



THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

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The Power of a Word (2 Peter 1:16–21)

M. Craig Barnes

President M. Craig Barnes delivered this sermon in Miller Chapel on September 5, 2014, at the opening communion service of the academic year.

The church was packed for the funeral of Linda Nercessian. She died at the age of forty after a valiant battle against breast cancer. I sat in the preacher's chair looking at the first pew where I saw her husband Ray, her ten-year-old son George, her eight-year-old daughter Lulu, and both of her parents. We fought our way through the liturgy, defending our hearts against the grief.

I remember raising my eyebrow when we said the twenty-third Psalm. As we recited the line "I shall not want," I wondered if this was correct. We were all in want of Linda. The church was filled with her friends, her family, brothers and sisters in Christ, who had worked beside her in the church most of her life.

Linda's friends offered the first two eulogies. They said the kinds of things that we were expecting them to say—they talked about how successful she was in work, as well as at home, as wife and as mother and as a leader of the church. They expressed how much we would miss her.

But it was the third eulogy for which we were not prepared. It was given by her ten-year-old son George. I can still see him standing before the microphone with his weeping father standing behind him. George reached into his front pocket and pulled out a sheet of loose-leaf paper, and he began to read:

"Thank you all for being here today to wish my mother well on her way to heaven. I wanted you to know a couple of things that Lulu and I are going to miss about Mommy. In spite of the fact that she worked, she was somehow home when we would get there after school, and we would run into her arms and get a big hug. And we're going to miss that. And at the end of the night we would race up the stairs and jump into one of our beds and have tickling contests, and then she would read us a story, and we're going to miss that too."

Then he folded up his loose-leaf piece of paper, stuffed it back in his front pocket and sat down.

The tenor soloist began to sing "Jesus, Lover of My Soul, let me to thy bosom fly." As I remained in the preacher's seat looking out over the congregation, I was amazed at how powerful music is to pierce through every wall we had built to defend around our hearts. "Safely to thy Haven guide," he sang. "Oh receive me to my rest at last."

Now it was my turn to speak. Only I couldn't speak. And no one else was volunteering

to go to the microphone. So we just sat there in the silence for quite a while. Eventually I did have to walk to the pulpit because that was my job. I was the one who was supposed to proclaim a holy word, a word that could break in to the silence. But what I remember most of all about that funeral is the power of this silence.

We have seen the silence before. We all know it. It is the same kind of silence that you will find in cemeteries or in nursing homes late at night—one of the quietest places I've ever found. It is the silence that fills the house when the child has a dangerously high fever. Or when someone comes home and finds a note on the dresser that says I have left because I never loved you. It's the same kind of silence that you find when you discover the Christmas stocking of somebody who recently died. The silence that you feel when you hang up the phone and the doctor says the lab report has come in and it's not good.

To be clear, this silence is not the welcome respite from our noisy lives. This is the threatening silence, the one that rips away all of our cheap words, the one that dares us to say anything at all.

It's the silence born of news that stops our heart. A friend confides in you, "I had to tell someone about this. My brother committed suicide last weekend." And you stammer, "I'm so sorry, I don't know what to say." In this moment, this is the only thing to say. You learned by now not to say, "but you have other siblings." Or, "I knew somebody else who committed suicide." These words would all be completely inane.

But about this I'm clear: there are no other human words that are really any better. No human words can adequately fill the silence. This is why we come to church to have funerals. It's why people will call their pastor in the middle of the night and ask her to rush to the emergency room. That's why when we finish reading the newspaper, we put our face in our hands, saying "My God we're still shooting unarmed black men." What we are all saying, is, "what about it, God? What about you? Do you have a word that can stand up to this threatening silence?"

The proclamation of the Gospel is absolutely yes. Yes, there is a word. But the word we need cannot be merely words on a piece of paper. This has to be the Word that was with God and was God, the Word from the beginning. The Word that had the ability to look out over the chaos and say *let there be*, sparking beauty and light. This has to be a Word that can enter in to the mess of our lives and take it on with us.

What Peter proclaims in our text today is "I know that Word." Peter says, "I was with them on the Mount of Transfiguration when Heaven was so excited that we were surrounded by the holiness and heard heaven proclaim, this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am pleased." This language echoes those magnificent words from Jesus' baptism when he walked down into the waters, an image that is a spectacular metaphor of the incarnation, signifying Jesus walking down into the mess of human life. And God proclaims, *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am so pleased.*

This is what God is saying about you. Jesus identifies with us in his baptism in a way

that is so total and complete that heaven proclaims to each of us: *you're the beloved daughter, you're the beloved son, with whom God is so pleased*. Not because you've finally figured out how to get your life right or because you've finally figured out how to climb out of the mess yourself. But because God has climbed down into it with us.

God is pleased because you were lost and now you've been found. Peter reminds us to pay attention to this Word. "I was there. I saw it," he affirms, and it will appear to you like the morning star that rises in your hearts. The morning star is the first star that pierces the darkness, signaling the coming of dawn.

The morning star that rises in your heart is the star that all humanity is yearning to see as we continue to bump our way through the dark. And that yearning is what brings us to this seminary at the start of another year. Frankly, the only reason for being here is to attend to that yearning for the morning star.

You may think you've come here primarily to be trained to be a pastor or a scholar. You may think you are here to be trained for public service. Or maybe you've come here to try to figure out why you're here. All of those reasons are okay, but you have to know they are not the primary mission of this place. We are all here to attend to the yearning for the morning star. We're all here to devote ourselves to the only Word we know that can fill the silence.

This is why we call you to study the text so carefully, why we want you to learn it even in the original languages. This is why we invite you to read the best and finest theological minds we know. This is why we call you to know the Christian tradition, our heritage. This is why we invite you to understand through practical theology what it means to handle the Word rightly.

All of this is not just a way of knowing *about* the Word. It would be the height of tragedies if when you graduate and I hand you your degree, you leave here thinking, "well, I know about the Word." We want you to know the Word. Everything we do here is about an encounter with this one holy Word that can fill the silence, this Word for which our souls yearn, this Word for which we thirst, that a taste of this grace will persevere on our souls.

That's why we're here. That's the true function of the study of theology: to encounter the Word, to see the morning star that pierces the darkness, to know how to proclaim the Word that can fill any silence that dares threaten us. And the Word's name is the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.