

The Wired Word

Student Handout

Sunday, January 24, 2021 --- from 9:00-9:45am

Zoom ONLY

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220 --- Passcode: 195152

Dear Class Member,

Following the end of each year, the publisher of the *Oxford English Dictionary* normally selects and reports on a "Word of the Year." For their report on 2020, however, they broke their own practice and included many words -- some new, some old but with new meanings -- to help tell the story of the year just past. For our next class, we will take a look at some of those words from a biblical standpoint and consider how they tell part of the tale of our journey through 2020 and how they give us some perspective as we move on.

How To Participate:

We are offering *The Wired Word* class live via Zoom. *The Wired Word* Zoom discussion will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. You can also use these resources to reflect or study on your own, with your family/friends, and/or with your Abide Group.

Until further notice, there is NO in-person Sunday school due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

You can participate in *The Wired Word* virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>
or by telephone (land line or cell phone) by calling: 1-301-715-8592

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For more about *The Wired Word* go to: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes/sunday-classes-for-adults.html#WiredWord>

For other learning opportunities through St. Paul's UCC go to: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes.html>

To subscribe or unsubscribe for the **free** weekly mailing of *The Wired Word* student handout, please contact the church office at Office@sprucc.org.



No Single Word Sufficient for Oxford's 2020 Word of the Year; Many Words Instead

The Wired Word for the Week of January 24, 2021

In the News

Almost nobody would disagree that the events of 2020 were *unprecedented*. That word was much used to characterize the course of human life on our planet last year. And now, the Oxford Language people, the publishers of the authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary*, have used that term in the title of their Word of the Year (WOTY) report: "Words of an Unprecedented Year."

And that in itself is unprecedented. Oxford publishes a WOTY report every year, but normally, it focuses on a single word. This year, so many new words were coined and so many old ones were repurposed to fit what was going on in the world that Oxford couldn't narrow the selection down to just one word or term.

So, included in the report are coronavirus, Covid-19, lockdown, community transmission, shelter-in-place, social distancing, blursday, Black Lives Matter, cancel culture, super-spreader, reopening, systemic racism, pandemic, epidemic, support bubbles (or support pods), hygiene theater, defund, masks, anti-masker, mask-shaming, PPE, essential workers, take a knee, Juneteenth, doomscrolling, wokeness, impeachment, mail-in, self-quarantine, remote working, remote learning, Zoom, staycation and others.

Oxford makes its WOTY determination after monitoring a corpus of news content, updated daily, which by the end of the year, contains over 11 billion words for its lexicographers to search and analyze.

Oxford's report said, "What's exceptional in our own lived experience often has parallels in history: The English language is studded with words from previous plagues and pandemics, mass social disruption, and an abundance of expressions that fulfill humanity's perennial need to describe an often inhospitable world."

But the report went on to note that "what was genuinely unprecedented [in 2020] was the hyper-speed at which the English-speaking world amassed a new collective vocabulary relating to the coronavirus, and how quickly it became, in many instances, a core part of the language."

Some other dictionary publishers did identify a single WOTY, Merriam-Webster picked *pandemic*. Cambridge Dictionary selected *quarantine*, and Collins chose a word that in 2020, became a synonym for quarantine: *lockdown*. This term arose in 1973, defined as "the confinement of prisoners to their cells for all or most of the day as a temporary security measure," but now, according to Collins, it "encapsulates the shared experience of billions of people."

Oxford, however, went with the longer list. Their report defines and discusses those and other words that describe or shorthand aspects of our lives as denizens of 2020 and notes that language is the "common thread connecting these shared experiences across the globe."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Blursday, Doomscrolling, and the Words of 2020. The Christian Science Monitor](#)
[Word of the Year 2020. OxfordLanguages](#) (The full report, titled "Words of an Unprecedented Year," may be downloaded at this link)

The Big Questions

1. Which of the words in Oxford's list above most fit with your experience of living through 2020? Why?
2. What biblical word or words might you apply to 2020? Why?
3. What do you hope will be the word (or words) of the year for 2021? Why? How is that word (or are those words) related to the Bible's view of the future?
4. If you had to pick just one adjective from this list -- unprecedented, anxious, unsettled, inconvenient, bizarre, strange, uncertain, difficult, seismic, challenging, extraordinary, unmoored, shifting, dizzying, unstable, turbulent -- to characterize our current times, which one would it be, and why? If you were to choose an adjective not on this list, what would it be, and why?
5. What could make (or does make) our present times also able to be characterized as momentous, opportune, engaging or God-blessed?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Matthew 23:25-27

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. ... For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. (For context, read 23:1-36.)

One of the new terms on Oxford's list for 2020 is "hygiene theater," which is defined as "cleaning practices which give the illusion of sanitization without reducing the risk of infection." This term arose as some people questioned the value of handwashing, and other practices encouraged to stave off infection.

We at TWW are not in a position to judge the efficacy of those practices, though we think they are, for the most part, helpful. But hygiene theater was a major topic for Jesus, who described it sharply without using that term when talking about religious leaders being like tombs, beautiful on the outside and rotting on the inside.

Questions: Do you feel that Jesus was overly hard on the Pharisees and scribes? Why or what not? What was Jesus getting at when he compared them to "whitewashed tombs"? What might be an application of that in your own life? How can you avoid making it hard for others to grow spiritually?

Matthew 24:36

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. (For context, read 24:3-44.)

"Doomscrolling," which is "the action of compulsively scrolling through social media or news feeds that relate bad news" is an apt word for those of us on the TWW team, since we are often on news and other media sites looking for the next stories to use for the TWW lessons. Our editor confesses to viewing at least one news site first thing almost every morning, no matter what else he had to do that day -- and reading even the stories he knows won't be used in an upcoming lesson. (He has finally learned not to repeat that process at night, as going to bed with bad news fresh on his mind sometimes affects his sleep.)

Doomscrolling has its counterpart in religion as well, especially among people who get so invested in end-of-the-world prophecies and in date-setting for it that they forget what Jesus said in the verse above.

As another example, TWW team member Frank Ramirez tells us that back before the pandemic, when going to the gym was still feasible, "there was this fellow who always insisted on taking the treadmill next to mine, knowing I am a minister, so he could talk about what was going to happen to people he disapproved of once Jesus returned. The final time he did that I was trying to read *Biblical Archaeology Review* (I would read magazines while I upped the pace so I wouldn't notice how bad it hurt), and he got going. I finally confronted him about some people of questionable practices he did support." Ramirez says. "At least he didn't do it while I was reading *The New Yorker*," he adds.

Questions: If you've been doomscrolling, what do you think compels you to do it? What benefits, if any, have you received from it? What negative effects, if any, have you received from it?

What events or troubles of 2020, if any, made you think about the Second Coming of Christ? Why? What is the one thing you can say for certain about the day and hour of Christ's return?

Luke 13:1-5

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them -- do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." (No context needed.)

The Oxford WOTY report says, "We have ... seen the coinage, or increased use, of various other words formed on *pandemic* or *epidemic*. *Infodemic* (from 'information epidemic') is not a brand-new word: It was first used in 2003 with reference to the explosion of information (and misinformation) associated with the SARS epidemic, but was revived in March and April this year [2020], in the context of similar concerns about Covid-19. ... *Infodemic* is a proliferation of diverse, often unsubstantiated information relating to a crisis, controversy, or event, which disseminates rapidly and uncontrollably through news, online, and social media, and is regarded as intensifying public speculation or anxiety."

In the verses above, Jesus is speaking to some people who are drawing conclusions based on misinformation -- that the Galileans Pilate had ordered killed "were worse sinners than all other Galileans" or the 18 victims of the collapse of the tower of Siloam "were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem."

"No, I tell you," Jesus said, implying that their information about why those particular persons died was incorrect. But then Jesus added the important learning from those incidents: that we should all live in such a way as to be ready to be face to face with the Lord.

Questions: What is the gospel vibe from this scripture? Why do you think Jesus turned the crowd's misinformation into a teachable moment? What does the word "repent" mean in Jesus' comment to the crowd regarding their misinformation?

Matthew 5:43-46

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (For context, read 5:43-48.)

While some of the words on the Oxford list are neologisms (newly coined words, like "Blursday," a day of the week that is indistinguishable from any other when one has to remain at home all week), but others are existing words given new meaning (such as "Karen," which *Wikipedia* describes as a "pejorative term for women seeming to be entitled or demanding beyond the scope of what is normal." In some cases, it has become a derogatory term to describe a white woman who demands her own way, especially regarding those she considers her inferiors. The term has sometimes also been applied to similar behavior in men.)

We don't know if Jesus coined any new words, but the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) clearly shows him giving new definitions to established words and phrases. In the verses above, from that sermon, he redefines "love your neighbor" to include "love your enemy." That he is redefining is signaled by his words "You have heard ... But I say to you" In that sense, he is giving his hearers a new understanding and a new challenge.

Here are some of Jesus' other But-I-say-to-you redefinitions:

- Matthew 5:21-26: "You shall not murder" now also meaning "don't be angry with your brother or sister."
- Matthew 5:27-30: "You shall not commit adultery" now also meaning "you shall not lust."
- Matthew 5:31-32: "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce" now also meaning "anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery."
- Matthew 5:33-37: "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord" now also meaning "Do not swear at all, ... Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."
- Matthew 5:38-42: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" now also meaning "But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also."

Many of Jesus' other statements in the Sermon on the Mount also involve redefinitions, but are not so clearly signaled by "You have heard ... But I say to you ..." vocabulary.

Questions: Do you think Jesus' primary intent with the redefinitions was to make living righteously more difficult? If not, what was his purpose? How can broadened applications of the Ten Commandments help us to follow Jesus more closely in our daily lives?

For Further Discussion

1. What is your reaction to this line from the Oxford WOTY report "[There is] an abundance of expressions that fulfill humanity's perennial need to describe an often inhospitable world"?
2. Respond to this: One of the new 2020 words, "twindemic," is a good example of how prophecy can prevent instead of predict. Had we experienced a normal flu season people were predicting, a twindemic in which the effects of the seasonal flu, mixed with the expected tidal wave of Covid cases associated with winter and holiday gatherings would lead to a double disaster. But in 2020, more people than ever took their flu shots, and were already social distancing, wearing masks and washing their hands. This winter the coronavirus is every bit as bad as predicted in the United States, but we didn't get the twindemic (we make this statement provisionally, because to what extent flu cases being mislabeled as Covid is not known). Most prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures provides an out. This is what will happen IF you don't turn around, or change directions. In this case, we changed directions.
3. Speaking of Jesus providing redefinitions of old rules, consider the off-Broadway musical *Cotton Patch Gospel*, which sets the story of Jesus in the American South. The play includes a song using Southern vernacular to encapsulate the Sermon on the Mount. The piece makes plain the reversal theme that should characterize the behavior of Jesus' followers. Here are a few lines, sung by "Jesus":

They tell you an "eye for an eye."
They tell you a "tooth for a tooth."
Then they say, "This is God's way."
But I'm here to tell you the truth.

When somebody looks at you in anger
and whomps you on the side of your head,
do you go whack? Do you hit 'em back?
No, don't fight 'em, invite 'em,
to whomp the other side instead.

Turn it around, turn it around.
Surprise 'em a little, start shiftin' the ground.
To get right side up turn upside down.
Now is the time to turn it around.

Listen to the full lyrics sung [here](#).

4. Discuss this, from the Oxford WOTY report:

"Unsurprisingly, two words that have seen a huge surge in use since March [2020] are remote and remotely. These are of course not new words, dating to the 15th and 16th centuries respectively in the general sense, and to the second half of the 20th century with reference to working at home rather than in an office.

"But the use of both words surged in March 2020, and remotely has seen an increase in use of over 300 percent compared to last year. Our corpus has also shown distinct changes in the words used in collocation with remote and remotely this year. We are talking about studying, teaching, meeting, and voting remotely now -- patterns that were much less common before the pandemic."

Most statistically significant noun collocates of remote:

2019

2020

village	learning
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island	working
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control	workforce
---------	-----------

location	instruction
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monitoring	monitoring
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(Table also quoted from the report.)

Responding to the News

Overused words become cliches. This would be a good time to double check your emails, letters, texts and other conversations for overuse of some of 2020's new (or newly redefined) words. You can do that in person, not remotely. And it might help to fill a Blursday.

Even more importantly, this is a good time, as followers of Jesus, to consider how and when we use our words, be they newly coined or long established, to express love for God and for our neighbors, in the spirit of what Jesus said about those things.

Prayer (from Psalm 19:14)

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.
Amen.