

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(December 17, 20017)

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Sermon manuscript

Merry Christmas!

Communication, 101

(Hebrews 1:1-4)

Introduction: Habla Deutsch?...

Communication. It's about the most difficult thing we do. It is challenging to communicate exactly what we want to say in a way that gets across just what we mean.

There are all kinds of obstacles that can get in the way of clear communication. For instance, there is the language barrier. It's very, very hard to communicate if you and your listener don't share the same language. And it goes without saying that it's a very hard thing to learn a new language.

I should know. I've spent a lifetime mangling languages.

I've made a wreck out of Spanish in San Antonio, Mexico, Uruguay, Nicaragua, and now, Chile. And even though I minored in German in college, I wrecked German while in Germany.

And to give a complete accounting, I have destroyed Swahili during my two trips to Kenya, the Dutch language when I went to Belgium, and Russian during several trips to Kursk. (...some would say English has suffered under my usage, too)¹

¹ Linguistically, my only saving grace is that no one knows exactly how the two languages I studied in seminary, biblical Greek and biblical Hebrew, sounded.

I could, perhaps, chalk my failures at language learning up to the fact that languages are more difficult as one gets more mature.

It is undeniably true that language acquisition is more difficult as we age. Exactly WHY this is true is less clear.

Some who have researched this will go scientific and tell you that adult's brains are less sponge-like than kids' brains are less able to pull off the specific kind of learning required for learning a language.

Others, though, get personal. They argue that learning a language requires making mistakes. And, since grown-ups are less interested in appearing foolish, we are less likely to learn.²

So, maybe I'm immature for my age. I am risking foolishness these days in my attempts to make gains in Español. Pastor Manuel is helping me with a messy session of language learning every now and then, but the progress is painfully slow. (I think it's his fault.)

If you and a friend come from different cultures and speak with different regional accents, clear communication will be more difficult.

Communication, as I said, is tough. It's easier when we know the language, but even sharing a language doesn't eliminate communication challenges.

Ask any husband / wife team. Husbands and wives love each other. And unintended communication miscues cause untold damage. We blurt out an unkind observation, remind our spouse of a fault once too often, speak when it would be better to listen. Amen?

Good friendships suffer from the same thing. How many times have I walked away from an otherwise good exchange with a friend and wondered why I said THAT. What was I thinking? I wish I could take back so many words.

² "I used to joke that I spoke French like a 3-year-old," says author, William Alexander, "until I met a French 3-year-old and couldn't hold up my end of the conversation."

Sometimes communication doesn't communicate because we lie. We are deceptive. We intend harm by our words. Sometimes, the way we speak is ugly. It's mean.

How many times have you told someone you love how much you love them, and it just fell flat?

You tried to give helpful, constructive criticism, and it came across as scolding? Or, you paid a sincere compliment, and it didn't deeply encourage.

Sometimes, our best attempts at communication result in lack of understanding. There's a lot to consider when we attempt communication. We try hard to be clear, but are often not successful.

Today, we are so grateful that God is a perfect Communicator. And, as we'll see, Christmas makes that abundantly clear.

A Communicating God

Communication via Nature

God has spoken. He has spoken in the beauty of the natural world.

While Kathy and I were in Colorado a week ago to meet our granddaughter, Dani, one afternoon, my son, Zach, and I got "out" for a bit.

We drove on an icy road to Loveland Pass (12,000 feet elevation) and then hiked up a few hundred feet and witnessed a 360-degree panorama of snow-capped wildness. Such views "speak" of God's majestic handiwork.

Most of the time, the Texas Gulf shore is a quiet place, perfect for unwinding and calming down as you watch the waves lap at the sand. But that normally calm Gulf turned violent this summer as Hurricane Harvey destroyed everything in his path.

The God who created the world, created the conditions that unleash storms. He speaks power by the storm.

In recent years, I've spent more time in the West Texas deserts than ever before. I've come to appreciate the desert's austere beauty and its unrivaled sunsets and star shows. God speaks through all of it of His artistic creativity.

This past year I read a book titled, The Language of God. It is a fascinating read by Francis Collins, who was the former head of the Human Genome Project for the National Institutes for Health.

This brilliant scientist says that God has communicated Himself, He has spoken, through human DNA.

In every way, the creation communicates the Creator.

And beyond this general communication of God in nature, we have the more specific revelation of God in His written Word.

Communication via Scripture

We understand God's presence and His power through nature. But without the record found in the Bible, we'd never know much of His character.

The stories of His interaction with Abraham and Moses and David speak of His holiness and love. The Proverbs point us to His wisdom. The whole history of Israel tells us of God's faithfulness and His justice.

You and I are so grateful to God for His communicating ways.

What if...?

But just think. Can you imagine our world if God had not spoken, through either creation or Bible? What if God was not committed to communicating?

What if, as we looked at the world around us, there were no clues pointing us to a Creator? What if we had no John 3:16 to tell us that God *“so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.”*?

What if God was present, but silent?

Well, thankfully, God *has* spoken! And there is a short passage right at the beginning of the book of Hebrews that speaks of God’s communicating ways.

The author - and we really don’t know who wrote Hebrews - reminds us that from the start God has been a communicating God.

God’s Communications in the Past (Hebrews 1:1)

God Spoke “in many ways”

[1] God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many...WAYS

God spoke in visions and dreams

In ancient times, God used a variety of ways to speak to His world.

Sometimes, God spoke to people through visions of the night and through dreams.

God gave Abraham a vision that let him know that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan.

Jacob’s son, Joseph, dreamed dreams that predicted his family’s future. Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams led to his family’s salvation.

God spoke through miracles

At other times, God communicated something about Himself by the miraculous. Miracles can be worth more than a thousand words.

God spoke very clearly to the Egyptians by the ten plagues that preceded the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea. Those miracles all spoke “power.”

Prophets like Elijah and Elisha performed miracles that spoke of God’s authority to suspend the “laws” of nature He Himself had put in place. By these prophets, people were raised from the dead, iron ax-heads floated to the surface of rivers, droughts started and ended.

Throughout the Bible, God’s miracles are exclamation marks, shouting His ability to do whatever He wants to do whenever He wants to do it. They speak of God’s meddling, intervening ways.

And then, sometimes, God spoke by speaking.

God spoke directly

He spoke judgment and grace to Adam and Eve. He spoke deliverance to Noah. He spoke a commission to Moses from a burning bush. He thundered from Sinai as the people trembled at the foot of the mountain.

God spoke through prophetic utterances

Some time, if you’ll flip through the prophetic books of the Old Testament, you will find dozens of communications from God, given in the form of prophecies.

In these prophetic messages, the Lord literally spoke by using the human prophets as His mouthpieces, sometimes rebuking the nation of Israel for her sin, and sometimes telling them what was going to happen in the future.³

God certainly has spoken to mankind. If nothing else, all of the modes of expression that God has used convince us that He wants to communicate with us.

³ God has even been known to use non-humans to get across His message, as in *angels* and even *Balaam’s donkey*. (Numbers 22).

But, as Hebrews 1:1 also tells us, in God's communications in the ancient past, something was always missing.

God Spoke "in portions"

[1] God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in many PORTIONS.

God's communication in past times was always true, always appropriate. But it was also never complete, full.

And the reason that all the communications we've considered so far were not "complete" was because in them, GOD spoke *as* GOD to PEOPLE. The gap that existed between us and God was never bridged.

But, God was so committed to communication, so committed to letting us know more about Him, to bringing us into relationship with Himself, that He finally bridged that gap.

So, back to Hebrews 1. As the author continues, we come to this - **[2] in these last days, He has spoken to us in His Son.**⁴

If you had wondered how this was all going to tie back in with Christmas, now you see.

When God sent Jesus, His communication to us was not portioned out. It was complete because (incredibly) in Jesus, GOD has spoken to us as one of us.

God Has NOW Spoken to Us in His Son (Hebrews 1:2-3a)

[2] in these last days [God] has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

⁴ The original Greek does not include the definite article with "Son." Reading along in Greek, we translate, "In these last days, God has spoken in Son..." The absence of the article ("the") gives the noun, "Son," an adverbial status, perhaps giving the sense, "In these last days, God has spoken 'Son-wise.'"

[3] And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...

God Speaks Through His Son

We listen to these words and we hear rapid-fire remarks about Jesus, each one of them prompting worship.

- As God's one and only eternal Son, Jesus is the rightful heir of all the riches of God. Everything that belongs to God, belongs to Jesus.
- Jesus is the active agent of creation. The Apostle John started off his Gospel with the same thought. **[1] In the beginning was the Word. [2] And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. [3] All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.**
- Jesus is the power controlling the universe. He keeps the whole thing going by His Word.
- Jesus made purification of OUR sins by His sacrifice on the cross.
- Having finished the work He came to earth to accomplish, Jesus has now "**sat down.**"

That last statement is so profound. Jesus didn't sit down at God's right hand because He got tired.

No, the image of Jesus sitting down takes us back to the Old Testament place of worship - the temple. In the innermost chambers of the temple, there were a few pieces of furniture. A table. A lampstand. An altar. The ark of the covenant. But there was never a chair.

There was no need for a chair because the work of the priest was never done. There was always one more offering to bring, one more sacrifice to make.

But, now that Jesus has finished His work (the work of bringing salvation to people like you and me) there is nothing else left for Him to do. So, He sat down.

Through Jesus, God speaks of His creative work. Through Jesus, God speaks of His redemptive work. Through Jesus, God speaks more completely than He ever had since the world began.

The Son is the Best Communication We Have from God about God

[3b] And He is the radiance of His glory, and the exact representation of His nature

Whatever we might have wanted to know about God, we discover by looking at Jesus.

God speaks through Jesus' miracles and teachings

For one thing, His miracles speak "God." Turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana was just the start. From there He gave sight to a man born blind, healed the lame, cast out demons, walked on water and calmed storms, fed multitudes, cleansed lepers, and raised the dead.

Anyone looking for evidence of God's existence and His power need only look at Jesus' miracles.

Or, consider His teachings. At the end of His Sermon on the Mount, people stood with their mouths wide open - they had never heard anyone teach like THAT before!

His ethical teachings went beyond Moses. Jesus spoke of changing behavior and of purifying motives.

He told parables, God-stories in street clothes. They were His best-loved form of teaching. In the parables we hear about the Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep, the Prodigal Son, the Sower and the Soils.

These stories help us see our world, ourselves, and God more clearly.

In all His teachings, Jesus communicated the wisdom and the love and the ways of God.

God speaks through Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection

Then, when we come to the very end of His life, King Jesus is *not* seated on a throne. He is nailed to a cross. But, the cross is not a sign of weakness. It speaks of His love.

It was Jesus' choice to die on a Roman cross, because in no other way could He win salvation for us other than by offering Himself as a sacrifice to pay the price to redeem us from our sin.

And then, after having been killed on a Friday, those who came to embalm His body on Sunday found the tomb empty, because He had been raised from the dead.

Of all the powers that hold sway over us, none is so powerful as death. And yet, Jesus conquered death. Not even the grave could hold Him. By the resurrection of Jesus, God spoke of His awesome power.

There is no doubt about it. Looking at any phase of the life of Jesus is looking at God Himself. In Jesus we see God's wisdom, His love, and His power.

But, what about the event we celebrate every December 25? What about Christmas? In what way is God communicating to us, speaking to us, through the birth of Jesus?

When we turn to consider what happened in Bethlehem, we find God using a unique mode of speech, different than the way He has ever spoken before.

It's quiet, un-flashy, un-showy. It's divine shyness. That's what Christmas is all about.

Speaking of Christmas, USA, 2017...

It being the middle of December, last Wednesday evening Kathy and I drove over to La Cantera Mall, mainly to check out the lights and decorations. We figured that all of the pretty lights would be up and shining - and we were thoroughly underwhelmed.

Now, we think La Cantera is a fun mall to walk around in, and we expected that on December 13th there would be lots of lights and Christmas music. Nope.

There were a few lit trees, but nothing impressive. The music wasn't even Christmassy.

There was a booth set up where lots of people were having pictures taken of Santa with their children AND THEIR DOGS (!). But other than that, not much.

On the way home, I realized that the trip had been a win.

This Christmas season, for whatever reason, I've been more conscious than I am normally of the seasonal emphasis on extravagant buying and merchandising. Commercials and billboards and internet ads are unapologetically focused on the material.

So, it was nice to see La Cantera with low lights and with very little of what usually passes for "Christmas spirit" - the kind that involves buying over-the-top gifts, tables spread with feasts, Hallmark cards featuring either chipmunks, New England farms, or serene, holy families wrapped in halos.

I'm really not at all against Christmas spirit. But I want us, today, to experience a Christmas spirit better than any mall could ever give us, better than any family gathering could ever produce, and better than what could ever be found under a tree.

To experience that, you and I have got to turn to the Bible to see the first Christmas. When we see how it really was back then, we'll see that Hallmark Cards, advertisers, and maybe even we have it all wrong.

God's Special Communication through His Son's Birth

The Ugliers of Christmas

We meet a young couple in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. We know very little about them except that they were dirt poor. We can assume this, first, because most all first-century Jews were poor.

But we also know they were poor because the sacrifice Joseph and Mary offered (Luke 2:24) when they dedicated Jesus in the temple on the eighth day of His life was the offering allowed for the poorest of the poor: two turtledoves. Anybody could afford two small birds.

We also know that they traveled roughly one hundred miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem on rough roads through rough territory in the dead of winter, while Mary was on the verge of giving birth. (With my daughter at precisely this point now, my heart goes out to Mary!)

And let's not forget that the reason they were traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem was so that they could register for Caesar's census and pay their taxes.

When it came time for Jesus to be born, His nursery was less grand than that of any of my children or grandchildren. He was born in Bethlehem's stables and an animals' manger, a feeding trough, served as His first crib.

Along with the silly Santa Claus' and reindeer and such on front lawns in our neighborhoods, we see an occasional, quiet nativity scene.

What emotions stir in you when you think about what was actually going on at the stables? A poor, young couple, far from home, deliver a Child in a barn. It's sobering and sad in its ugliness.

But, there's something about that birth. Not *despite* the ugliers. *Because* of them. That birth is beautiful. It draws us to worship.

It is by the uglinesses that God “speaks” in a way that He never had spoken before. And, had He not spoken in this way, had Jesus entered the world in some grandiose, kingly way, we would have never known THIS about our God.

The Beauty of Christmas’ Uglies

God “gets” us

Without the humble birth Jesus experienced in Bethlehem’s stables, we would never have known the depths of God’s passion to connect with us, to reach us. That birth says that He was willing to do whatever it took to save us.

After Bethlehem, God can say, “*I get it*” - and we know that He really gets it. He gets us. He understands hardship and suffering, humiliation and deprivation. He became one of us.

Last Sunday, Jeff urged us to learn from Mary and Elizabeth and Zacharias to praise and to worship God, even during life’s disruptions. I so appreciated that timely word.

Here’s another thought for you if you find yourself going through tough times at this Christmas season. Jesus has been through tough times, too. He knows. He’s walking with you through your valley, with valley scars of His own.

His woundedness began at Bethlehem and ended on a cross. So, by His birth, life, and death, He says, “*I am uniquely able to sympathize with you when life is unspeakably hard.*”⁵

Go to Jesus with your pain and sadness. He has walked the road of pain and sadness and He’s walking with you now.

Jesus’ birth *communicates*. It tells us that God cares. It also, though, speaks something about how God works, generally.

God’s gracious, humble ways

Of course, we know that God sometimes works through blinding lights from heaven, impressive displays of power, and by spectacular manifestations of omnipotence.

More normally, though, He works silently, in the shadows, and by the power of weakness. Christmas celebrates that weakness. At Christmas, Jesus comes to us in the form of a helpless newborn - vulnerability in its purest form.

During His life, Jesus perfectly fulfilled the Law. But beginning in Bethlehem’s stables, He ushered in the way of grace.

Law commands us to obey. Grace compels us, to obey. Grace is non-coercion. Grace is warm invitation.

All our lives, we are given the choice to live on the basis of law or grace. And it is a challenge to live grace-fully. It can appear to be so inefficient.

A quick story...

I was enjoying a mid-afternoon tea with my Russian Bible students during one of my trips to Kursk when I decided to ask them a couple of questions.

Through the decade I was privileged to travel to Russia I came to love Russia. The Russians I met were big-hearted people with great spiritual sensitivity.

We had been talking about how things “worked” in their churches. Seated around a big table, I asked, through a translator (there’s that communication thing),

“Tell me if you agree with this statement. ‘THE MOST POWERFUL MOTIVATOR IN ALL THE WORLD FOR CHRISTLIKE LIVING IS GRACE.’ Do you agree or disagree with that statement?”

⁵ See Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:14-16.

The men and women around the table all nodded their heads. They all agreed with my statement. They affirmed the power of grace. What God has done for us moves us to want to live for Him.

But then, pretty quickly, first one, and then another, said, *“But you can’t run a church like that.”*

Everybody there agreed. They were saying, in essence, *“Grace is good. But when you want to really accomplish something, you need to rely on other things. Things more practical.”*

Now, by telling that story, I didn’t really just throw my Russian friends under the bus. I used them to make a point that is as true in San Antonio as it is in Kursk.

It is tempting to abandon grace in favor of something a bit more “practical” when you really want to get something done.

It is tempting to revert to arm-twisting, guilt motivation, high-pressure tactics, and ordering people around. Such tactics just seem to work better - at work, in politics, at church.

In the stables, Jesus shows us a whole new way.

Notice how un-coercive that Baby lying in the manger is. He has no power to speak of. And notice how you are compelled to worship. At the moment of His greatest vulnerability, Jesus was most powerful. That’s the power of grace.

Today’s wisdom would tell us that grace is nice, but it’s for dreamers. Law is the way to get things done. Leaders the world over know this and they use their authority to coerce compliance.

There was one Leader, though, born two thousand years ago, who played the ruler game by different rules.

King Jesus doesn’t rule like most rulers rule. And He didn’t enter the world He created as most kings would have.

Throughout human history, God has shouted through visions, dreams, thunderings from heaven, and prophetic revelations.

In His own life, Jesus shouted through the wisdom of His teachings, the power of His miracles, the love of the cross, and the glory of the resurrection.

Bethlehem is God speaking in a different language. Bethlehem is God whispering, not shouting. And I believe it is His most persuasive invitation to us to worship, to trust, and to live by grace.

So, yes. Let us adore Him.

[2 Corinthians 8:9] For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.