring it out, and they go, 'Zachariah, it's you.' And this old man looks up and he says me? It's this amazing experience.

Now remember, the temple's full of tens of thousands of people, and a thousand priests, and choirs and instruments and worship, and he's probably never done this in his life. He has to remember what to do. He's going over, okay I got to do this, this, this. Begins to ascend the stairs. Imagine, everybody's singing the hallel, hallel, hallel, the instruments. I mean just think of all of the context and the power that he's getting to go and light the incense for the sacrifice.

And he's walking up the stairs and he goes into this room and into this altar, and begins to prepare the incense, and all of a sudden (WHOOSH) the angel Gabriel shows up, and he says 'Zachariah.' And of

course he's terrified. Whoa, what? All these people, it's this amazing religious experience.

The angel says 'you're going to have a son. Your wife Elizabeth is going to be pregnant. And he is going to be Elijah. He will not drink any wine or fermented beverage at all.' It's probably calling him to do the Nazarite Vow. 'And he will be a forerunner to the Messiah.' And he's incredibly scared, it's an incredible experience, he's in the house of God, and he looks at the angel and he goes 'ahhhhh my wife's pretty old. I'm pretty old.' And the angel looks at him and in the Hebrew, he's in the presence of God and there's Shekinah glory and power, and the angel looks at him and he goes, the Hebrew says he goes, dude. Really, the angel says probably in a stern voice, 'I am angel Gabriel. I stand in the presence of the almighty God.' And he says to him 'you're questioning this? This will come to pass, and you will not speak until it does.'

All of a sudden, he's just made mute, and go outside, people were singing and playing tambourines. Now they're kind of looking at their watches and they're like why is Zachariah taking so long? A lot of time is going by, it's kind of hot outside, the suns on them, they're kind of looking around, waiting. Finally Zachariah comes out, he's awfully shaken, worrying, he knows he has to do this blessing over them. Puts the shawl over his head, puts his hands up, and just goes (mmmm, mmmm) and then just leaves. And everybody is thinking what happened in there? It says that all of Judea was wondering what happened to

Zachariah, because remember he can't tell them what happened. Nobody even knows! And like months go by, he still can't talk, everybody has no idea what happened, and everybody's like, you know, it's all conjecture. Everybody's coming up with, I'm sure lots of fun stories about what might have happened. And sure enough, Elizabeth becomes pregnant.

Now Mary also receives a visit from the angel Gabriel, and this is what I want you to see. Everything Zachariah was told was amazing news. I mean an incredible blessing. He's going to have a son, he's married, its coming from his wife, their prayers are answered. When Gabriel visits Mary, she's not married yet. She's a young teenager, engaged to this hot guy Joseph. Really excited to get married. Putting wedding plans together. They're going to start their life and she finds out she's going to be pregnant before they're married, and she's supposed to convince her fiancé that is a virgin. I'm a virgin. Yes, good luck.

So literally she has everything to lose, and like a kid, right? Like a teenager, full of faith, full of hope, just praises the Lord, thanks the Lord, trusts the Lord that this idea of His is a good thing and everything's going to be okay. It's amazing, isn't it? What is it about when we're young and when we're older, that as we get old, this sort of realism comes in where we got to tell it like it is. We got to put people in their place. But there's something about teenagers that when they hear the gospel, sometimes they just take it and they run with it, and when they hear good news, they just take it with joy. And I think this is part of what God

wants us to recapture in our faith is a little bit of this childlike trust of the Lord that Mary had.

Well of course both Elizabeth and Mary are pregnant, and there's this wonderful story in the Bible where they meet, and the baby, John, in Elizabeth's belly, jumps with joy. It says that even then, he was full of the Holy Spirit. And they have this very tender moment with each other where they're hugging and Elizabeth blesses Mary, etc., etc., and it's a really wonderful story. That's a great image, isn't it?

So she gives birth to this baby, and in Judaism you don't name the child until the 8th day when it's circumcised. And they ask her, 'what do you want to name the baby?' Now keep in mind, she's never heard from her husband - John. Just inspired by the Holy Spirit, she tells all of her friends and family - I want to name the baby John. And they all look at each other and they say John? Why would you want to name the baby John? You don't have any family members named John. Why this name? You should name him Zachariah. And she's like I want to name the baby John. And they're like well, but maybe another name. She's like I want to name him John!

And they say let's go ask your husband. Apparently Zachariah wasn't there. Keep in mind he hasn't spoken still for probably at least 9/10 months, maybe more. And nobody knows what's going on, and they finally go to Zachariah, and they said what should we name your son? Surely you want to name him Zachariah. And he's like (MMMMM) like

(MMMMM) and hand me.. he says, he's like pointing to a chalkboard or writing tablet. They hand it to him, and they said what do you want the baby's name to be? And he goes (WRITING ON A CHALKBOARD) this says John, by the way. And it says that.. look its Hebrew, see? I told you I could do it. I had like 20 people say like don't write in English, write it in Hebrew.

So he holds this thing up, John, and it says that everybody is filled with terror. Like it was scary to them. Like there was something about this that made everybody be like whoa, what is this? And as soon as he proclaims that the baby's name will be John, it says that the Holy Spirit filled his body and then he proclaimed.. the first thing he said was this prophecy: "Praise be to the Lord! The God of Israel! Because He has come to His people and redeemed them! He's raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David. Salvation from His enemies and from the hands of all who hate us to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember His holy covenant. The oath He swore for our father Abraham to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and enable us to serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days."

Everybody's looking at him. Maybe there's tears coming down his eyes, and he looks at his 8-day-old baby, and he says "and you my child will be called a prophet of the most high for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him to give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender

mercy of our God by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet in the path of peace.”

And it says that nobody forgot this story because this was the first thing he said in maybe a year after being in the temple. And it says that they raised that little boy up, he probably was a Nazarite, which means that he didn't cut his hair, he didn't drink any wine or eat any grapes or any fermented beverages, any beer or whisky or anything, and he never touched any dead bodies, and he probably went out into the wilderness and lived with the Essenes who were like a purist ultra Orthodox desert people who gave us the dead sea scrolls, and probably dwelt among them. And it says that later then he would return to be this great prophet and preacher who paved the way for Christ and we know him as John the Baptist.

Powerful, powerful story that reinforces the power of words. It was important that Zachariah not speak another word of doubt against God's proclamation. I don't know why. But there was some reason that it was important to God. It was like God's mercy that Zachariah could not speak anymore. I think it's important to recognize that we have times in our life where we go through something difficult, we have disappointments, and it's good to talk about those things with an empathetic friend, an empathetic witness, and receive comfort, but sometimes, especially as we get older, we go through hardship after

hardship after hardship. We just don't want to be hit again. We don't want to be disappointed again. And we get into this mindset where we just try and see the worst so we won't be disappointed. But that's not God's way. God wants us to become the kinds of people who proclaim words of faith and trust, joy, and adoration. And the more we speak this way, it's like the whole space around us gets full of faith and full of hope and full of life. It's like an aroma. How many of you like Cinnabon cinnamon rolls? That's right. It's the best there is. They have a proprietary cinnamon that they found in the mountains of Indonesia. And man, it smells like it, doesn't it? They say, and I don't know if it's true, maybe it's a legend, but that Cinnabon pumps cinnamon flavored air from their ovens through the air conditioning vents in the mall so that even if you're on the opposite side at Sears, you're going to get this like.. maybe I should have a cinnamon roll, and it draws people to the bakery.

I think there is something about words that have that aroma. There's an allure to people who speak words of encouragement, and it almost creates an environment, even when you're not speaking, that builds faith, builds life. And I think the same is true with words of doubt, words of fear, words of judgment. When we become the people who are cursing others, blaming others, judging others, just spewing this out, it like creates a bad smell. It creates a repulsive smell that pushes people away, that causes at best people not to want to be around. And you can't have both Cinnabon smell and fart smell in the same space. You just

can't. You can't have both. And sometimes you have to say things to wake people up.

It's really true. When we judge others, blame others and have all these negative things, it's just not good. But when we love others, when we're kind to others, it creates good things.

And so I want to encourage you this year. You can have an opportunity to talk or not talk. To speak or not speak. And when we get into this really bad place, it gets on us. When we spew this stuff out, it gets on us and I want to encourage you to 1) anytime you have a really good thought about someone, don't assume they know. Take a moment and actually practice love in your speaking, where if you're thankful for someone, it means so much to them. Just put your hand on their shoulder and just say I'm thankful for you. It's really good to see you. I'm on your side. I'm proud of you. And when you're angry at someone, it's easy to want to judge, blame, fix. There is a love that also comes from restraint. Not that you shouldn't tell the truth, but it's that impulsive impassioned thing that Bobby Schuller, by the way, does a lot at the dinner table. It's good to practice restraint. That there is a compassion and a mercy in your speaking, too, where especially with people that are close in your life, you hold on to it, or you wait, or you wait for a better time and watch as that makes a big difference in your life.

Words matter to God and they matter to people. They make a big difference in how people experience you and just experience the world around you. And trust me that you have a gift to offer people.

Lord, we ask in Jesus' name. First, we use our own words to say we praise you, we worship you, we lift up your name, we thank you, we adore you, we love you, and we say thank you for every breath, every moment, everything you've given us, every friend, every church service, our neighbors and we pray God that you would even use difficulties and hard times to train into us more love, more mercy, more compassion, more empathy. Help us, Lord, to walk a mile in the shoes of those we want to judge. Help us, Lord, to become the kinds of people who see the world the way you do. Help us to use our words or not use our words the way you want us to. Give us wisdom, above all, we ask in Jesus' name, amen.