

Preaching epiphanies

By [William H. Willimon](#)

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The story of Jesus, at least the way John tells it, begins unspectacularly. “There was a man sent by God, and his name was John.” What does John do for a living? He is a preacher. We can’t get to Jesus without going through a witness, no epiphany without preaching.

Jesus is the Word of God. But the Word requires somebody like John who has the guts to stand up and speak the truth. And yet, the reasons for any sermon speaking to the hearts, minds and souls of the hearers are always more theological than anthropological, due more to the nature of God than the nature of the preacher or the hearers.

“Theology” means literally “God words.” But Epiphany is a good time to be reminded that God is not only the subject of Christian testimony but also its agent. Theology does not just mean words *about* God, our talk about the meaning of God. Theology also means *God’s talk to us*. This is the great mystery of Epiphany.

We preachers are able to speak because the God of Israel and the church deems it right to speak to people through sermons. John the Baptizer says that he decreases as the Lamb of God increases. We preachers are subservient to the power of God to speak. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 3, “So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.” We preachers do not work alone.

If you have never had your soul seized by God in a sermon—if you have never been surprised to see your life changed through the frail, inadequate, poorly delivered,

not fully comprehensible words of an ordinary woman or man preaching—then you may think that this talk about God speaking in preaching sounds silly.

Yet for the multitudes, which no one can number—all those who have been enlisted in God's great movement to take back the world, all those who heard their name called by God through a preacher, all those who risked life itself on the basis of nothing more than words heard in a sermon, the saints who have gone before us and who even now stand among us—the preached word has been, still is, the very Word of God.

In the majestic, poetic beginning of John's Gospel, we hear an echo of the beginning of Genesis. There are gods who create worlds by having sex with other gods, or through a primal, cosmic battle between good and evil, chaos and order. But this God creates through nothing but a word. All this God has to do is to say the word, "Light!" and there is light. "Animals!" and there is now something where before there was nothing but formless void.

On a cloudless night this God calls Abram, a nomadic desert sheik, out of his tent—and promises to make a great nation from this childless old man and his aged wife Sarah. This will happen based on nothing more than a promise, nothing more than words. That's the way this God works.

When that promised people becomes numerous, they find themselves as slaves in Egypt, under the heel of the most powerful empire in the world. God appears to Moses and tells him to go tell Pharaoh to "Let my people go."

Is that all? God is going to free the Hebrews on the basis of a command from a none-too-talented and untrained speaker like the murderer Moses? As Moses wants to know, "Who am I that I should go to the Pharaoh and say...?" But that is the way this God works, creating something out of nothing, a people out of nobodies, free women and men out of slaves, all on the basis of nothing but words.

These people, now free, are given a land. But they consort with other gods, forget the God who liberated and blessed them. So God sends a peculiar set of preachers called "prophets." These God-obsessed individuals are personally chosen by God to give the people of Israel the bad news of their coming exile, then to sustain them through the horrors of their Babylonian captivity, then to announce that they are going home, then to direct how they will reconstruct themselves as God's people—all on the basis of nothing but words. Using just words, the prophets

deconstruct old worlds and envision new ones.

In a sermon series on the prophet Micah, John Calvin says that the whole purpose of the church is to preach. The reign of Christ is established not by swords, says Calvin, but by the preaching of the Word—because “the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken” (Micah 4:3–4). Peace on earth, swords transformed into plows, all on the basis of words from God’s mouth.

Preaching is a heck of a way to make a living. Yet we preachers will do it again this Sunday in service to a God who chooses to do some of God’s most miraculous work through nothing but words.