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Texts: Genesis 11: 1-9; John 1: 1-5, 14; Revelation 13: 5-8, 10b

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Living in the Spread:  
the Violence of Language and the Word Become Flesh

*“Speech has power and few people realize that words do not fade. What starts out as a sound ends in a deed.”*

*-Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1961<sup>1</sup>*

So said Abraham Heschel in a memorandum addressed to the Catholic Church in 1961, in an effort to reform portrayals of Judaism by the Vatican – in its pronouncements, catechisms, textbooks and art. It was a tip of the hat by a Jewish Rabbi to an audience well informed about the relationship between speech and action, words and deeds. Indeed, Heschel’s statement functions as a gloss upon the first words of John’s Gospel, instantly recognizable even to the most inattentive Christian listeners and readers: “In the beginning was the Word...and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

Allow Heschel’s statement to work upon your understanding of that opening passage in John. Words matter. That is a theological as well as a moral claim. A word is the building block of a thought, of an idea. And a thought, or an idea, is the building block for an activity. Thus, it also follows that a set of words, which is to say a text, or a series of texts, can form and inform a human life, the way Jesus was formed and informed by the words of the Law and the Prophets. Words have the power to shape reality. The acquisition of language, in speech and writing, is one of the most fundamental aspects of our personhood, which is why young parents wait for their child’s first word, and why teachers drill grammar and spelling into their young charges. It’s why, when we go to reside in a new place, we work diligently to learn the language of those with whom we reside. Conversely, it’s why those who owned and trafficked in human beings once did their best, on threat of torture or death, to prevent those they viewed as property from acquiring much facility with words. A word leads to a thought, which can lead to communication, which can lead to action. So it is that a child grows toward maturity. So it is that the uprooted nourish new roots. So it is that those stripped of personhood acquire agency. What starts out as a sound ends in a deed. Words have a way of becoming life, flesh, habit.

The power of language, of speech, has been on my mind a lot over the past several weeks. Like many of you, I witnessed the first Presidential debate, and I must tell you that I felt as chilled by what I saw and heard as anything that has occurred over these past four years. It felt of a piece with the detention camps for migrant children and the chortling admonition to seize women by the genitalia. It felt somehow analogous to hearing about “fine people on both sides” of the Charlottesville white supremacy rally. It seemed as unnerving as the now infamous statement this summer during lawful protests, “when the looting starts, the shooting starts.” Those are all deeply troubling utterances and acts. What I found so pernicious about the debate, however, wasn’t any particular outrageous statement, but rather the tactics and deployment of

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), pg. 23.

language itself. That 90 minutes witnessed a cascading, torrential outpouring of verbiage that worked to interrupt, the flow not only of other people's words, but of thought and deliberative rationality itself. In essence, it was less the words and what they might have meant that chilled me, but rather their ceaseless, senseless pileup, such that meaning itself was overwhelmed. Speech does indeed have power, and the form of speech we witnessed that evening was, I submit, evidence of a form of violence, and of cultural nihilism, that people of faith do well to understand, and counter.

What I wish to do in the time that remains is to think through that moment as a cultural phenomenon, but as a theological one as well. What is that torrent of verbiage, and what is it doing? Is it an isolated incident, more or less localized in a singular individual, or is it a part of a wider cultural development? What are its effects on human life, on thought, on reflection, and on all of our activities? What becomes of personhood, autonomy and freedom when language becomes overwhelmed? And what might the Bible, faith, and theology have to say about any of it?

Ben Lerner's recent novel *The Topeka School* is one of the most intellectually exciting novels I've read in some time. It might also be the most perceptive treatise on our current cultural predicament, including our linguistic predicament, of any book I've read in the past four years. It tracks the development of Adam, an adolescent on the verge of graduating from high school who has a unique facility with language. His gift allows him to become a champion debater on his school forensics team, where he and other competitors practice a technique called "The Spread." (It's a real thing in debate circles, I've checked.) The idea is to speak so fast in your allotted time that you simply overwhelm your opponent with information, making it impossible to respond adequately. The sheer volume of information means that most of the arguments laid out at such voluble speed simply can't be answered, resulting in unanswered arguments and thus, dropped points. Lerner describes the way high school debaters will push themselves in practice to the very edge of intelligibility, where the human capacity for speech is accelerated so fast that it risks falling apart, like a bobsled racer on the verge of careening off the track from sheer velocity. It's a technique born of the will to dominate, to control, to overwhelm – to spread. To spread your opponent is to leave him or her disabled, mute, unable to gather their words into coherent thoughts or ideas. To spread one's opponent is to render them helpless, confused, and stammering. To be caught in the Spread is to find oneself inarticulate, exhausted, and acquiescent as the waterfall of words flattens you, spreads you, like a body hammered by water below Niagara.

Lest we believe the Spread is confined to high school debate teams, isolated from every other feature of late capitalist life, Lerner notes its use in other features of daily living. Take, for example, the ridiculously sped up disclaimers at the end of TV commercials for various medications, in which legal jargon and warnings of harmful side effects are read at such a high speed that comprehension is effectively nulled. Still you, the consumer, are now deemed responsible for that information. Or take hip hop as another example, arguably the most playful and aesthetically convincing use of the Spread, in which language is pushed to its extreme, sometimes to dazzling effect – the Spread does have its pleasures. Or add the Youtube videos my kids sometimes watch, where every silence, pause or gap in speech is edited out, and where the recording itself is sped up, so that, to my ear at least, one effectively confronts a wall of pure verbiage? Or take cable news personalities - from FOX, from MSNBC, it's used on the Right and the Left - who nightly unleash an avalanche of words in response to whatever events or nonevents occur in the space of a day, usually at hyperspeed. If Lerner is right, and I believe he

is, we are all of us in the very center of the Spread all the time, being Spread by information and language, even as we unleash those effects upon one another. It's no wonder that Lerner's characters negotiate, and strive to overcome, migraines, depression, and alcohol. It's no wonder that they're drawn toward sedatives, spasmodic outbreaks of violence, and suffer from exhaustion. It's no wonder that they experience apathy, despondence, and hopelessness. Caught in the Spread, how could it be otherwise?

In a little known theological tract published in the early 1970's, a theologian named William Stringfellow grappled with these themes. His book, entitled *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* is a reading of the Book of Revelation, the final entry in all of the Bible. At best, Revelation is a sorely neglected portion of the Bible, and at worst, it's misunderstood as a series of occult predictions about the end of the world. But careful readers throughout history have always understood that it is actually a highly symbolic portrait of the dehumanizing and demoralizing effects of Empire upon ordinary lives. Its original intent was to dramatize the early church's encounter with the Roman Empire, but Stringfellow argues that Revelation is a book applicable to every historical moment, as individuals and communities struggle to retain a sense of conscience and dignity amidst what he, borrowing from the Apostle Paul in Ephesians, calls the "powers and principalities that rule the air."

The foremost tactic of the principalities is an assault on language. Through a close reading of the Book of Revelation, Stringfellow notes the way the powers harness and debase language in order to batter subjects into submission. It occurs through denials or evasions of truth. It occurs through doublespeak and overtalk, or through secrecy and boasts of expertise. It occurs through surveillance and harassment, through exaggeration and deception, through cursing, insults, and through diversion. Those linguistic effects, Stringfellow suggests, are the predicament of Babel first articulated in the Book of Genesis, now come full circle in the Book of Revelation. "Babel," he argues, has to do with "verbal inflation, libel, rumor, euphemism and coded phrases, redundancy, hyperbole, and such profusion in speech that comprehension is impaired." Babel has to do with sophistry, jargon, noise, and incoherence.<sup>2</sup> Speech does indeed produce effects, and when the speech is Babel, the effect is violence. The emperor worship of imperial Rome was Babel. The Nazis practiced Babel against the Jews. It is Babel that spawns racism. Babel is the language spoken by the principalities and powers in the Book of Revelation. Babel is likewise the domain of the Spread.

In the time that remains, I'd like to suggest a few ways of countering Babel, and resisting the Spread. Much of what I have to say is drawn from Scripture, which is a record of individuals struggling to recover their humanity from the powers and principalities that too often demean and demoralize human life. The first strategy I would suggest is to cultivate moments of silence, in which no external voices or other sources are mediating our thoughts. To quit the "doom scrolling," to shut off the TV, to turn off the music and the podcasts and all the other devices in which the Spread is most in effect. It's an ordinary practice cultivated by Jesus in his own preparation for a confronting the powers: prior to his public ministry, he went to the wilderness. Not only that, there are instances throughout the Gospels of Jesus retreating from the many voices that pressed upon him in order to preserve what was truest and best in him. The Spread disdains silence, and so we must recover just that: silence, both in our inner lives, and in our interactions with one another. To converse with another, to listen to another, is, after all, to

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<sup>2</sup> Stringfellow, William, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco: Word Books, 1973), pg. 106.

negotiate the silences that occur when attempting to traverse the abyss between one life and another.

But we need more than silence. We must also recover the practice of intelligible speech and language. By that, I don't simply mean plain speech. There is, for example, poetic and highly symbolic language, such as that found in the Book of Revelation, that is dense and often obscure, requiring careful exegesis. I affirm the array of available forms of speech available to us, many of which are modeled in the Bible itself: myth, history, poetry, parable, exhortation, lamentation, philosophical argument, legal codes, travelogues and letters. We must recover the full complexity of language, all the available forms of speech, as a means of telling the truth. That practice, too, was modeled in Jesus's ministry, where different forms of speech were used in different moments to confront the principalities. In our own lives, I believe this entails reading as a daily practice – and not merely pop entertainments or current events. I know – we live in a post-literate society, saturated more by images and icons than by words. That's a part of the Spread. I'm talking about slow reading. Deliberate reading. The use of language and words that somehow sinks into your very being. That's the sort of thing that faith communities know how to do – poring over sacred texts and allowing the language to shape our lives, words slowly becoming deeds, becoming flesh.

But more still is required. In addition to the recovery of both silence and the forms of language, it's learning once again just how to speak in public that is necessary. Here, I'd like to cite my own experience throughout the summer, attending demonstrations and rallies, marches and teach-ins all around the state of Connecticut. Frequently those have involved forms of public speech that don't always feel comfortable to me, call and response chants that are sometimes simplistic, hackneyed, or formulaic. Despite my discomfort, I join in, allowing my voice to merge with those of others. At times, I have even led some of those chants. Imperfect though it is, I've come to be deeply moved by what I see and hear every time we practice that form of speech. I think it's a way of recovering our voices. I think it's a way of learning how to speak all over again, even in the midst of the Spread. I think it's a marshalling of public language before the powers and principalities, learning how to assert ourselves when we have too often been rendered mute. That too has Scriptural precedent. Public speech was practiced by the prophets. It was practiced by Jesus. It was practiced by the Apostles, all of whom planted themselves in open spaces, using their singular voices to appeal to the conscience of a beleaguered public. Out of practice as we are, it's something akin to a child learning to use his or her voice in a class or on the street. It doesn't feel easy. But caught in the Spread, it's vital that we learn to speak again.

Finally, this: Babel is most effectively countered through the practice of prayer, and through the invocation of the Spirit. Some demons, Jesus tells his disciples, can only be cast out through the power of prayer. Thus it is that he counsels his followers to pray for those who curse, to pray for those who revile, to pray for those who scorn and assail the ways of peace. Thus it is that he admonishes his followers to pray for their enemies. Prayer is a mysterious thing, something that I don't fully grasp, and so I can't say with certainty that it has the power to alter things beyond our control. But I am confident that it alters us. I am confident that a heart accustomed to praying for those who persecute, or boast, or lie, or deceive, is rendered more capable of withstanding the blandishments of Babel, and the stunned paralysis of nihilism. I am confident that a heart accustomed to uttering a prayer for one's enemies stands a chance of preserving and enlarging one's own humanity. I'm confident that a heart accustomed to taking it to God in prayer stands a greater chance of withstanding the predicament of the Spread. I'm

confident that in prayer, we encounter that which can ground us, hold us, setting our feet upon a firm foundation – one built in love and a powerful affirmation of the worth of each and every human life, including and especially those who have been most cruelly demoralized by the violence of Babel.

“Speech has power...what starts in a sound ends in a deed.” May our own words, thoughtfully and carefully chosen, come to incarnate deeds of love, grace, acceptance, compassion, and spiritual and moral maturity. Amen.