

“Beware! Talking snakes.” 2 Samuel 15:1-6.

“After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him. And Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way of the gate. And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, “From what city are you?” And when he said, “Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel,” Absalom would say to him, “See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you.” Then Absalom would say, “Oh that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice.” And whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him. Thus, Absalom did to all of Israel who came to the king for judgment.

So, Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

A few weeks ago, we meditated upon that gut-wrenching account from 2 Samuel 15 where Absalom was stealing the hearts of the men of Israel. As mentioned, we will have two sermons reflecting on those events. So, this is the second one.

Let’s read the inspired account once again... [read above].

What was so wrong in what happened? Do you remember the 8th Commandment? It’s time to refresh. **“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.** *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbour, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.”

Do not give false testimony, instead, for the sake of the fear and love of our God, defend your neighbours, speak well of them, and explain everything in the kindest way. Our words have incredible power. They do. Do we realize that? Do we?

Sometimes we may not realize how powerful and far reaching the effect of our words could be. That is why the good and gracious Lord has instructed us to be very careful how we speak about one another. A lot is at stake. More than we know.

What was Absalom doing? He was speaking. He was speaking with certain intentions. To discredit the king David in the eyes of his loyal and trusting subjects. He spoke to create suspicion, to insinuate, to falsely accuse king David.

He also spoke to elevate himself. He acted and spoke to manipulate and to convince the men of Israel that he, Absalom, was far more caring, far more trustworthy and a much better candidate to bring justice to the land. He was stealing their hearts.

What happened as a result? The words that Absalom spoke, created a new reality. Yes, our words have the power to create a new reality. And what kind of reality was it? A twisted, false, deceptive and manipulated reality.

In that new reality, in the perception of those men of Israel, the good name of king David was discredited. The men of Israel had been tricked to believe that they couldn't trust their king. That they couldn't expect justice or anything good from him. Another king would be better.

Now, was king David perfect? By no means! As we reflected a couple weeks ago, he failed spectacularly. But... was he guilty of what Absalom accused him? By no means! As it is recorded for our sake, David was just and righteous king, who feared his Lord and cared for his subjects as well as he could.

But see, regardless of what kind of king David really was, because of the words spoken by Absalom, trust was broken, relationships were severed. What emotions would David's subjects feel towards their king? Bitterness, anger, suspicion?

What about their attitudes? How would they react if they met king David? Could they look in his eyes? The words of Absalom had destroyed their trust, they had poisoned their thoughts and emotions and attitudes. How did this end?

With Absalom's rebellion. With Absalom being crowned a king. King David and his loyal servants fleeing Jerusalem. With Absalom going to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel. Eventually with bloodshed between the loyal supporters of king David and those whose hearts Absalom had stolen. With so much tragedy.

Sure, the Lord vindicated king David. He restored David's throne and his Kingdom. After so much blood was shed and so many lives lost and destroyed. How did this tragedy start? Yes, by speaking. By speaking falsely. By giving false testimony.

This event is not unique. The Scriptures are full of such incidents. Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Moses and Korah's rebellion. David and Sheba's rebellion. Prophet Daniel and his deceitful adversaries, prophet Jeremiah, and more and more...

And then, we need to add to this list Paul the apostle. The chosen instrument of the Lord Jesus to bring the Gospel to the gentiles. Every pastor of the Church is just a pale, pale shadow of what Paul the apostle was like; we all serve so much less, sin so much more, and are so much less committed. Pale shadows...

The Spirit of the Lord tells how committed Paul was to His Lord. How much he suffered for the sake of the Gospel, as we can read a summary in the second letter to Corinthians. How mightily the Lord Himself worked through Paul the apostle!

And what happened? People spoke. Members of Paul's own congregations. They gave false testimonies. Against Paul. We can read how congregations in Galatia, where Paul was almost stoned to death because of the Gospel, were turning away from Paul, how angrily he had to respond.

We can read about Corinth, some members wanted to incline the congregation Paul had founded to turn against him. Ephesus. Paul spent two years there. **“God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.”** (Acts 19:11-12)

Amazing! What else happened? Some members of his congregation spoke against Paul. This is how Paul relates it. **“Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. [...] At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. [!] May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me [...] So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth.”** (2 Timothy 4:14-17) All that was done to Paul by speaking...

May the Spirit of God help us to recognize when something like that is happening, when we are tempted to sin against the 8th Commandment. May the Spirit give us courage to use our words for good, to defend and care for our neighbours.

To rebuke and silence false accusers and to stand for truth and for peace and harmony in our relationships. Especially in God’s household. Where the evil one can’t wait to sow strife and disunity among God’s people. May the Lord help us!

But there is someone else, who has suffered the most from false testimonies. Do you remember how this evil practice of lying and deceiving first began? In the garden, with the talking snake. Yes, back then, and what did the serpent do?

Exactly the same. The serpent tried to discredit the good name of God the Creator. “Does He really care for you? All those prohibitions... Does He really want what is good for you? Wouldn’t you be better off without Him? Perhaps, it is better not to listen to Him. That will give you more, that will make you more.”

You know what happened after the snake spoke... The unpleasant truth is that the same voice still sounds in our hearts, still giving false testimony against the Triune God. “He is not fair, He is not just, He doesn’t care about you, He doesn’t wish you well, He wants to restrict you, you can’t trust Him. Listen to me...”.

Every time when someone falsely accuses others because of envy or with the purpose of selfish gains, or to promote their own agendas - that is the same ancient snake talking through them. Yes, we are surrounded by such talking snakes, and whatever painful that may be - there is such a talking snake in each one of us.

And once the words are spoken, there is no way to gather them back. Once the trust is broken, it is very difficult to restore it. It is not enough to just say different words, something more is needed. Thus, it was not enough for God Yahweh just to come to Adam and Eve and say: “O, common, the snake just deceived you. Don’t listen to him!” That wasn’t enough.

Something more than words was needed. And something more was given. Not words only, but deeds. The Word who was in the beginning acted, He became flesh and dwelt among us; the fullness of God dwelt in Him.

He, the eternal Son of God, gave His life as a ransom for many, including you, yes! you. He gave His life for us when we were still His enemies, when we were still thinking and speaking falsely about Him. The Holy God who was falsely accused in Eden, spoke with His deeds, He still speaks from that cross. This is what He says:

“Look at me, this is what I am willing to do for you. I am willing to take your place in judgement. I am willing to pay your debt. You can trust me. I do care for you. I do wish you well. I want to bless you as no one else can. I want to be your God and I want you to know me as your God.” And that is most certainly true!

Our words have incredible power. Your words have incredible power. With your words you can stop wrong actions, you can rebuke talking snakes and defend what is good and true. With your words you can build up others, more than you know.

When you “defend your neighbour, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way”, you are standing up for the truth, you are resisting talking snakes and you are loving your God and your neighbour. With how you speak.

You can do even more. You can speak words of peace and reconciliation. “Please, forgive me, Brother, please, forgive me, Sister, where I have sinned against you!” And then also: “I forgive you, Brother, I forgive you, Sister!”

And just like that your words create a new and beautiful reality, relationships and peace restored. By your speaking. But there is even more. Your words can do even more; when you speak instructed by our Lord, when you bring His message.

Like this: “Do you want to have peace with God? Do you want all your sins forgiven? If so then - I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit!” When you say this, a new divine reality is created, eternal reality where the forgiven brothers or sisters are embraced by the Trinity. As you speak...

Your words have incredible power.

Remember, we are created and redeemed and our God continually renews and reshapes us so that we are made more and more like His Son Jesus. May our Lord bless us that we use our words well, as Jesus did. To silence those talking snakes, to create a new and beautiful reality as God’s messengers, as God’s ambassadors of peace, and as the pillars and buttresses of truth.

May your words succeed in creating a beautiful community - the Bride of Christ - beautiful and adorned by truth and trust and grace and peace. May your congregation be such a community.

Amen.