

Sustain with a Word  
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
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**Isaiah 50:4-9a**

<sup>4</sup> The Lord God has given me  
the tongue of a teacher,  
that I may know how to sustain  
the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens—  
wakens my ear  
to listen as those who are taught.

<sup>5</sup> The Lord God has opened my ear,  
and I was not rebellious,  
I did not turn backwards.

<sup>6</sup> I gave my back to those who struck me,  
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;  
I did not hide my face  
from insult and spitting.

<sup>7</sup> The Lord God helps me;  
therefore I have not been disgraced;  
therefore I have set my face like flint,  
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

<sup>8</sup> he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?

Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries?

Let them confront me.

<sup>9</sup> It is the Lord God who helps me;  
who will declare me guilty?

**James 3:1-12**

<sup>1</sup>Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. <sup>2</sup>For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. <sup>3</sup>If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. <sup>4</sup>Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. <sup>5</sup>So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! <sup>6</sup>And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup>For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, <sup>8</sup>but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup>With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup>From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

<sup>11</sup>Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? <sup>12</sup>Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

If I could do it over, I would have placed our time for teacher appreciation **before** these readings. Isaiah and James don't paint a pretty picture for those who teach, being insulted and scrutinized. James uses his tongue (for this was spoken before it was written) to talk about how dangerous using the tongue in speech can be. Commentators have said how Isaiah teaches that we need to be listening always for God if we are to hear what God is saying. Commentators have said that James is best a cautionary tale not to lead others astray with our words. It is not often, in fact I can't remember the last time it happened, that I will tell you I disagree, or, at the very least, that I feel strongly that the readings can be received in a very different way. I **do** believe there is value and truth in both of those understandings of these readings – that Isaiah commends our ready listening for God and that James offers needed warning for how we use our speech – but I think there is more.

You see, I know I am not always listening for God when God is trying to speak to me and sometimes, not infrequently, I piece things together long after they are presented to me. Many times that realization will come when I least expect it. Hindsight has been an excellent teacher. And, although I completely missed what God was trying to say the first time, I still learned what could be taught. I actually think this was the case for the Israelites as well, who went on record looking back at what preceded that which had befallen them and made a connection, sometimes oversimplified, sometimes deeply reflective. This reading from Isaiah was believed to have been penned during the Babylonian exile, one of those times where the Israelites connected the dots later, realizing they had given up on God in favor of human leadership and been overcome by other human leaders. This reading is not about placing blame or making those connections, though. This reading talks about the role of the prophet, here known as the Suffering Servant.

The time for warning the people has passed. His job now is to give hope to the people, despite any poor response they offer him. His words are meant to keep them going, despite their weariness. God has taught him so he might teach others and what he is to teach will sustain the people by the word he speaks. This word is the end of our reading: "It is the Lord God who helps me." Sustaining the people with a word is what James hopes for teachers as well; he simply gets wrapped up in all the ways that can go wrong. It's not untrue to say that words can hurt, words can damage. I think to my freshman English teacher who told me I couldn't analyze poetry instead of helping me understand how to. She could not have known how that would stick with me (for heavens' sake, it's been thirty-one years) but that word had power and leaves me doubting myself to this day – I will stare blankly at you if you ask about iambic pentameter. What James speaks of are words which teach wrongly about Jesus and the bad influence they could have. James is also speaking of those who boast or those who use words to spark a

much larger spreading of words, such as gossip. Indeed, these words are damaging. We already know about those, don't we?

Ah, but sustaining words. There are never enough of these it seems. We don't need to be taught how to cut down or criticize or exploit a weakness. We **do** need to be taught sayings like, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all" or its current day descendant, "Think before you speak: is it True, Helpful, Important, Necessary, Kind?" These sustaining words can be so rare and can be eclipsed by the criticisms and hurtful words. You already know how important those words are. The words we tell our kids as they grow so they have confidence, can solve problems, know they are loved, can find God – these are the words that sustain. These are the things our teachers we'll soon recognize do, in addition to the words they teach which help our kids articulate what they believe, and what they don't believe. You've seen the results of the teaching when you read a confirmand's statement of faith. You hear the results when our kids answer my questions during the moment with the children.

Friday night on all the major networks was a fundraising event, called Think It Up, for education in our nation. The idea is for students and teachers to dream up ways of engaged and creative learning which will be financially supported by those who contribute to this campaign. As motivation, they showed clips of different projects already undertaken, emphasizing their impact. Over and over the words which were connected to the teachers who supported these projects were "empower" and "nurture" and "encourage." Each of these ways of being is sustaining, all come from the words spoken to these kids with dreams and imaginations and hopes. Our Sunday School teachers do the same, encouraging the children of this church to find their place in God's story, nurturing their growing faith, and empowering them to ask questions and name and claim a faith that is unique to them and their experiences. And we are so grateful.

It doesn't stop there, though. James is hinting at people like me who have the title "teaching elder" but the truth is we all teach as much as we learn. In fact, what good is what we learn if we keep it to ourselves? If our ancestors in faith had behaved that way, there would be no descendants of the faith. If James wants me shaking in my boots, you should be, too! But, like I said at the start, I don't think that is the only right way to understand what James himself is teaching. What you say does have the power for harm but it also, and most importantly, has the power for good, for upbuilding, and, yes, for empowering, nurturing, and encouraging. Just as we ask the children of this church to do, we, too, must tell others where we have found ourselves in God's story. We must tell others about our growing faith – note, not our grown faith, for there is no graduation in a lifetime of faith. We must share the questions we have had and tell others how we have named and claimed our faith. As much as James cautions

against gossip, we can also use words to spark a much larger spreading of words for good and for God.  
So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Lord God, give us each the tongue of a teacher, sustain us with your word that we might sustain others,, be our bits and rudders to guide our speech, we pray. Amen.