

Standing on the promises: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Some 50 years ago, Merton warned us about what can happen when “all words have become alike.”

by [Kathleen Norris](#) in the [November 29, 2005](#) issue

It is hard to believe what we hear, that we are a blessed people, standing in God's favor. Hard to believe that God will bring righteousness to our world, as mysteriously and yet naturally as a seed sprouts and grows out of the earth. We know it is foolish to put stock in such promises, when we have devastated God's creation with war and willful misuse. For centuries we have turned good topsoil into barren dust. We have poisoned the earth and its waters so badly that what grows there is often damaged and unfit to eat. Promises, promises. Pie in the sky.

To believe in a promise requires a level of trust that is increasingly hard to come by. These days, the very words that would engender and foster our trust have been stripped of meaning. High-sounding mission statements do not prevent corporate bosses from routinely betraying their employees, retirees and stockholders. The powerful words of scripture have not prevented clergy from abusing the trust of parishioners and their children. And ordinary words in the mouths of politicians have become weapons against trust itself, betraying anyone who hasn't amassed enough wealth and power to insure against betrayal. A nuclear accident becomes “an event.” A fatally misguided foreign policy becomes a “mission accomplished,” which, years later, is still claiming the lives of Iraqi civilians and American soldiers every day.

Is it any wonder that, as Thomas Merton once stated, people have grown so weary they “don't want to hear any more words”? Some 50 years ago, Merton warned us about what can happen when “all words have become alike.” It means that we can no longer presume that even our most sacred words still have meaning or value. With a poet's brevity and wit, Merton commented that “these days to say ‘God is love’ is like saying ‘Eat Wheaties.’” And all too often we act as if that is true, and the body of Christ is just another marketing tool, useful to ideologues but having little

place for poets, let alone prophets. To be a real Christian, the marketers insist, means believing in bad science. To be a real Christian means being a devout member of one political party or another. To be pro-this, or anti-that.

We need both silence and words to still the cacophony. And, by God's grace, our words do find ways of reaching us. Etymology itself can redeem them. "Promise," for example, turns out to be not empty air at all, but a word closely related to "mission." It derives from a Latin word meaning, in Eric Partridge's phrasing, "to send, hence put, in front, hence to engage to (do something)." A promise, then, is a call to take action, to move, to perform a required service. We are not so foolish after all to regard God's promises as the solid ground on which we stand.

If we will trouble to listen, to bend an ear to this Sunday's readings, we hear from a prophet, a psalmist and the writer of an ancient epistle that no matter what befalls us, God is faithful, and God's promises are true. The psalmist insists that God will see to it that we who are lost will find our way home, and we who sow in tears will reap with joy. The prophet offers a beatitude, promising the consolation of gladness to those who mourn. Both authors presume our intimate knowledge of pain and loss, but they assert that far better things await us, joys we can scarcely imagine. The epistle writer gives us a primer, almost a little rule, for holding on to our faith in these or any times: be thankful, pray no matter what, listen for the spirit's prompting and do not spurn it when it comes, refuse to scorn with worldly wisdom the words of prophets.

"Test everything," we are commanded, and "hold fast to what is good." The testing will counter our tendency to pride, to boasting of all that God has done for us in ways that belittle others. The holding fast will keep us primed to believe in all the promises God has given. What Isaiah can proclaim, the Christian insists, Jesus has become. The prophet's words, and Jesus as the Word, have a power all their own to accomplish what is said. To be both message and mission, word and act.

In John's Gospel we find that the high theology of the beginning verses has receded, leaving us with something more simple, and perhaps more necessary. It is a story that begins, as stories often do, "There was a man." Not just any man, we are told, but one "sent from God, whose name was John." And what name will we give, when God's promise turns into our mission? It won't be Isaiah, although we may need to cite him in plentiful measure to keep our hopes at the ready. It won't be Elijah, or the Messiah. It will be the ordinary name we are known by in the world—Molly or Henry, Alice or Joe. It is we ourselves who will bear, and who will become, the

promise.