



First Born of Many Siblings
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:13-16
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (October 3, 2021)

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched with Dr. King in Selma, was known to say the phrase "words create worlds." His daughter, Susannah Heschel, remembers the full quote: "Words, he often wrote, are themselves sacred, God's tool for creating the universe, and our tools for bringing holiness — or evil — into the world. He used to remind us that the Holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoria, and Hitler did not come to power with tanks and guns; it all began with uttering evil words, with defamation, with language and propaganda. Words create worlds, he used to tell me when I was a child. They must be used very carefully. Some words, once having been uttered, gain eternity and can never be withdrawn. The Book of Proverbs reminds us, he wrote, that death and life are in the power of the tongue."¹

Words surely have creative and transformative power.² And so does literacy in general. Educators know full well that when a person has the mastery of language, a world and new possibilities open in ways that are liberating and affirming. That is why slaveholders did not want their slaves educated.³ And that is also why the elevation of the mind creates introspection, self-expression, empowerment, self-esteem, the development of listening skills, reciprocity, and advocacy.⁴

The epistle to the Hebrews tells us that it is by using words, precisely the Word, that God reaches out to us. The creation stories included in the book of Genesis already tell us that God creates by calling the world into existence. Now, Hebrews' opening line reminds us that God has spoken to our ancestors in many ways through the prophets and now, in the last days, God has chosen to express Godself by the Son.

God creates through the Word and redeems and transforms through the Word. All that is created, whether visible or invisible, contains and manifests God's creative genius, and all that God redeems and transforms, on Earth as in heaven, contains and manifests God's saving will and the desire to be one with the whole creation. All reality, called into existence by God, is also loved and sustained by God's powerful Word.

That's why God takes the initiative to reach out to us. God speaks the Word so that we may know Holiness and Goodness and Beauty and may know ourselves in reference to God. God's Self-offering and revelation is meant for life in abundance, a life of hope, joy, reconciliation, and unity.

¹ [AMMPARO Words Create Worlds \(elca.org\)](http://elca.org); Proverbs 18:21.

² [The power of language: How words shape people, culture \(stanford.edu\)](http://stanford.edu)

³ [Education of Slaves \(spartacus-educational.com\)](http://spartacus-educational.com) and [The Role of Education - SLAVERY, FREEDOM, AND EDUCATION \(weebly.com\)](http://weebly.com)

⁴ [Philosophy of Education -- Chapter 2: Pedagogy of the Oppressed \(webster.edu\)](http://webster.edu) and [Rabindranath Tagore on education – infed.org](http://infed.org)

Our knowledge of God and, therefore, our enjoyment of *Life* is what God has intended to do since the beginning through the creation of the world, the words of the prophets, and the message of God's Son. The Word still comes to us as we stand in awe of creation, as we meditate on the words of Jesus, and as we sit in prayerful silence. God's Word, still creating new life, still convicting our sin, still transforming our spirit, still consoling our heart, still sustaining us in life, comes to those who have ears to hear every day and in different ways.

Often, in silence. God's silence, the place where in panic we mistakenly think God is distant and has abandoned us, is actually a pregnant and gestational silence where new clues about God can take shape and form in time. New insights, images, and words to experience and express the Divine slowly begin to emerge and our sense of self and our relationship with God get solidified.

Obviously, God cannot be captured by our thoughts, words, or images. We cannot wrap our mind around God. We need to come to terms, if we want to grow in our relationship with God, with the reality that anything we can say about God is limited: we cannot comprehend God and can only speak of God in metaphors and even those have their limitations. We can say that God is Father, but God is more than Father. There is also a feminine side to God. We can say that God is a mighty Warrior, but God is more than that. God also embraces vulnerability and weakness. No single way of talking about God is definitive and can tell us everything.

That is why God's Word may be said to be inspired and continues to inspire, because God's intent is to continue God's Self-revelation for the purpose of creating communion (in Latin, "*cum unio*" or "participation in unity") with us. We are meant to grow in that communion.

That is why we refer to the Son as the "perfect copy" of God's glory, or, as translated by Bishop N.T. Wright, "the shining reflection of God's own glory, the precise expression of his own very being." (Hebrews 1:3)⁵ In other words, God's character is manifest in the Son for all the world to see and to follow.

Followers of Jesus are disciples insofar they learn that language, absorb the Word, resist any inner rebellion to God's will, and allow the image of God, in which they are created, to grow into full maturity. Ironically, God's image, which we are not allowed to depict according to the Ten Commandments,⁶ is present in every human being (and not only in the king).⁷ How egalitarian is that?

So, the God who cannot be depicted is reflected in fellow human beings. Those who revere and cherish the image of God in others see something of who God is. Christ, the perfect image of God, is the end product of the image of God in each one of us brought to its maturity. That journey is what we call "discipleship", a process of *trans-formation* in the Spirit of Jesus for the purpose of being *con-formed* to the image of Christ for the glory of God and for the sake of others (2 Cor. 3:17-18).

Our spiritual self has a chance to develop when we submit to the Spirit in humility of heart and mind, and dedicate time and space for solitude, reflection, worship, and accountability. All too often, however, some people approach religion with a market-based mentality. Some people are game only as far as they like what they hear. Some engage only if the worship experience is

⁵ N. T. Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone*, WJK.

⁶ Exodus 20:4-6; Deuteronomy 5:8-10

⁷ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, mentioned in Jesper Svartvik's commentary for October 3, *The Christian Century*, September 22, 2021.

entertaining enough and fits their needs. All too often we want religion to happen to us with the minimum effort on our side to plough the soil of our heart and prepare the necessary dwelling place for the seed of the Word to take root in us. We forget that worship is not about us and that a life of faith matures with time and consistency. Pope Benedict XVI once said, "... the faith is not a theory, a philosophy, or idea; it is an encounter. An encounter with Jesus."

It does take work to be alert and to progress in faith. The ploughing of the soil needs to happen through suffering and the sweat of our brow.⁸ Jesus himself was not spared suffering but learned and led through it. Through his pioneering work, he made a way for us to come to God. God's revelation elicits a response, either for or against and nothing in between. We don't go to church as long as the message is not too challenging and off-putting. We are Church, holy and stubborn, saints and sinners, always being sought after and renewed by God. God is known to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Again, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel would comment:

"What is a religious person? A person who is maladjusted; attuned to the agony of others; aware of God's presence and of God's needs; a religious person is never satisfied, but always questioning, striving for something deeper, and always refusing to accept inequalities, the status quo, the cruelty and suffering of others."⁹

Embarking on a life of faith means being for others; it means taking on the plight of the little ones in society; it means shedding what is corrupt and scandalous in our life; it means responding creatively to the challenges of life so that beauty and honor and dignity and justice may be enjoyed equally by all; it means protecting those who suffer and being ready to follow the self-sacrificing example of Jesus.

A 1992 movie titled *A River Runs Through It* told the story of two brothers growing up in the beautiful Montana countryside. The older was quiet, studious, hard-working; he got a good job and became a respected man in the community. His spirited younger brother was great fun, but was always getting into trouble, pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable. He ended up associating himself with people who led him deeper and deeper into trouble and was finally killed in a brawl. His older brother couldn't help him. They had grown too far apart, and he couldn't reach him: he couldn't come to where he was and rescue him.

The epistle to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus, the older brother of many siblings, has come into our midst and identifies with us. He has shared everything with our life but sin. This is quite remarkable: the perfect image of God does not separate himself from us nor does he spare himself for us, his siblings. He becomes a holy Way for us out of the quagmire of our sin and corruption. By associating with us, we learn to trust him. By putting our life on the line with his for the most vulnerable in our midst (Mark 9:13-16), we learn to reorder our priorities. Jesus opened the path for us and following him has the potential of making us holy (v. 11).

Jesus has come to embrace the excluded and he himself got the same treatment. He came as a poor, Dark skinned, Jewish Galilean in the midst of an empire that thought it was all powerful and invincible.

May we be receptive to your Word that comes to us always new and from manifold quarters and in so many sounds and accents.

⁸ Genesis 3:19

⁹ [Remembering the teaching of Abraham Joshua Heschel \(tikkun.org\)](http://www.tikkun.org)

May we extend radical invitations to all so that those who feel on the outside are on the inside and that those who feel excluded are included for who God created them to be.

Remind us that we are God's images walking among God's people on Earth.

Remind us that we are always loved by you. Amen.