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Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans

Isaiah 7:10-14

The Light of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love:
Freedom Of Speech Brings Love



Golden Verse: Isaiah 9:2

*“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined.”*

Growing up in different parts of the country made for an interesting journey in learning the second person plural regionalisms. I first remember a friend from Teaneck, New Jersey, Tom Stupin, who referred to me and my brothers as *“Hey, youse guys”*. Then moving down to Roanoke, Virginia, we learned *“Hi ya’ll”* from many a southern belle. I was totally perplexed when *“Yinz”* came out of someone’s mouth on a visit to Pennsylvania. But the beauty and the richness of language is that every word spoken has the potential to teach us something of the one speaking. As a boy I remember, to my great embarrassment, my father, who speaks six languages, instinctively reflecting the accent of the one speaking, whether it was on the golf course or in the gas station. He had lived on three continents, and it was second nature to him. He could connect with them more deeply. Speech not only discloses geography but even more, how the words are spoken conveys something of a person’s character as well.

Phrases like *“Thank you”* and *“I love you”* can be mere social niceties from one voice or profound words in another. Even seemingly harmless words like *“boy”* can quickly turn into words of contempt and hatred.

While excellent oratory can influence crowds for a time, true verbal mastery comes from a deeper place than cleverness and insight.

It has something to do with the quality of the voice but not its resonance; its true power comes from a deeper place. *“The good [person] out of the good treasure of [their] heart brings forth what is good; and the evil [one] out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for [their] mouth speaks from that which fills [their] heart.”* (Luke 6)

Norman Rockwell’s painting, *Freedom of Speech*, shows a man speaking his heart.

*The blue-collar speaker wears a plaid shirt and suede jacket, with dirty hands...The other attendees are wearing white shirts, ties and jackets...His.. youth and workmanlike hands are fashioned with a worn and stained jacket, while the other attendees appear to be older and more neatly and formally dressed. He is shown "standing tall, his mouth open, his shining eyes transfixed, he speaks his mind, untrammled and unafraid." **

This painting visually captures a working man’s earnest plea before a more polished and

refined crowd at a town hall meeting, perhaps not wholly unlike a prophet before a king.

Perhaps you can remember a time when you felt like this man, pouring your heart out before others, afraid of their reaction but even more afraid of how you might feel about yourself should you never stand up to speak. God gave King Ahaz that chance to speak, to share his heart, through the invitation to ask God for a sign.

But Ahaz too tentative, too political, and too afraid, refused.

Ahaz had failed to share the one thing that truly belongs to each of us, the inner recesses of our heart, the core of our being, our deepest hopes, our most pressing fears. This is what God asked of Ahaz and this is what God asks of us.

Speaking our heart is a foundational principle for life. As Americans it is expressed as "Freedom of Speech". As Presbyterians we also understand this principle in words from the Westminster Confession. It was written in the 1600s in England at a time when the people were understanding their power to influence history through their common voice and inherent rights. Rights given by God, not the king or the church, and this is how they expressed it in the Confession, *"God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men."*

The calling from God is to speak our conscience but because of speech's power we must be careful. The book of Proverbs has much to add, *"...a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit."*

(Proverbs 15:4) Words can create peace...or destroy it.

I remember a pastor friend of mine in Magnolia, Arkansas commenting on a parishioner's attempt to complement him. After a Bible study lesson a member came up to him with a smile and a word of well doing, *"that class was excellent!"* But the man did not stop with those words, *"It's too bad you don't preach like you teach..."* He said it was like receiving a handshake with one hand and a knife with the other.

But as harsh words can crush caring words can heal, *"Kind words are like honey – sweet to the soul and healthy for the body."* (Proverbs 16:24)

Words filled with love bolster our belief in the goodness of the world and as the text suggests even invigorate our physical selves, *"they're healthy for the body."*

Words have a mystical power to create healing and hope. For if words can convey the depth of our being that means they can share God. Since each of us are made in the image of God each of our words have the potential to go forth to touch another soul with the divine light!

But sometimes ordinary words are not enough.

In this seventh chapter of Isaiah, we encounter another of Isaiah's powerful prophecies in regard to the messiah, *"Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."*

This prophecy is necessary because of Ahaz's dangerous alliance with the superpower

of Assyria. As a result, Judah will lose its sovereignty and become their vassal. It *seems* that God's promise will fail – the throne of King David will not endure forever.

At the point of our text, Isaiah was giving up on the hapless Ahaz whose leadership was clearly failing Israel and vexing God. In the midst of war and treachery he was only making things diplomatically worse, refusing to truly seek God's guidance and hope. In Chapter seven Isaiah is promising Ahaz that he will be replaced by a more competent and faithful son, presumably whom we know to be his first born, Hezekiah.

But over the ages Isaiah's impassioned speeches against authority and power have been elevated in our conscious so that today when we read them, we hear them as if they're coming from the mouth of God. God's speech; God's heart.

But time and again, the words of God's prophets proved not to be enough. No matter how many times God spoke forgiveness, and mercy and justice the people would not follow.

And so even though on one level Isaiah's prophecy was speaking to Ahaz about his son soon to be born, God was speaking of something much deeper as well. A new word to be spoken, a new child to be born.

In the first chapter of John's gospel, we learn the essence of this Word.

A Word that was in the beginning with God!

A Word that was God!

The Word through which creation itself came into being.

When God said, "*let there be light*" and there was light!

This was the Word spoken!

This is the Word that would not float into the ether to be forgotten; this would be God's Word, God's heart to become flesh; to be found in human likeness!

To be born in a manger.

This Word coming into the world would share the core of God's will to be for us and not against us, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.*"

Speech has the power to share something of our inner selves and Jesus is God sharing His inner self with the world; speaking His Word into being that we may truly know Him.

And Jesus' speech not only showed love but had the power to re-create how people saw the outcasts of His time. When He called the woman with the hemorrhage "*daughter*" he was showing everyone that she is a part of the family when He called that tax collector Zacchaeus, "*son of Abraham*" He showed the crowd that despite his profession he was still one of the people. When He renamed Simon into Peter, He changed a man who was more like sinking sand into the Solid Rock on which Christ would build His church.

Jesus' words changed people because they conveyed so powerfully not only the hope He had for them but helped them to realize the truth about themselves.

Freedom of Speech within the Christian context is less about our personal rights than our personal responsibilities. God has created within each one of us a portion of the nature of divine love within us. Our speech is our power to share it. I remember feeling this power in the roach infested home of a blind man....

It was Magnolia, Arkansas and a beloved church member, Mama Sue, took me on one of her daily tours taking food to the community. The last stop was a 90-year-old blind man, Chapman. He had no family and perhaps his blindness kept him from seeing the terrible conditions in which he lived. But rather than devoid of life he was filled with it! The words he repeated over and over again were, *"God is so good, Tom, God is so good."* And I could tell he meant it! Part of his thinking, I am sure, was because of Mama Sue. Each day she took him a home cooked meal...because...well, there was no one else to do it. As we were leaving, I began to say a prayer, but he interrupted me and said, *"Tom, first I want to bless you. 'May the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord be kind and gracious unto you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and give you peace.'"*

To this day those words still echo in my heart and each time I bring them to mind I see Chapman, feel his genuine hope and his heartfelt love.

Use your words to spread the love of God...always.

Amen.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of Speech \(painting\)#cite note-CR-13](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_Speech_(painting)#cite_note-CR-13)

62 East 92nd Street • New York, NY 10128 • (212) 289-4400 • www.brickchurch.org