Ordinary 24B (Psalm 19; James 3:1-12)

James reminds us of the duplicity of language, like a matchstick dropped by singed fingers that leaves behind charred acres. The deception of language is that we believe it is innocent.

by Melissa Florer-Bixler in the September 2, 2015 issue

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I've only read the first few chapters of *The Flame Alphabet*, Ben Marcus's dystopian novel about a time when the language of children inflicts deathly wounds on adults. But it's already a book I both love and fear. As I read I wonder if Marcus, whose prose is steeped in scripture, stirred lines from this week's James text into the darkness.

The friend who gave me this book pulled it open to the middle and read lines from the pages ahead, dialogue from one of the rabbis who channel wisdom through secret languages in huts deep in the woods:

> Since the entire alphabet comprises God's name, [Rabbi] Burke asserted, since it is written in every arrangement of letters, then all words reference God, do they not? *That's what words are.* They are variations on his name. No matter the language. Whatever we say, we say God. . . . Therefore the language itself was, by definition, off-limits. Every single word of it. We were best to be done with it.

If ever there is a time when it seems like we are coming to the limits of words, it is in the meetings of my national church body. Like other denominations, the Mennonite Church USA gathered this summer to make decisions about our common life. Our convention in Kansas City was filled with words—words on paper and from the open microphone, words around table groups and outside delegate halls, words in bars and on park benches. There were the words of those in power and the persistent absence of those who were the target of our words.

James reminds us that this is something we should fear. He reminds us of the duplicity of language, like a matchstick dropped by singed fingers that burns insatiably, leaving behind charred acres of destruction. "No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison." The deception of language is that we believe it is innocent.

James amasses these poetic metaphors, stressing to his reader the violent and unpredictable nature of human speech. The tongue is rein and tiller, flame and poison. The mouth is a spring, somehow both putrid and pure; it is a tree bearing both olives and figs. But James gathers these metaphors toward one end: "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so." The terror of speech is its ability to drive our sister or brother away.

The words of James are in stark contrast to those of Psalm 19. The psalm ends with a prayer that has served as the plea I make publicly with God every time I preach: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." The psalmist leads us to believe that we have every possibility of making our speech right, of being blameless and innocent of transgression. Of course, it is God who makes this possible, the one who places a bridle bit in our errant mouths, the expected Spirit who separates out the brackish from the clear waters of human speech.

In the Mennonite Church, the time when I sense that the rudder of our common tongue is most firmly held in the direction of God's grace is when we sing together.

Julia Kasdorf, who was formed in the Mennonite community, writes that “singing uniquely binds people in a shared task” across the spectrum of difference. Yet for Kasdorf the goal of congregational singing is not to subsume individuals into the collective. “All experience counts,” she continues; “all constituent members speak within a self, even in dissonance.” It is in communal singing that Mennonites learn not to eradicate our disparate voices but to blend them.

At our convention, there are always words and there is always singing. One place I can expect to encounter congregational hymns is outside the delegate hall, usually a half hour before our work sessions begin. Each day a group of LGBTQ advocates and allies, identified by their Pink Menno shirts, gathers to sing. At first a small circle of mostly young people sits on the ground. Each day the choir grows, gathering more passersby. More people begin to sing—people of different ages, races, and roles in the church, all drawn to the familiarity of the songs. This year, by our final day of meetings more than 300 people encircled the delegate hall, immersed in four-part a cappella singing.

It is no accident that Pink Menno’s actions often center on hymn singing. These songs are a common thread through generations and across communities. These songs, bound between the weighty blue cover of our hymnal, bind us together. In the midst of speech that divides and maims, we willingly and happily accept the invitation to sing. Our hymnody proclaims the forbearance in which we already participate: that within the variety of places we are each living, at variance with our tradition and with scripture, we are also already enacting our common life.

In moments like these, when the tongue of fire is emancipated from sin, I wonder if the proclamation of God’s glory at the start of Psalm 19 is actually a song. The opening lines speak of a heavenly announcement, yet in words that are wordless. Perhaps, the psalmist reminds us, it is our spoken words that put us at risk of cursing God’s beloved. Singing together guides the body toward wholeness.

If I imagine Ben Marcus writing *The Flame Alphabet* as a Mennonite, then what would be left at the end of language would be four-part harmony. I would expect to find us in that circle with the bridle of hymns in our mouths, where all of human language, all the name of God, affixes us to one another.