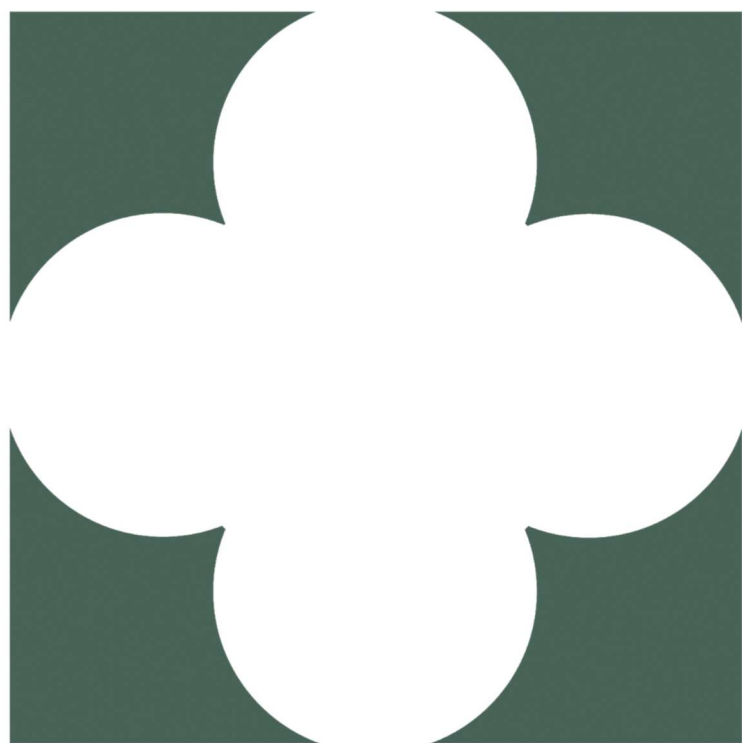


# Transfiguration Sunday

Rev. Anita Peebles



seattle first baptist

February 27, 2022

John 1:1-5

## ABC-USA response to Ukraine<sup>1</sup>

As we hear news and witness the reports of the assault on Ukraine by Russian troops, I call all American Baptists to pray for the people of Ukraine and all those affected by this military action. As many of you are aware, Ukraine has one of the largest bodies of Baptists in the world and on this day and in the weeks ahead, we especially lift up in prayer our Baptist brothers and sisters in Ukraine and Russia. Please pray for the safety of all people, for minimal loss of life and property, and for a peaceful end to this conflict.

American Baptists have a long history of proclaiming peace and denouncing war: “We record our conviction that war as a method of settling international disputes is barbarous, wasteful and manifestly contrary to every Christian ideal and teaching. We reaffirm our belief that our country should have its part in an association of nations for expressing our common humanity, adjusting difficulties and outlawing any nation that resorts to arms to further its own interests.” (Adopted by the Northern Baptist Convention in 1922)

We also join our larger body of Baptists in this call to prayer. Last week, at the invitation of Igor Bandura, the vice president of the All-Ukrainian Union of Associations of Evangelical Christian-Baptists, Rev. Dr. Elijah M. Brown, General Secretary and CEO of the Baptist World Alliance visited Ukraine to pray and to support the Baptist leaders who have been organizing their churches to make preparations should this day come. Deplorably, this day has come and we call on American Baptists to pray.

*“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”*  
(Galatians 6:2)

Dr. C. Jeff Woods  
General Secretary  
American Baptist Churches USA

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.abc-usa.org/2022/02/call-to-prayer-amidst-conflict-in-ukraine/>

On this last Sunday in Black History Month, we began our service by singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” also known as the Black National Anthem. Written by James Weldon Johnson in the year 1900, and put to music by his brother John Rosamond Johnson, it was first sung in public by 500 children at a segregated school in Jacksonville, Florida to commemorate the birthday of Abraham Lincoln. James Weldon Johnson was not only a writer, but also a leader in the budding NAACP. The NAACP website says this about the hymn: “At the turn of the 20th century, Johnson's lyrics eloquently captured the solemn yet hopeful appeal for the liberty of Black Americans. Set against the religious invocation of God and the promise of freedom, the song was later adopted by NAACP and prominently used as a rallying cry during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.”<sup>2</sup>

One of Johnson’s best-known works is from his 1927 book of poetry, *God’s Trombones*. The poem “The Creation” is a poetic reimagining of Genesis 1. The beginning of the poem goes like this, and includes traditionally masculine pronouns for the Divine:

*And God stepped out on space,  
And he looked around and said:  
I'm lonely—  
I'll make me a world.*

*And far as the eye of God could see  
Darkness covered everything,  
Blacker than a hundred midnights  
Down in a cypress swamp.*

*Then God smiled,  
And the light broke,  
And the darkness rolled up on one side,  
And the light stood shining on the other,  
And God said: That's good!*

*Then God reached out and took the light in his hands,  
And God rolled the light around in his hands  
Until he made the sun;  
And he set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.*

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/lift-every-voice-and-sing>

*And the light that was left from making the sun  
God gathered it up in a shining ball  
And flung it against the darkness,  
Spangling the night with the moon and stars.  
Then down between  
The darkness and the light  
He hurled the world;  
And God said: That's good!*

Here, as in Genesis 1, we hear God creating all things through the power of speech. God's word *created*, ordering the cosmos from infinite space into the Creation we perceive all around us. But God's speech did not only call everything into being, but also declared the fundamental characteristic of all creation "good." I just love how Johnson describes this, "And God said: That's good!" with an exclamation point! The creation is GOOD!

Through the power of words, the most powerful entity formed something from nothing. Thus begins the Torah and thus begins the Bible, placing significance on words. In Genesis 1, we learn that spoken words are a creative force. And later in the Hebrew Bible, we learn that the God also gives words to be written, transmitted to God's people by prophets. And in the Christian Bible, in the gospels, we learn that Jesus was formed by the words of the Jewish tradition and the Hebrew prophets, and that much of his speech shares those words. So right from the get-go, the Bible tells us that words are important. That *God's word* is important.

But what does "God's word" really mean?

There's a peculiar quirk in USAmerican Christianity that is somewhat unique compared to Christianity in other parts of the world. When you think of "God's Word," what do you think about? Many people think of the Bible as God's Word. The only problem with that is that the Bible was created by humans, writing over thousands of years and in many different cultural contexts, then put together in different combinations until the canon was reached. But even then, what is considered "the Bible" is different for Catholics, for Orthodox Christians, and for Protestants. Those differences were intentional. Literally, some men a long time ago sat in a room together and decided what was in and what was out—and of course, because they were human, they brought their own biases into that work.

But the Bible is not God's Word (capital W). Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that the Bible isn't important, or that it doesn't contain wisdom or stories that move us or concepts that remain relevant despite the differences of time and place and culture and language. But the Bible was not there in the beginning of all things, in papyrus scroll or sheepskin codex form.

So, I want to challenge you that if you hear the term "God's Word," instead of thinking about the Bible, think of John 1:1-5, our scripture for today.

As has been our pattern, I will read John 1:1-5 as translated by Dr. Wilda C. Gafney in the *Year W Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was with God in the beginning. Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being that came into being. What has come into being in the Word was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the bleakness, and the bleakness did not overtake it.*

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..." So starts the gospel according to John, with some of the most beautiful poetic words the Bible has to offer. But these are just more than pretty words. The Gospel of John is unique in the opening hymn it provides, telling us in poetry not only who Jesus is and what he does, but also locating him as a fundamental part of creation and his identity intrinsically bound with God. These are words that artistically communicate something essential about Jesus called the Christ. John 1 tells us that the Christ is God's Word, more specifically "the Word (capital W) made flesh.

The beginning of this gospel builds on an ancient tradition of wisdom literature. The Word dwelling with God before the beginning of all things recalls Proverbs 7.22, which locates Wisdom with God as a partner in the creation of the cosmos. Other references to this wisdom through which God creates are in Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. In the original Hebrew of Proverbs, the word for "wisdom" is personified as feminine. But the Greek translation of the Bible, from which most of our modern translations come, is a neutral-gendered word: *Logos*. This is also associated with wisdom. Today, we translate *logos* as "Word." Thus, we get the incarnation of Jesus as God's Word.

Beloved church, you know words matter. We know words matter. That's why we care so much about how we talk to one another, how we shape our church bylaws, how we pray, what pronouns we use to address the Holy and each other...we do all these things because words matter. Words shape the world we live in, and they carry power. Did you notice that in Dr. Gafney's translation of John 1, she used the words "bleakness" instead of "darkness"? That's because words matter, and over many, many years dark-skinned people have been harmed by the association of "blackness" and "darkness" with "bad" and "primitive" things, while "whiteness" and "lightness" refer to things that are clean, pure, true and good. Words matter—and so Dr. Gafney made a choice to eliminate "darkness" from the text in favor of "bleakness," a word that is less harmful and possibly closer to the original intent of the author.

Or, if you wonder how words matter, think of that playground phrase "sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me." That might be helpful for staring down a second-grade bully, but words *do* carry weight and they *do* harm.

We know this simply by virtue of living in this world. Right? Each of us at some point in our lives has said something that has harmed someone. And each of us has been harmed by someone's words. That doesn't stop when we are kids, that as we grow up, we magically stop being affected by others' words. I bet each of us can think of something that was said to us long ago that still brings up feelings of hurt, sadness, anger, frustration or worry.

We have examples of how words matter in the world around us. For example, why does saying "Black Lives Matter," garner such intense, emotional reactions for some people? Isn't that something that should be obvious, that Black lives matter? Yes, it should be obvious. But because Black people, and really all people of color, have not been treated as whole humans by the government of the United States of America throughout history, it became necessary to say these words, and say them loud and proud. Today when we hear the statement, "Black Lives Matter," what comes to mind is not only an "of course they do!" but also images of a beautiful and diverse and leader-full movement of advocacy for all who have been harmed by white supremacy.

And when tyrants choose to name the invasion of a peaceful country a "military operation" instead of a "war," that impacts how people think about

the meaning of military activities. And the names of the places where these events are occurring matter too! Geographical names have power, as imperialist countries force their language and therefore their culture on the names of cities and regions. I learned this week that the country currently being invade by Russia is “Ukraine” and should not be referred to as “the Ukraine.” During the Soviet era, “the Ukraine” referred to a region of the USSR, not a sovereign nation. It’s important to respect Ukraine’s sovereignty and call them by the name they recognize.

And right here in Seattle, indigenous communities have been asking people to know the history of the land on which this city is built, and the stories of the people who were the original inhabitants of this land. That’s why land acknowledgements are important: to help each of us know the names and some of the multitude of stories about the history of this land. With place names, words locate us not only on a map, but also locate us in history.

And words that are names of people matter! Right? It’s important to be called by your name! That’s why Mary Magdalene recognized Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane: he called her name. That’s why hearing a loved one say our names is so meaningful to us. That’s why the “Say Her Name” movement, uplifting the names of Black people, particularly women, who have been killed by police and experienced gender-specific violence. And words are particularly important to transgender people, who deserve to be called by the right name and referred to by the correct pronouns. Right now, transgender children and teens in Texas are under attack by policies recommended that would treat gender-affirming medical care as child abuse. That includes medical staff using a trans child’s correct name! It is important to be known in the world by the words that best expresses a person’s true self.

In the anthem the choir sang, the words “Hold On” are repeated over and over again, calling us to think, to *feel*, the impact of the experiences of Black Americans that led to the creation of this song. When Rev. Sam Townsend from New Beginnings Christian Fellowship led our choir in a workshop last week, he reminded us of the healing power of empathy. Rev. Townsend encouraged the choir, and through them, encourages us all, to imagine for one second being kidnapped onto a slave ship. Imagine the power and strength inside that calls out “Hold ON!” Imagine having to watch as your loved ones are mistreated and sold, never to be seen again. Imagine the

Spirit inside a person that must cry out “Hold ON!” Imagine being pulled over by the police and fearing for your life because you know what happens to people with your complexion. Of course, there are those among us who do not need to do any imagining, because these words, these stories, are written on your hearts and on your bodies and in your cells. The words of this song matter because they prompt us to empathize with the situation out of which the lyrics arose.

The prologue to John’s Gospel describes the power of God’s Word (capital W) as a partner in creation, as the medium through which the Holy called into being the cosmos and the planets and stars and earth and ocean and living beings. And in the Transfiguration story that we began our worship together reading responsively, God calls us to listen to what God words God says about the Word. The transfiguration at the mountaintop marks one of the rare places in the Christian Bible that God speaks directly to humans. And what does God speak about? God speaks to make a claim about Jesus’ identity. The Holy speaks in a way that human ears and hearts can receive, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved.” And God calls Peter and James and John to “listen to him.”

On Transfiguration Sundays, we can often focus on the disciples’ experience of the mystical moment of Jesus’ body being encompassed in stunning light and the appearance of the prophets Moses and Elijah appearing next to him. And yes, we can again align ourselves with Peter, bless his heart, who wants to set up camp and stay in this majestic mountaintop revelation. But today I invite you to listen to the words God speaks. God says to the humans, “Listen to my Child.” And how do we remember Jesus, centuries later? In one part, by his words. The words of the Word-made-flesh.

Jesus, too, knew that words matter. As a child raised in a Jewish household and being taught to participate in the religious life of his Jewish community, Jesus probably knew the Torah by heart. He probably had heard stories about the prophets who performed miracles and did signs, hoping to spur their communities to repentance, to change their hearts and lives when confronted by bold injustice. Jesus told stories called parables that prompted people to wonder about their relationships in the world and their relationships to the Holy. Following a long tradition of Hebrew prophets, Jesus preached that all people were beloved, and he said things like “blessed are the poor” and “blessed are those who mourn.” He assured communities



living under the shadow of empire that their struggle was not the end. He affirmed that God saw them and listened to them. As the Hebrew prophets Isaiah and Amos and Jeremiah and Ezekiel did, Jesus preached that a day would come when oppressors would answer for their crimes.

If we follow the Holy's directions, given to our spiritual ancestors Peter, James and John so long ago, and listen to God's beloved Child, we will be listening to God's Word. And we must allow ourselves to be transfigured by what we hear. What does that look like today? That means listening closely to the Biblical text for God's love and justice and mercy, whether we receive them in the complex gifts of parables showing us glimpses of the kin-dom, or we hear Amos' thundering rush of water declaring that God's justice *will* be done. That means spending time thinking and praying and contemplating and living alongside what we know about Jesus and his teachings, so that our transformation is not only internal to our hearts and minds, but also external, impacting how we show up in the world.

Thinking back to James Weldon Johnson's poem *The Creation*, remember how God smiled and looked at all of creation and said, "that's GOOD." No matter what words we have been told about ourselves, our identities and our capabilities. No matter what words we have been taught about those *other* from us, people who differ in race or gender or sexuality or ethnicity or religion or language. No matter what words are being used to spur voracious warmongers to use powers of domination against innocents, whether in Ukraine or Yemen or Ethiopia or Syria or Palestine. Remember that God foundationally called the cosmos "good," and shared God's beloved Child with us, to be known as the "Word of God incarnate." Claiming our identity as good, and claiming our identity as deeply, inherently, irrevocably beloved, we can overcome the grip the words of humans have on us, on our bodies and our families and our lives and our countries. We can recognize the power of the words we use every day, to identify ourselves and others, to claim autonomy, to build up each other in love and justice and peace; to break down walls of hostility upheld by centuries of "othering." We can follow the Way of Jesus, the Way of the Word, and pattern our lives to care for each other, by what we say and how we behave and what we show up for. We can live each day pursuing justice and peace with our words and our deeds, for all people living in God's GOOD creation.

May it ever be so. Amen.