

What to say: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

by [Patrick J. Willson](#) in the [June 26, 2007](#) issue

A couple of months ago in the Century, Thomas G. Long discussed temptations faced by anxious preachers who must preach week after week, sometimes for several services each Sunday. “What can I say this time?” is the angst-filled question of many of us. In an earlier day one could find Harry Emerson Fosdick’s sermons collected in his books, and Ernest T. Campbell’s sermons were mailed weekly from Riverside Church. But nowadays the Internet entices plagiarists with an unlimited selection of instantly available sermons. An answer to “What can I say?” can be provided with the click of a mouse. And it’s free! The only cost, Long points out, is the preacher’s vocation and integrity.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus anticipates the anxiety of those who will soon go out in his name. Knowing what they will have to endure, Jesus names their threats and trials as “an opportunity to testify” (21:13). At the very moment when anxiety about “What can I say?” overwhelms his witnesses, Jesus promises, “I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict” (21:15). He does not promise that “the words will come to you” or that “you’ll think of something,” but rather that he himself “will give you words.”

Then he sends out 70 messengers and gives them words. He offers encouragement: “The harvest is plentiful”; he provides instructions for packing: “no purse, no bag, no sandals”; and he gives them the gift of words: “Say, ‘Peace to this house!’ and ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” Sandals will wear out and purses become empty, but these words will not wear out; they are filled with Jesus’ power and blessing.

The words Jesus gives his messengers are performative: they do what they say. The kingdom of God advances and draws near—“The kingdom of God has come near to you.” One may reject the message, ignore it or dismiss it as utter nonsense, but the message does not change, and it cannot be otherwise than “The kingdom of God has come near to you.”

This performative quality of the words Jesus gives his messengers is noteworthy in a society where consumer response provides the ultimate measure of truth. Moviemakers gather test audiences to try out alternative endings to films. Does the audience like this ironic ending, or will a happy reconciliation fill the most seats? Faced with its own empty seats, the church naturally feels a temptation to select another ending and tailor the message to whatever will secure measurable success. Consider it: the church with a new, improved message!

Just as Jesus anticipated threat and trial, so he also anticipated rejection and dismissal. The word he gives messengers finding themselves in a place that will not receive their message is the message itself: “The kingdom of God has come near.” In the same way, disciples who enter a house announcing “Peace to this house!” will discover that the message of peace is not depreciated by those who refuse it. The peace of God rather regularly takes a beating in this world, but that does not shrink its scope or diminish its truth. If the peace you extended lies trampled in the dust, pick it up. “It will return to you”; it is not broken. The peace of God with which Jesus equips his messengers is resilient. It has endured war, famine, betrayal, torture, even crucifixion—even indifference—yet it endures all of these and responds to a place in people’s hearts. They are waiting, yearning to hear a word of peace, real peace, the deep peace of God.

Jesus commissions 70 messengers and gives them a gift of words so that they know what to say. “First say,” Jesus directs, and again, “Say to them.” As a result, we don’t have to be anxious about “What can I say?” The whole church—which Luke numbers at 70—is given the gift of words. With the words we are given we can go anywhere. We can walk over “snakes and scorpions,” we can stand and speak before “the power of the enemy,” whether the enemy is an emperor, a jail keeper or all manner of lesser adversaries.

After worship one Sunday an elder pulled me aside. He had visited the local hospital the day before and discovered that a young couple in our church had just had a baby: a little girl with Down Syndrome. “Pastor, I didn’t know what to say,” the elder told me. “We visited for a few minutes. They let me hold her and I told them she was beautiful. . . . Pastor, I didn’t know what to say.” He went on to describe how he had prayed, thanking God for their child and asking God’s peace and blessing on their family.

I told him that I thought he had done what elders are supposed to do, that his words and gestures were apt and kind, and that I could not have thought of anything better to say.

A couple of weeks later this elder again pulled me aside and showed me a note from the young mother. She thanked him for his visit and his prayer, and then she concluded her note: "Thank you for not saying what so many people said and telling us how sorry you were. We are so happy to have our baby. Thank you for sharing our family's joy."

"That's great," I said.

"But Pastor, can you imagine people telling them how sorry they were?"

"Well," I said, "I guess they just didn't know what to say."

Our elder knew what to say even when he didn't know he knew what to say. He knew how to claim a child as a citizen of the kingdom of God and to announce God's peace to her household. Nothing else needed to be said.