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 Redwoods Presbyterian Church
 Larkspur, California
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Genesis 1:1-5; John 1:1-5 and 14; John 14:19-24
 "Words, Words..."

Many of us have seen the movie "All Quiet on the Western Front." There are two versions: 1930 and 1979. The 1930 version is the better and won a couple of Oscars. I watched the movie over 40 years ago and forgot most of it. I read the book a month ago.

I have since discovered that many high school students have had the book assigned to them. I cannot imagine teens reading it but teens confront tougher things today. The novel is graphic, gruesome and devastating and yet probably one of the best depictions of war and the futility of war. It is trench warfare of World War 1, the so-called war to end all wars.

I reached the final 30 pages or so and recalled the ending, superbly written by the author Erich Maria Remarque. It hit me in the solar plexus.

Every paragraph of the book struck me as amazing but one instilled a thought for a sermon, this sermon. About halfway through the novel, Remarque writes, "Bombardment, barrage, curtain-fire, mines, gas, tanks, machine-guns, hand-grenades – words, words, but they hold the horror of the world."

My mind raced to the opening chapter of Genesis where God speaks and creates the world good. Words, words, but they hold the beauty of the world.

"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. And God saw that the light was good..." (Genesis 1:1-5).
 Everything that God creates in Genesis is good.

There is considerable discussion in theological circles about the creation of the world. Scholars generally accept that the Genesis account does not tell us the how or when of creation but by whom and why: by God and for God's pleasure, beauty and goodness. A key phrase about this creation appears in the Brief Statement of Faith of our denomination. It states, "In sovereign love God created the world good."

Discussion revolves around whether God created the world *ex nihilo*, that is, out of nothing or whether God's creation in Genesis makes a statement about the

goodness of God in opposition to evil already in existence. One can interpret the earth's formless void and darkness as forces of evil already in existence and God creates a world of goodness in opposition to this. God's words of goodness counter words of evil.

I have a hard time thinking that God created good and evil. It is inconsistent with a God of love. After all, the definition of God in the Johannine epistles in the New Testament is "love." Thus, the affirmation, "In sovereign love God created the world good." How can love create evil?

The opposition of good and evil, the battle between good and evil, has continued through the ages. There has always been ugliness and horror and there has always been beauty and loveliness. They exist side by side.

Remarque's words were in the beginning of the biblical text in another form and God comes with words of goodness, which then become the story of the Bible and all that is good within it as communicated by God's chosen people. The Bible reflects misguidedness of God's people departing from the word of God but most of it is a continuation of God's good creation in law, prophets, wisdom, and the good stories of God's people.

Throughout biblical history and general history, we encounter words of hate and violence but since the beginning of time, and biblical time as we know it, we have God's words of goodness and beauty.

God's ultimate biblical word of goodness came in the birth of Jesus, which the gospels of Matthew and Luke describe in natural terms but the Gospel of John describes in philosophic terms that mirrors the creation story in Genesis but now with God's fascinating twist. Jesus is the word.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...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."

My book group generally reads classics in literature and every now and then comes up with a modern piece with so-called legs. Presently, we are reading a weird one, Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

The title of Part 2 and 4 in the novel is "Soul and Body." The author separates these two aspects of our humanness. The soul is one thing and the body another.

A protagonist is in a relational situation where she allows her body to be overcome by something that the soul would oppose if we understand soul as loving and good. The author writes, "She had sent her body out into the world, and refused to take any responsibility for it. She neither resisted nor assisted

him; her soul thereby announcing that it did not condone what was happening but had decided to remain neutral.”

The separation of body and soul, this dualism, is dangerous spirituality. The point of the incarnation, the word becoming flesh and living among us in Jesus, is that soul and body are one. The soul cannot be neutral in relation to the body. The two agree. The entire goodness of God dwelt in the entirety of the body, which was Jesus. The word as goodness now walked, talked, and acted in Jesus. In this, God affirms the goodness of the body since it is one with the soul.

The word of God continues in scripture but now has an additional expression. God’s word in a person, Jesus, and Jesus’s mission is to confront evil everywhere and affirm the good. Whatever Jesus says and does is an expression of God’s word of goodness.

Other parts of the New Testament call Jesus the "new creation." God affirms once again in Jesus God’s good world. Jesus’s coming into the world is a new and radical expression of God’s goodness and it continued until the forces of evil in the day took him to the gallows.

It is amazing that powers in society kill agents of goodness. There are many examples in history: Jesus, a prime example from Palestine, then Martin Luther King Jr., of US civil rights fame, Archbishop Oscar Romero, of El Salvador who sided with the poor, and Dorothy Stang, a missionary, who fought for the rights of indigenous people in Brazil and was gunned down by cattle ranchers while she spoke God’s good word from the Bible.

The post Jesus expressions of God’s word are faithful expressions of God’s word as read in the third scripture text today. Before Jesus departs from the earth he says, “In a little while, the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day, you will know that I am in my Father and *you in me, and I in you*. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me...Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, *and we will come to them and make our home with them.*”

In this passage, the word of God is transferred to Jesus’s disciples. In the beginning, the word was with God, and became flesh in Jesus and is now given to Jesus’s disciples and to us. Since we are in Jesus, we are the carriers of this word to the world.

We are God’s new creation so when we read Remarque who writes, “Bombardment, barrage, curtain-fire, mines, gas, tanks, machine-guns, hand-grenades – words, words, but they hold the horror of the world,” we are God’s counter word for all that is lovely, beautiful and good in the world.

We are empowered to create and recreate God's world in goodness. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. God depends on us now for God's word to build God's world. In the face of evil, despair, abuse and spoliation, the world relies on us for goodness.

How do we do this practically? We continue to do the good things we do in and through the church, contributing to the mission endeavors of our denomination, writing letters for Bread for the World, supporting and caring for each other, making choices for compassion and sharing when we go to the polls next month, networking with agencies working for peace and justice in the world, in other words, combatting evil in its various forms – and hopefully doing all with peace and joy in the Lord. We balance work, home and play. We enjoy life and leisure and affirm with God that it is all good.

We do all this in the belief that good will overcome evil. Words, words, God's word will prevail in the end. Amen.