

“Very Near to You” / Deuteronomy 30:9-14 / 14 July 2013

“It’s not up in heaven; it’s not across the sea. No, the Word is very near to you, on your lips and in your heart.” Life-giving words, world-redeeming words of courage and hope, they’re very near. The Word is within us and around us. It’s in our very hearts, even if it doesn’t always make it to our lips. The Word is very near to you.

This line from the Book of Deuteronomy makes me think of a pivotal moment in James Salter’s novel *The Arm of Flesh*, which was recently republished with a far less gripping name but a lot of improvements to the story. The book’s new name is *Cassada*, which is simply the surname of the main character. It’s probably the only book with a surprise ending that has ever truly taken me by complete surprise. And yet, if I had reflected a little longer on the old name, *The Arm of Flesh*, I might have known from the beginning that it was going to be a tale of betrayal. Does that term “the arm of flesh” ring a bell for you? If you were a Protestant anytime before the 1980s, then it should, for the line is lifted from an old militaristic hymn that was once very popular, but which no longer appears in hymnals: *Stand up, Stand up for Jesus*. You won’t find it in the polite blue hymnal in the pew rack in front of you. But I’m sure that many of us remember it. In fact, when we did a survey of the congregation’s favorite hymns, two years ago, *Stand up, Stand up for Jesus* was chosen by exactly three people. It’s a rollicking old gospel song that started falling out of favor in the years just after the War in Vietnam. One of its verses says: “Stand up, stand up for Jesus; stand in his strength alone. The arm of flesh will fail you; *ye dare not trust your own.*”

In the novel, *The Arm of Flesh*, Cassada is an ambitious fighter pilot whose job it is to help with the American occupation of Italy and Germany in the aftermath of World War II. Cassada is assigned to a new unit, where none of the other fighter pilots like him. He takes too many risks; he’s a showoff; he’s not a team player, which can be a dangerous thing for Cassada’s fellow airmen. He is a great pilot, but he always gets passed up for promotions, and he’s never allowed to fly on any of the most glorious missions. Nobody trusts him, and the author spends the bulk of his novel getting you to side with Cassada. Poor Cassada! He’s the Rudolph-the-Red-Nosed-Reindeer of the US Air Force. None of the other reindeer will let him play in their games. Even his captain—Captain Isbell, who really tries his best to include the newcomer—even he can’t overcome the strong feelings of dislike that everyone bears toward poor Cassada. And yet, Captain Isbell remains Cassada’s one and only supporter, not knowing that Cassada blames him for most of his woes. There comes a place in the novel where Cassada and Isbell are away from their airbase together in some other part of Germany. They go out for breakfast, and they end up having a short but good conversation about how beautiful Europe is from the skies. “Berlin, gray as a river. Munich, blue, deserted. The roads seemed dusted with chalk.” And into that moment of bonding, Captain Isbell feels a kind of affection for the unhappy pilot, and he tries to encourage him. But it’s awkward. He doesn’t know how to say the things he needs to say to this promising young hothead. He doesn’t know how to tell the guy that he’s good but reckless, that he needs to learn obedience before he can lead a mission. The captain knows what Cassada needs to hear, but he hesitates because it’s not easy to have a real heart-to-heart with another man, one you barely know.

The captain didn’t know it, but at that crucial moment, he had in his heart and on his lips the very words that could have prevented all the tragedy that strikes later in the book, all the vengeance and betrayal. The words of redemption that could have spared them all the pain to come, they were on the tip of captain’s tongue. And they were nothing all that dramatic, just the genuine words of encouragement and concern that men sometimes find hard to express to one another, just words of counsel that are so hard to share with a person you don’t know well. And the writer says of that pivotal moment, “There was suddenly a great deal Isbell wanted to say. They could have talked. They could have pushed the plates aside and leaned forward on their elbows, talking while the dust floated sideways through bolts of sunshine, while the eggs turned cold, but it didn’t quite happen. The moments don’t fulfill themselves always. Somehow they started eating in silence and it was impossible

to begin.”

Well, I won't tell you how it all ends, for James Salter is 81 years old, and I'm hoping that his excellent novel—the revised edition with the less gripping name—will be made into a movie someday before the author dies, and that you will actually catch it on the silver screen in all its suspenseful drama. My point is this: the silence that settles over Isbell and Cassada—the inability to push aside their plates and really talk about the issues—that silence develops into a deep misunderstanding, and it comes at a great price that the reader only discovers at the end of the book. It's a silence we've all known. I think James Salter, in this passage of his novel, touches on something that all of us have experienced: sitting with another person and wanting so badly to say something vitally important to that person, wanting with all our hearts to reach out in a way that we don't quite feel capable of doing. And then, all too quickly, the moment passes. The word was so near, but it never quite realized itself, and the opportunity to speak may never come again. Have you ever been there? “The Word is very near to you. It's on your lips and in your heart.”

It's said that people who love sausage and respect the law should never watch either being made. We've always been told—for the sake of simplicity—that Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the ten laws of God inscribed on two stone tablets; those Ten Commandments became the basis for the Western World's sense ethics. What many of us may not know is that Mr. Moses, Esquire, held a juris doctorate degree from Duquesne University School of Law, and those ten simple rules came with whole truck-loads of footnotes. Imagine the scene in today's reading from the Book of Deuteronomy. The crowds of the Israelites sit dumbfounded and glassy-eyed as Moses finishes up reading the long and complicated Law of God that fills the whole Book of Deuteronomy. After giving all the lofty commands of that vast legal code, after all the many dozens of “thou-shalts” and “thou-shalt-nots,” after all the curses that were pronounced upon the disobedient, and the many blessings spoken over the pious, after the mind-numbing prescriptions and proscriptions, after tallying the exact number of doves that must die for each and every human sin, after describing in elaborate detail all the appointed rituals and rules, after squarely decrying the evils of the Philly cheese steak sandwich (by prohibiting any mixture of meat and dairy), this is how the Book of Deuteronomy sums up the sacred code of Israel. It says, in essence, “This law is not hard, people. It's not up in heaven; it's not across the sea. The Word is very near to you; it's on your lips, in your heart.” And it's true, really. After all the many words of the Law, it really all comes down to the one Word of Life that Jesus lifted out of it. Leviticus 19:18 said it long before Christ: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Any and all words that tend toward the love of God and the love of neighbor, these are the Word of life, and they are very near to you. Even in our polarized age of extremist words, sensationalistic journalism, simplistic sound-bites, words that divide and create enmity, even now, the Word of life is still very near to us. The Word of Life is any word that tends toward the love of God and neighbor. It takes courage to hear and speak.

What words are in your heart and near to your lips? What words come back to you in the quiet of your mind? For good or ill, there are words inside of us, and they have enormous power. When we unleash our inner words into the world, they can harm or they can heal. Sometimes they even come back to haunt us. Back in the days of the old KGB in the Soviet Union, a certain man had a pet parrot who happened to escape one summer day through an opened window. The man called the secret police and told them, “My parrot has escaped.” They asked, “What concern is that for us?” He stammered for a moment, then said, “Well, if the bird's found, I just want you to know that I do not share his political opinions.” Our inner words have a way of making it out into the world.

Words of kindness, words of blame, words of criticism spoken to us decades ago still ring in our ears, though the voices that spoke them have long since been silenced. Words can create a whole new world, and they can destroy. They can inspire hope and joy, or they can crush the spirit. There is a living Word that our world is waiting to hear, the Word of love for God and neighbor. The Word of Courage that will drive out anxiety; the Word of Pardon that will dispel guilt; the Word of Life that will overcome death; the Word of Love that will cast out fear; the Word is very near to you. It is on your

lips and in your heart...but it's usually easier to speak the negative word. How is it that any mean-spirited person can easily speak words of anger or fear, words that tear down, but it takes a real kind of courage to speak words that bless and build up? Are we really afraid to say life-affirming things to other people, as if words of encouragement would be a disservice to them, puffing up their egos? Most people I know could use a kind word every now and again. Words of wholeness are around us and within, and anyone can speak words of blessing instead of criticism, but it takes a sort of courage.

And “the moments don't fulfill themselves always,” as the novel says. Or as often as not, we fail to bring them to their fulfillment. The Word of life is indeed very near to us, offering to redeem even our most desperate of moments. But the things of death are near to us, too. Every manner of vice, and fault, every injury we've ever borne, every injustice that we've witnessed with a shrug or a sigh, each dehumanizing pornographic image that's been lodged in our heads. And all the ugly words that have been used on us like weapons. These things, too, are very near, and they'll offer themselves up for our counsel. If you don't believe that, then just examine the first words that come to mind when you bump your head or get treated rudely by a stranger. If you don't believe that the words of death are near to us, then think about the way you feel after watching half an hour of some cable news network, or a political debate, or a popular religious broadcast. The words of death are around us and within; they make their way onto our lips, and (God help us) that's because they're in our hearts. What when all of life comes to seem like a dreary list of lonesome obligations? What when all our days start to seem identical, and a dread boredom makes its ugly nest in our lives? What when we sit alone with old hurts and nurse them into new ones? I've come to believe that more hearts are broken in the silence of our lost moments—perhaps sitting around a TV—than in all the acts of violence and hatred the we read about in the paper. We reach these unhappy points in life because the words of death, too, penetrate our hearts. But even at times of darkness and fear, apathy and loss; even at times when death seems close by, the Word of Life is very near to you. It's not faraway in heaven where you cannot reach it. It's not across the ocean, on some distant beach. The Word of Life—the “Law of God”—is any word that tends toward the love of God and neighbor. And that Word of Life is very near to you, on your lips and in your heart.

My favorite Word of Life, the thing I need to hear each day, is found in the Book of Philippians. It goes like this: *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things...and the God of peace will be with you.*

How often that life-giving Word has returned to me in times of uncertainty and fear! How many all-but-lost moments of my life it has redeemed. And so, I would say two things as this sermon draws to a close: First, the Word of life is very near to you, but it's often easier to hear the words of death. You get to choose which thoughts you will entertain in your lifetime. Choose wisely. Dwell on the life-affirming Word that speaks joy and courage to your spirit. Nurture that Word in yourself, and you will find that—just as Deuteronomy says—it will come to make a home in your heart. Secondly, it takes a kind of courage to speak the Word of Life instead of the negative word. But you must speak that life-affirming Word to the people around you, especially the ones you love. “The moments don't fulfill themselves always,” but we only get so many moments in this life, and people do regret never having said the things they should have said when the time was upon them. The Word is very near to you. It is. The Word, or “The Law” of God is simply the love of God and neighbor. It's not hard. The Word is on your lips and in your heart, but it takes courage to hear in and speak it. It's the Word that can speak comfort to your fears, faith to your doubts, strength to your failings, and hope to your