
**From This Night Forward, Speak
Commencement Address
December 17, 2010**



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Have you ever noticed how much of what we know from the story in the Bible of Jesus' birth comes through spoken words—conversations between people. The real flavor of the story comes through the voice of its characters. Or, if you'll permit a pun, the story comes to life when the characters speak.

Early in the Gospel account the angel Gabriel visits Mary. The story begins with Gabriel's words: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Mary is perplexed, even silent. (Who wouldn't be in the presence of an angel?) So Gabriel continues:

"Do not be afraid, you have found favor with God.

You will bear a son, and will name him Jesus."

Mary knows how these things happen, she's mystified that the angel says she is pregnant and, more than this, favored by God. She replies to the angel:

"How can this be?"

Whereupon Gabriel speaks again:

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you."

And after a bit more from Gabriel, Mary responds in full acceptance and submission:

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord."

Not long after, Mary visits Elizabeth, who also is pregnant. Elizabeth greets her cousin with words which have become sacred in the Christian tradition:

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus."

To this point in the story Mary has been mostly silent and reflective. But this proclamation from Elizabeth prompts from the depths of Mary's soul a magnificent song of praise. She proclaims:

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

These are words of praise which give voice to the mystery Mary ponders in her soul.

Months go by, and the baby is born. The portion of the story which covers the actual birth of Jesus doesn't include any dialogue between Mary and Joseph—which in my mind is probably a good thing, having been present for the birth of my our two children.

Though the words spoken between Mary and Joseph that evening remain forever secret, we do know what happened nearby as the story continues. Shepherds are doing their work that night, when an angel greets them with these words:

“I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people.”

Soon more angels appear, singing:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven
and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

The shepherds are foolish enough to believe there might be something to this, and say to each other:

“Let’s go and see.”

And so they saw, and afterward they told everyone, the text tells us, praising God for everything they had heard and seen.

This story which begins the Gospel account changed the course of history. This story has given direction, and purpose, and meaning to millions of faithful followers of Christ in each subsequent generation.

Yet this is a story which would have had little meaning and precious little impact on those who heard it, were it not for the spoken words, the voice of its various characters. Narrative alone is insufficient. To know Gabriel visited Mary, without knowing the words spoken between them would render the story meaningless. To know Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth, without knowing the words spoken between them would render the story meaningless. To know the angels visited the shepherds, without knowing the words spoken between them would render the story meaningless. Without these spoken words, without the voice of the people, the story would have little meaning and purpose.

Each year at our December commencement convocation I call attention to the importance of voice, your voice as graduates of North Park University. You do not have a voice in the story of Jesus’ birth—likely you’re quite satisfied with this. But you do have a voice in the story of your life today—and I imagine you’re wondering about just that tonight. Now graduating from college—for some with your first degree, for others with a second degree—what do you say, how do you give voice to your life, what is the conversation which gives meaning to your story?

Voice connects us to others. Voice communicates. Voice shapes community. Voice tells story. Voice makes meaning. Voice gives identity. In moments of idealism we call our careers, our professions, a vocation, a calling, a voice speaking from within us to those around us.

Psychologist and author Mary Pipher, in her book *Writing to Change the World*, tells us that

Voice is everything we are, all that we have observed, the emotional chords that are uniquely ours—all our flaws and all our strengths, expressed in the words that best reflect us. Voice is like a snowflake—

complicated, beautiful, and individual. It is the essence of self, distilled, and offered in service to the world.

Pipher continues,

Individual voices can be quiet or noisy, wry or schmaltzy, self-disclosing or guarded, kind or angry. Voice comes from genetics, gender, relationships, place; from ethnic background and emotional experience. Voice resonates with our sorrows and fears, but also our joys and it sings out of all of who we are.

Your charge as a student has been to discover your voice. To learn who you are, to identify the commitments which will guide your life, to explore the place and community in which you will speak, to determine how you will make this a better place and a more loving world. Your responsibility as a student has been to discover your voice, to know your vocation.

Your responsibility as a graduate moves beyond this. Now your obligation is to let your life speak—to live your voice, to tell your story, to change your world by being present in it; to be significant, to serve.

In other venues, some of you have previously heard me say that while learning always is a noble endeavor, learning is most noble when used to benefit others. Today, this is your opportunity. To take what you have learned over your years at North Park and now to live your life, to speak your vocation, to tell your story, in the world you enter, consistent with what you have learned. Your opportunity, your obligation, is to transform the privilege which has been yours as a student, as one who learns, and to recast it as a responsible citizen within the community you now enter. Your opportunity now is to speak, to live, in significance and service.

This will be your voice. It will be a voice learned at North Park University—a voice nurtured by faith, a voice leavened in the city, a voice nourished by the multitude of people from around the world among whom and from whom you have learned.

You know your voice. From this night forward, speak. Speak your voice learned at North Park University. Speak with significance; live in service.

May God's whisper, enkindled in your hearts, speak boldly through your life.

God be with you. Amen.