

LENT 2
“Letting go of Empty Words, Holding on to Wisdom”
by Rev. James C. Ramsey

Texts: Joel 2:28-29
Luke 12:11-12

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[IMAGE – too many words umbrella]

“We live in a world awash in words. Tweets, billboards, texts, taglines, blogs, podcasts, headlines, newsfeeds, talk shows... Whenever we find ourselves waiting or with a moment to spare, we instinctively go to a screen, scroll, distract, and try to disengage from much that is all around us, but still the words are everywhere.”

How much of what we read and see and hear is shallow...empty...or not entirely truthful? How willing are we to except such empty words, just because we are tired or distracted or not wanting to make a scene?

[IMAGE – Jokers]

The guys on Impractical Jokers have perhaps captured the essence of the empty word! Impractical Jokers is a popular hidden camera reality TV show. Before each episode there is this warning: “The following program contains scenes of graphic stupidity among four lifelong friends who compete to embarrass each other.”

[IMAGE – Jokers Movie]

There is a new Impractical Jokers movie that just premiered at Pittsburgh Mills Mall and one of the jokers, Sal Vulcano, was on hand to take pictures and sign autographs!

One of the bits the Jokers do is this game where one of the jokers has to use a made-up nonsensical word and get a stranger to agree that they have heard of it before. It’s ridiculous – usually played in a grocery store.

[IMAGE – Dwimplepeen GIF]

One episode saw Joe Gatto having to use the word Dwimplepeen, so he strikes up a conversation with this guy in the produce section. The guy is looking at hot peppers, so Joe says, I remember one of the hottest dishes I’ve ever had it was at my first Dwimplepeen...the guy looks back quizzically. You know...a Dwimplepeen, that event where a young kid turns 13, everybody throws confetti at him, they all spin him around and sing the Dwimplepeen song ...you know,

Kingle, kingle Dwimplepeen,-You made it to 13! -- Kingle, kingle Dwimplepeen,- Hey! 13 now!
[IMAGE – Joe]

So, Jo asks, did you ever attend a Dwimplepeen? Did you ever go to one of those? Of course, the guy says, No, I've never been. But then Joe pushes... Yeah, but you've heard of it, right? "Oh yeah, sure, I've heard of it," the guy replies. Sure, Joe says, Everybody's heard of a Dwimplepeen! --- Actually, nobody's heard of a Dwimplepeen. Nor have you heard of Cafafee, Jampaloon or Goofdookie!

[IMAGE – word cloud]

The empty words of the Impractical Jokers are mostly harmless – but many of the words we hear in the course of a day are not. They might be manipulative, biased or patently wrong. So much of the language we see and hear comes in the form of advertisement – words that are never innocent and potentially misleading.

[IMAGE – 5 hr energy]

You're probably familiar with 5-Hour Energy... The company alleged that its energy drink shots were better than coffee and that doctors recommended it. Those claims were found to be misleading and the makers of 5-Hour Energy were ordered to pay \$4.3 million in penalties and fees.

[IMAGE – Eukanuba]

Companies make unsubstantiated claims about their products all the time... words that we don't have time to research or dispute and so we make a decision to buy based on this misleading information. Mars Petcare US dog food said its Eukanuba dog food could extend dogs' lifespans by 30% or more. The Federal Trade Commission ordered the company to stop making those unsupported claims.

[IMAGE – content]

We're susceptible to all kinds of ads all the time, always asking us to purchase something new, something more, something better or bigger. Last Tuesday's Lenten devotion asked us to practice being content. To consider that we don't need anything new or better, to consider the gifts we have in our life right now. Notice when you buy into the message that you need better or more of something. Recognize when you are being sold a consumerist vision of life. Think to yourself, "How is Jesus' vision of life different?"

[IMAGE – politician]

It's not just companies that seek to deceive with clever, but not quite truthful claims. We get the same thing from some politicians, especially as we near the presidential election in November. I dare not give examples, but needless to say, there's a lot of words tossed around – a literal war of words – truth and decency are often casualties.

How might we give up empty words? OR...at least become more discerning as we are bombarded with a constant barrage of information?

[IMAGE – Tutu book]

One of my heroes, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, has said, “Praise is easy and words empty when they fail consistently to translate into action.”

[IMAGE – Ephesians 5-6]

The Letter to the Ephesians instructed early Christians to be discerning...but it seems contemporary advice:

⁶Let no one deceive you with empty words... Live as children of light— ⁹for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. ¹⁰Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord...

¹⁵Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is...

Ephesians 5:6-20 (selected verses)

[IMAGE – edification pigeons]

Do we seek out words that are edifying, compassionate, honest, wise? – words that might be, as the scripture says, pleasing to the Lord? How do we live as discerning, faithful people with the barrage of information we must process?

Our spiritual challenge is to give up the empty words we hear...as well as the empty words we are tempted to speak ourselves. What do you choose to say, to write, to post on Social Media?

[IMAGE – Ephesians 4:15]

The Apostle again instructs the Christians in Ephesus:

I...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience,

bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...

¹⁵But speaking the truth in love... ²⁵So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another...²⁹Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear... ³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Ephesians 4 (selected verses)

Can we let go of empty words – both those we hear and those we speak...while at the same time, holding on to wisdom? Can we trust that the Holy Spirit will give us the right words at the right time?...as Jesus said.

Holding on to wisdom, for me, means knowing God's Word.

[IMAGE – Isaiah 55]

Listen to these words from the Prophet Isaiah:

¹⁰For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

[IMAGE – rain]

The prophet likens God's word to the rain and snow which enable crops to grow, come to fruition and provide nourishment. What image do you have for God's word? In what ways does God's word bring life? Where can you see the growth happening within yourself and in our church through God's word? God's word is also a title for Jesus!

[IMAGE – walking with Jesus]

Imagine the Lenten Journey as walking with Jesus...as we walk and listen, walk and talk – we can let go of empty words and hold on to wisdom...In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.