

What did you leave unsaid this year? A goodbye? A comeback? A revelatory thought? The Thursday New York Times had a story about a public art collective called Illegal Art who placed installations around the city and invited passers-by to offer a few last words. The paper printed a sampling of what people left.

Grow up
But, you don't understand
I quit
Grandpa, sorry I put ink in your coffee.
I did remember
I am in love with the man who let me have a free swipe of his metrocard
Come back
I've changed my mind, I'm going to keep it
You can't be in the Mickey Mouse Club.
I wish I could somehow go back in time and make my mother's life better.
Oh, same to you!
I forgive you.

The words remind us of the things we should have said, but didn't, and maybe the things we said, but now regret. What would your words be for 2009?

Words matter for us humans. We need to be able to speak to one another. We need to be able to make our world real through our words. We speak and a thing becomes true for us. We speak and others respond. Frederick Buechner says it beautifully in his book, "Wishful Thinking."

"Words are power, essentially the power of creation. By my words I both discover and create who I am. By my words I elicit a word from you. Through our converse we create each other."

"When God said, 'Let there be light,' there was light where before there was only darkness. When I say I love you, there is love where before there was only

ambiguous silence. In a sense, I do not love you first and then speak it, but only by speaking it give it reality.”

In our world, in our lives, words have the capacity to make our thoughts real, words have the capacity to create something among people, words have the capacity to repair something that was broken. We speak and things that were not become, things that have been broken are restored, connections are made, love happens, forgiveness happens. Our words have the capacity to create, to renew and to remake.

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.”

God said, and it was so. God speaks and the ordering of the universe begins. God speaks and things that were not are. God speaks and the world that we will one day know begins.

With *a* word, God creates.

John writes, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”**

With *the* Word, God creates.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

With *the* Word, God enters our lives.

From the abstract transcendence of the first creation story to the poetry of Jesus' presence in the first verses of John's gospel, God creates and then comes into our world to bring redemption, renewal and wholeness.

With words, God made us, and with the Word-capital "W", God redeems us and makes us whole, again and again.

We hear this expressed with a timely beauty in today's psalm:

God gives snow like wool;

scattering frost like ashes.

God scatters hail like bread crumbs—

who can stand against God's cold?

Indeed, who can stand against God's cold? I mean, I'm like any Iowan, proud of our ability to tolerate cold and snow, stocked with the right clothes, tools and gear to handle the worst that winter offers. But the older I get, the less I like it. And these days are especially cold and snowy. Temperatures in the single digits—either positive or negative. A deep snow cover that will likely get deeper before much of it melts. On TV the other day the meteorologist said the last time we have had this weather pattern was in 1977—and that means we are not even close to done.

Who can stand against God's cold the psalmist asks, and we might well ask the same thing.

But the psalmist goes on to say how God responds to the cold:

The LORD sends forth the word, and melts them;

the wind blows, and the waters flow.

God sends forth the word and spring arrives. God sends forth the word and the snow melts, the air warms and winter no longer holds us in its icy grip.

We are sometimes held in an icy grip, in a deep freeze—not literally winter—but an experience of life that seems like winter.

We get so we are hunched up and hunkered down. Hunched up and tense in our layers of self-protection, shivering against whatever challenges and difficulties we're facing. Huddling up against our fears, thinking that if we can close ourselves off, tighten ourselves down, hold ourselves in, we can keep those difficulties away, we can ignore them and by ignoring them, somehow successfully pretend that they are not present, that they are not with us, that they are not following us.

We isolate ourselves, like we do in a hard winter—staying in, limiting our time with others, limiting our engagement in the lives of our friends and families. We turn away from those who might help us, from those who might reach out to us. We turn away from God, skeptical that any help will come, that any support can be given.

The short days, the mounds of snow, the grey skies—become for us like our own narrowed perspective. We don't or can't look past today, or tomorrow. We don't or can't allow ourselves to imagine a better future, a hopeful outcome, a time when our hearts can be touched again.

Our lives can become like winter, even when it's not winter, even when the sun is out and shining, even on the warmest summer day. *Who can stand against God's cold?*

But the promise of the word made flesh—the promise of Jesus—is that God sends God's Word like spring to reach into the winter of our lives, to reach into the cold places with a breath of spring, to bring the promise of renewal and rebirth.

If we are afraid and find that we are hunched up and hunkering down—tense against the cold, Jesus allows us to trust. Jesus brings forgiveness for the hurts we have caused and the hurts we have experienced. Jesus brings a forgiveness that warms us enough to reach out, to take a chance, to know that no hurts can harm us when we live in the warmth of God’s love, a love made real in Jesus.

If we are lonely and feeling isolated, Jesus reminds us that we are claimed as God’s children. As our second reading proclaims joyously, we were “...chosen before the foundation of the world, destined for adoption as children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.” We are not alone, we are never alone. In the darkest places that we will experience in our lives, Jesus shines his light. During the most difficult challenges we will face, Jesus stands by our side.

If in our narrowed perspective, not seeing past this day, not seeing beyond these piles of snow, we get to thinking it is all up to us, that we alone carry our burdens, Jesus reminds us that we can give our worries, and concerns and fears over to his care. We can let go, we can let someone else carry the load, because the truth is, we can’t do it ourselves anyway, not even with our very best effort.

God sends forth the word that melts the snow and frost and hail. God sends forth the word that brings warmth to frozen and cold places. God sends forth Jesus, for us and for our sake, so that we will know that Spring will come, so that we will know that hope is real, so that we will know that redemption is for us.

In a little while we will share in the meal, coming forward to the rail to once again meet Jesus present in his body and blood—the Word made flesh, living among us. And in

the crumbly taste of the bread, and the sharp tang of the wine, the Word creates new life for us. We are assured that the promise of spring is ever before us, we are assured that in Jesus new life is a promise that is made real for us—right now and right here, and we are assured that we are not alone, not now, not ever. We walk forward to the rail, and winter becomes spring again, even in the depths of a record-breaking snowy, cold Iowa January.