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## *The Word Near Us — A ‘Quantum Word’?*

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith**  
**Proper 14 - Year A**

"The word is near you," says St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans that we read today. "The word is near . . . on your lips and in your heart," he declares. And then he hastens to clarify: that is, "the word of faith that we proclaim.' After that, he makes this bold guarantee of faith

because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:8-9)

And now, some 2,000 years later, I want to ask this question about that word of faith; that word of faith for which Paul was so confident to guarantee an outcome: the outcome of salvation. Here's the question: Are we just as confident as he was, so that we too could guarantee that outcome to our descendants into the foreseeable future, and even 2,000 years from now?

What if there were a word, a phrase; a sentence or set of sentences; a paragraph or set of paragraphs—any kind of speech that we could say 'on our lips and in our heart,' as the apostle said, that would mystically guarantee us some infinite blessing, or benefit, or bliss? What if? What if just by saying and believing that word, that phrase, sentence, or paragraph, we could ensure our access to some remarkable state of being, some reality we long to possess and enjoy? And what if, my friends, that's what we we're being offered in today's scriptures; by today's gospel message, appointed for this tenth week of Pentecost, in the year 2020?

Now I like to call that kind of yearning, in addition to using the language of scripture, I like to call that deep kind of longing, a 'quantum of desire.' That's right: using the latest scientific language of today, a language that may even become antiquated by 2000 years from now, I want to call that kind of word that guarantees the fulfillment of bliss, a 'quantum of desire' or a 'quantum word.' The word, 'quantum,' as we can hear in the very sound of the word, is like our word, 'quantity;' quantity meaning any kind of amount; any amount of any kind of thing. That's quantity. But the word 'quantum' is more specific than that. A quantum of something is a particular kind of amount. It's the smallest amount of something that's enough for it to be effective in an interaction of some sort—a chemical interaction for example.

Now we've all gone to school about this kind of thing, right? The chemical formula for water is H<sup>2</sup>O—the old formula that tells us that water is composed of two hydrogen atoms—H<sup>2</sup>, and one oxygen atom—O. We've learned that water contains molecules; each one made from those two basic elements—two atoms of one element, and one atom of the other—H<sup>2</sup>O. But with the science of particle physics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century we started learning about interactive quantities even smaller than molecules and atoms: the smallest possible particles or quanta.

So we've begun discovering all sorts of other 'quanta' out there in the world. And now, lifelong learners that we are, we're educating ourselves about the kind of quantum reactions that can occur around us: out there in space and closer to us in the atoms and in the atomic energies that sustain us and astound us. Now, as it happens, one of our contemporary theologians has coined the term, "quantum theology"\* too. He wrote a book with that title; a book that

\**Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics* by [Diarmuid O'Murchu](#) (Crossroad, 1997) presents a "bold theological map where science, religion, psychology, cosmology and spirituality all whirl together in a stirring dance of connections." <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/reviews/view/698>

explores how to connect the new physics with religion and spirituality in our time. In that regard I too want to engage in a little quantum theology myself here today. But be sure to tell your friends: you heard it here for the first time at the Cathedral of St. Philip on August 9, 2020. Well, let's see if the Holy Spirit cooperates with any of that!

So, back to what St. Paul said about the words of salvation. In that passage he gave us a few words that he said are 'near us, in our mouths and in our hearts.' Like my physics definition of quanta that I mentioned before, they are the fewest, most concise words that are effective in the interaction that he said would result in the salvation. Right here, of course, we are concerned not with physics or with chemical interactions, but with faith interactions. And precisely in that connection, consider with me our most familiar faith traditions here in the United States: the three related faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In each one of these traditions there are creeds—declarations of faith that include single sentences or sets of sentences, paragraphs or sets of paragraphs. And they are all spoken 'by the lips and in the heart' in order to express the holy focus of desire: the tradition's quanta of desire. For Jews these words are found in their creed called the *Shema*, or the *Shema Y'israel*; where *shema* means 'hear.' "Hear, O Israel," the creed commands, "the Lord is One"—the only One for true monotheists.

And for Muslims there are similar quantum words in their monotheistic creed called the *Shahada*, which means 'testify.' Indeed, in that tradition all you need to do to become a Muslim is to sincerely testify by saying: "I testify there is no God but God"—or Allah, and "I testify that Muhammad is God's Messenger." And finally for Christians there are two traditional creeds—somewhat longer as we well know: our Apostles' Creed and our Nicene Creed. Yet notice here that Paul gives us his much shorter version as we've heard already in Romans. "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Rom. 10:8-9)

But what about other citizens in our country, or in other countries around the world? And what about people outside of faith traditions altogether? Nowadays I believe the Holy Spirit is encouraging us to make room for their spirituality, and to make room for non-spirituality or irreligion as well.

Consider the following phrases that are more inclusive than the ones we find in our faith traditions. Imagine hearing them not only on the lips but also in the hearts of our fellow citizens. As I intone them now, imagine that they encapsulate the infinite longing of generations past, present, and future in our country. And here I paraphrase:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that we are all created equal, and endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these being life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that governments are instituted to secure these rights, deriving their just powers from our consent—the consent of the governed. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

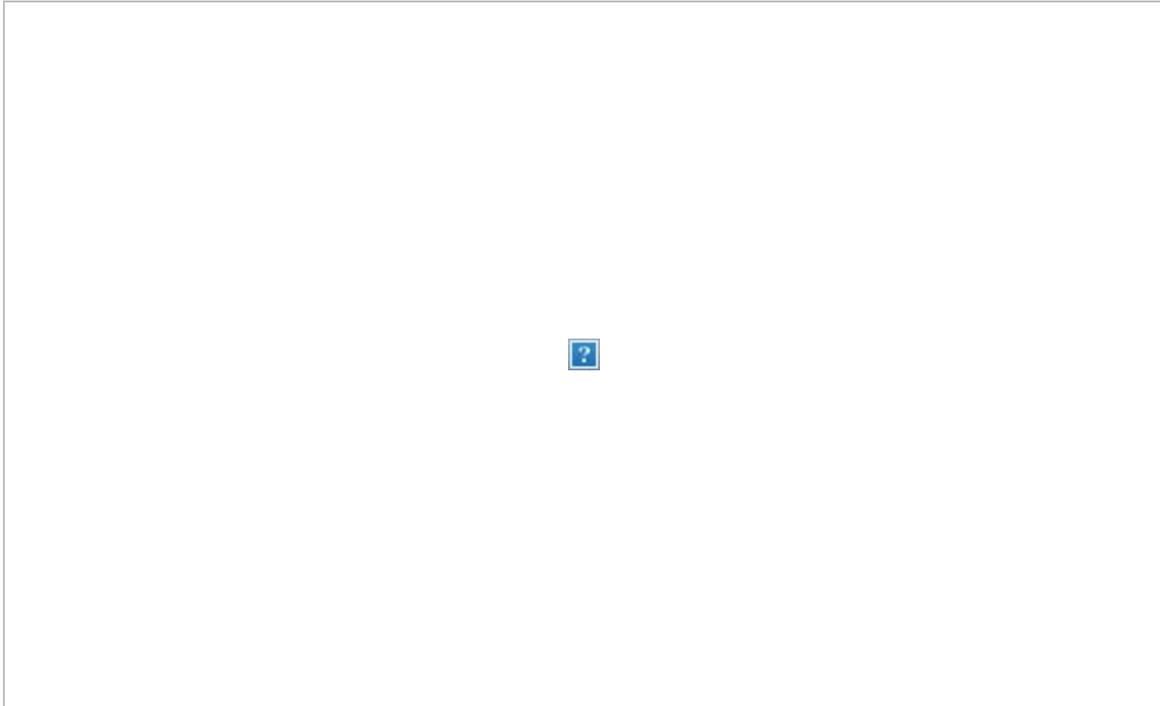
Well, of course, we all recognize those phrases from our revered Declaration of Independence. Indeed, our hearts and minds resonate with even the shortest phrases from that declaration. 'Created equal,' 'endowed by a Creator with inalienable rights,' including 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,' and finally declaring that the only "just powers" of governments 'derive from the consent of the governed.' Wow: these interactive words are almost sacred for us, aren't they?

Now I want to take us beyond those phrases to another source of desirable quanta available to us. I propose it as an amplified version of our national creed. It's a series of familiar phrases from the classic American poem called, "Desiderata." The word, "desiderata," simply means 'desirables' or 'desirable things.' As a Latin word for any 'things that are desired' it works nicely with the plural form of the word, quantum: quanta of desire are also desiderata: any set of desirable things. The poem itself was written during the 1920s, in the years following WWI, and published in 1927, almost a hundred years ago now, by the German American poet, Max Ehrmann.

Now you may not have heard that title before, or the name of the poet, Max Ehrmann. But its lines are often recited by speakers like me. And you're likely to come across it again in other places sooner or later. Yet there's another benefit in sharing it here today. Apart from its quanta of phrases that are true to our national character, it conveys virtues that are tonic for us in this time of pandemic. Think of it as a post-world war conveyor of words that seek to restore us to national sanity in a time of terrific challenges; in a plague year, as we also pass through a summer of intense presidential politics, including dramatic protests in our city streets.

As I share it with you in a few minutes, I'd like you to consider how Desiderata also converges with our gospel reading appointed for today. Perhaps you will hear how well it applies to people who feel like they're sinking in deep waters—the way Peter felt in that dark night described in today's gospel. Indeed, so many of us may be

feeling like that, like we are cast upon the waters, perhaps having stepped out in faith—bold and confident at first, but seeing now strong winds kick up, and deep waters begin to rise around us.



<https://utmost.org/the-bewildering-call-of-god/>

But notice here what the scripture says: becoming frightened, and just beginning to sink, Peter cried out, "Lord, save me!"

[And] Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Matthew 14:30

Christian friends, and friends of Christ, I hear Jesus summoning us like Peter to have a quantum more of faith than we have previously allowed ourselves to grasp. Not some great 'leap of faith' is called for, lest we over-reach with our egos. Not some athletic or heroic measure is required. Rather, as in our definition of 'quantum,' there is a smallest amount that is necessary to be effective in an interaction of some sort.

"Truly I tell you," Jesus says three chapters after today's gospel in Matthew appointed for today, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matt. 17:20). Maybe this is how quantum physics relates to quantum theology; like science, seeking to find smaller and smaller particles needed for effective interactions; a least as small as the mustard seed in Jesus' parable.

Similarly we heard St. Paul declare that no huge effort is needed for our salvation by faith. Rather a simple word of desire is so near to us—near on our lips and near in our hearts, so that we don't need to go up to heaven, to bring a savior down to us (Rom. 10:6), or go down into the abyss, to bring salvation up to us. Instead, the apostle Paul declared what the other apostle—Peter—discovered in today's gospel: God's hand of salvation outstretched here and now for us, ready to interact with our faithful word, or our heartfelt claim, or our yearned-for desire.

So now, let us consider these particular, particle-like phrases from *Desiderata*; phrases expressing its quanta of things desired.

**Desiderata** (1927)  
by [Max Ehrmann](#)

**GO PLACIDLY** amid the noise and the haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As

far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even to the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are vexatious to the spirit. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Exercise caution in your business affairs, for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals, and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself. Especially do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment, it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.

Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here.

And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be. And whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

By Max Ehrmann © 1927 Original text

<https://www.desiderata.com/desiderata.html>

So that's the poem, Desiderata. Notice how its final verses declare the universal right of all of us to be here, as 'children of the universe' and, speaking of rights, how the very last words echo our Declaration of Independence with its "pursuit of happiness" clause.

Now I know that, as Christians, we require more specific invocations of desire: Jesus as our desire through all the ages. Certainly, true believers in most faiths prefer creeds that affirm the holiest, most precious desire of their minds and hearts. But we may also cherish more collective, common creeds. We can also celebrate the ways they invite interactions with fellow citizens in ways that affirms us all, and in ways to which we can say a sincere Amen.'

Still, as your preacher here today, I also affirm the desire of our hearts for the Holy Spirit to empower us for the days ahead. And so, after all that's been said here today, let's close with this invocation of the quantum powers at work within us:

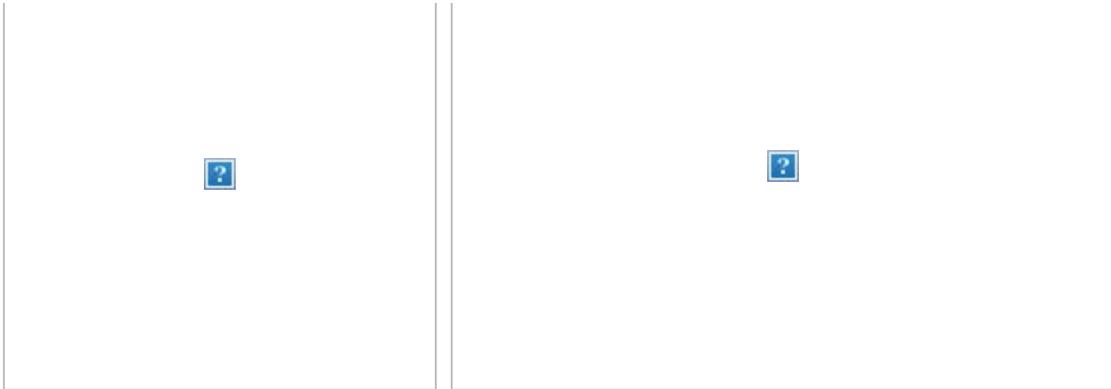
Now to Him who is able to do [for us] exceedingly and abundantly above all that we can ask or imagine, according to the power that works in us, to that One be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

—Ephesians 3:20-21 (NKJV adapted)

## EPILOGUE

Illustration of Genesis 1:3 "Let there be Light" (Latin: *fiat lux*)





“In the Beginning Was the Word”—John 1.1\*

\*Bill McEntee, In the Beginning Was the Word” (Fine Art America) Courtesy: Daily Office Radio, Morning Prayer, 8-3-2020; <https://dailyoffice.wordpress.com/2020/08/02/morning-prayer-8-3-20-joanna-mary-salome-myrrh-bearing-women/>

In the beginning was the Word... (Joshua Earle) Courtesy: Daily Office Radio, Evening Prayer 8-3-2020; <https://dailyoffice.wordpress.com/2020/08/03/evening-prayer-8-3-20-joanna-mary-salome-myrrh-bearers/>

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