

“No Mumblin’ Word”

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

October 4, 2009

Since I was a young man, I have had difficulty hearing out of my right ear. When I get hearing tests, they tell me nothing is wrong but still, if my right ear is toward you and you don’t speak loudly enough, chances are, I am not going to hear you. And it is irritating. Not just to me but I’m sure it is annoying to those who are trying to speak to me.

Very often this is the way it goes in the Ryman home: *Honey, would you like me to pack you a lunch?* Then a moment later: *Well, would you like me to pack you a lunch?* To which I get the reply: *I told you I wanted a Lean Cuisine and a yogurt.* And my continuing reply is, “If you want me to hear you, you have to speak up.” To make matters worse, sometimes her response is further concealed by a hair blower. All the more reason to speak up!

Recently, suspecting a lack of attention on my part, I have asked the question and then looked in to see and hear a response. The times I have looked, it is barely audible. In fact, it is sometimes mumbled. So let me go on record to say, “Honey, I am still going to fix you a lunch even if you mumble. But if you really want to be heard, you cannot mumble.”

Now sometimes, if you really want to be heard, you must not say a thing, as in the old spiritual:

They led Him to Pilate's bar  
Not a word, not a word, not a word, not a word  
They led Him to Pilate's bar  
Not a word, not a word, not a word, not a word  
They led Him to Pilate's bar  
But He never said a mumblin' word  
Not a word, not a word, not a word, not a word

Jesus allowed himself for our sake to be led as a sheep to the slaughter. But he also spoke the truth before Pilate. When asked who he was, he directly answered.

In the history of salvation, God's people have very often him speak under the cover of a less anachronistic noise than a hair dryer. God spoke in ages past through prophets.

Those prophets often seem to mumble. Ezekiel is especially "mumbly."

As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal. And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. (Eze 1:4-8b)

I'll stop there because I'm sure you get the point. You have to really concentrate—even study—to understand what Ezekiel is saying. Ezekiel is not alone

amongst the prophets or for that matter, the Apostles. John was particularly challenging, at least if you are reading Revelation. Sadly, Luther found it such a puzzle that he advocated tossing it out of the canon of scripture. He said, "Christ is neither taught nor known in it." Calvin thought it should be canonized but in my complete set of Calvin's Commentaries, the last book upon which he comments is Jude. God has spoken to us through prophets and Apostles and through pastors and teachers but nowhere does he speak so clearly as when Jesus spoke.

The words of Jesus are not mumbled. Even when his disciples had difficulty comprehending him, he stopped to make matters clear. When Jesus spoke in parables, those men and women who hung on his every word were often confused. So he would lovingly chastise them, *When are you going to understand?* Then he would spell it all out. The parable of the sower and the seed is a good example.

And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." As he said these things, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of

the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.' Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.

So why speak in the parable at all? Why not just jump to the explanation?

Have you noticed that in this parable, if you were asked to tell the story, you would tell about how the seed fell on the different types of ground and may not even tell about the explanation? And if you give the explanation, you have to think about the parable first. This is similar to attending college. Every professor is going to give you books to read. Then the next class, they will tell you what you read. Why not just skip to the lecture? Because it is the combination of reading and listening that makes the subject clearer.

Nevertheless, professors find it still isn't clear to some of their students. I am just such a case because professors often mumble. I read the assignments and go to

the lectures and end up saying, “If you want me to hear you, you have to speak up.” Of course, what I mean is, *Tell me in way that makes sense in my world.* I had one professor, who after explaining some theological conundrum, just to be sure his slower students understood, would recall a scene from The Simpsons cartoon the night before, and say, “I guess it’s sort of like that.”

It is troubling how many times I was then found to go, “Ohhhhh!”

In ages past God spoke through the prophets and people were puzzled. When Jesus, who is the very image of God, came and taught the multitudes that he was the “radiance of the glory of God,” some people were disturbed; they just could not or would not hear it. But many people were finally saying, “Ohhhhh.” When God spoke through his Son, the mumbling of former times ceased.

For those who are disturbed because you think the Old Testament makes perfect sense and never was a mumblin’ word spoken there, let me say two things. One, you better understand the Old Testament because of Jesus. How can you fully understand some of the Psalms (just to mention one book) without Jesus? How incompletely the ancients understand Psalm 22—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psa 22:1) “They have pierced my hands and feet—I can count all my bones—they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for

my clothing they cast lots.” (Psa 22:16b-18) or perhaps the question is better stated, how else can one more fully understand these verses than with Jesus’ explanation of the prophetic parable?

The other thing, if you think the Old Testament doesn’t sometimes mumble, is that when you decide Ezekiel’s visions make perfect sense, get back to me about whether he was “mumbling” or not.

In Jesus, however, we have no mumblin’ word. He is clear. So why not just begin with him and be done with it? The prophets are the homework that make the lecture called Jesus clear. For example, the Old Testament slowly develops the idea of a need for a gracious Messiah. Even by Jesus’ time, the Jews were simply looking for someone anointed of God to deliver them from their Roman oppressors. But in Jesus, people began to understand that it was not the Roman Empire that oppressed them, it was their sin. It takes awhile for the truth to become clear—especially when you have been wandering in your darkness. The truth was always there but it was not spoken clearly enough or with an illustration sufficient to make one exclaim, “Ohhhhh!”

This illustration may be a bit off for moderns because of digital photography but the photographic darkroom is a good example of what the writer of Hebrews is

saying. I used to sometimes find rolls of film I had forgotten to develop. Sometimes a month or so after shooting a roll, I would develop it and make prints. Very often, the reverse image of the negative only made what I had shot even less clear. When I enlarged the image in the red safe-light of the darkroom, I still might not perceive what image I had shot. Then I put the white photo-paper into the developing tray and slowly sloshed the liquid over and under the paper. Gradually a black and white image would begin to appear and awareness would steal over me.

What I had been seeing very small and backwards in the dark was now large and clear in the light. If I had set up the shot correctly and exposed the film just right, I could remember the day, who I was with, and even the emotions behind why I shot the photograph. If I shot, developed, and printed well, others also could see my impression of that moment in time.

The four-color process of printing is another good example—but one that computer printers have already made obsolete. Yet I hope I never forget the wonder of printing a photograph with four colors of ink for my first time. It was a photograph of the head of a lion with his great mane. I had to print it with cyan, magenta, yellow, and black inks. To do it right, you have to first imprint the yellow ink before the blue and red and finally black inks. Thin yellow squiggles on white paper are difficult to

make out; sometimes they are almost invisible to the naked eye. Then the blue and red inks are added one color at a time and the plain white paper miraculously transforms into something that looks almost real. Black is then printed and the contrasting tone makes it pop! I was giddy. I could not get over the marvel of a process that made four different negatives and printing plates—that by themselves just looked like black-and-white illustrations—come to life.

The process is important if one is to marvel at the result. From the beginning, God made us for himself and to enjoy his company. He also created us to share his glory. He simply gave it to us in the garden but we did not comprehend and asked by eating forbidden fruit, *Is this all there is?* Then he spoke to us in burning bushes and whirlwinds and pillars of fire. These colorful expressions but not always easy to understand. Eventually he communicated through prophets—sometimes condemning and other times a bit perplexing. But in these last days, God has articulated himself to us through a Son.

God has made perfectly clear what *millennia* of religious teachings have obscured. The writer of Hebrews uses an excellent word to express this with clarity. Verse three of our lesson says that Jesus is the “exact imprint” of God’s nature. The Greek word used in Hebrews 1:3 is *charakter*, and is used to explain things like

stamping out a copy of a coin or could be used, I suppose, in the darkroom as well.

Printing presses can also reproduce perfect copies. But in Jesus, the die is broken.

Indeed, this metaphor fails to do him justice even if it helps us understand who he is.

My prints were not the people I photographed. The sheets of paper were not  
litters of lions. But Jesus is a striking impression of God. In that man from Nazareth  
of Galilee was the very nature of both God and man. The essence of the Father was  
struck into Jesus. If that were not the case, then his life and death were in vain.