

Planet Word Museum Launches Exhibits to Raise Literacy and Love of Language Through Joyful Wordplay

The Wired Word for the Week of June 26, 2022

In the News

The language arts Planet Word Museum, located in Washington, D.C., recently launched Lexicon Lane, a new immersive exhibit, which is a "word-sleuthing adventure" puzzle. Visitors are invited to solve alphabet-themed clues spread around the room.

Described as "the museum where language comes to life," Planet Word opened in October 2020. It is "dedicated to the power, beauty, and fun of language and to showing how words shape the human experience."

Retired elementary school reading instructor Ann Friedman was convinced that a strong democracy is based on a high rate of literacy. Concerned that 32 million adults in the U.S. can't read, and that one-third of fourth graders couldn't read at a basic level on national tests in 2019, Friedman envisioned a place that could ignite a lifelong love of words and language in people of all ages through interactive, hands-on wordplay. Planet Word, housed, appropriately, in a renovated 1869 schoolhouse, is her brainchild.

Using technology as a hook, the museum emphasizes fun, playfulness and surprises to motivate visitors and build confidence in their ability to use language to express themselves and connect to their world. The Planet Word website states: "Our words and language reflect who we are, how we interact with others, and how we interpret our world."

According to one of Planet Word's advisers, Colin Phillips, professor of linguistics at the University of Maryland, "We have seen ... the ways in which language has had a profound and sometimes damaging impact ... on things we do. ... And so getting people to reflect more on how language is important, how we use it, how it can be used against us is more and more important."

Exhibits at Planet Word focus on topics such as the origins of words and how they evolve over time, "the history of the English language, how children learn words, languages around the world, humor, poetry, and how music and advertising use words." These include a room-size globe, graffiti on bathroom walls, a motion-detecting tree sculpture called Speaking Willow that greets visitors in hundreds of languages, the Word Worlds room that guests can "paint" with words, and the Words Matter interactive gallery in which people can contribute stories about how they use words to define themselves and how words have shaped their lives.

The museum aims to "strengthen community by celebrating and valuing all types of linguistic diversity." Staff work to ensure that everyone -- especially people "with low literacy, people without access to educational resources, and those experiencing homelessness" -- feels included and welcome.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Interactive Museum Strives to Boost the Love of Words. *PBS News Hour*](#)

[The Best In Heritage \(TBIH\) 2022 Imagines: Planet Word Museum \(Video 20:35\). *YouTube*](#)

[A Museum Dedicated to the Power of Words. *Beyond Wordplay*](#)

[Planet Word. *Planet Word Museum*](#)

[Planet Word Museum. *Twitter*](#)

Applying the News Story

God is not limited in how he can communicate with people. In [Numbers 22:21-35](#), God speaks through a donkey as well as an angel to his stubborn prophet Balaam. In [Luke 19:28-40](#), Jesus states that if his disciples kept silent, even stones would shout out in praise to God.

We explore the ways God communicates with people through language, and how we can convey God's messages to others through well-chosen words that have the power to shape our world.

The Big Questions

1. What words have had the biggest influence on you? Who spoke those words? What impact for good or ill did they have on you?
2. How does God speak to people today?
3. Given that within the Bible, many voices speak -- including the voice of God; voices of godly and ungodly humans; voices of demons, devils and angels; voices of animals; and voices of planets, stars, and weather -- is it accurate to use "the Word of God" as a synonym for the Bible? Why or why not?
4. Might God's people in some ways become words from God? Explain.
5. Can God speak through people who do not identify as followers of Christ? Why or why not?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 1:1-5

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, 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, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (For context, read [Genesis 1:1-13, NRSVUE](#).)

According to the book of Genesis, God does not create the heavens and the earth out of raw materials. Instead, God creates by speaking the words: "Let there be light" ... "Let there be a

dome" (v. 6) ... "Let the earth put forth vegetation" (v. 11), etc. The Word of God brings order out of chaos, and creates good things where there had once only been "a formless void" (v. 2, NRSV) or "welter and waste," as [Robert Alter renders the Hebrew](#). In addition, God gives names to the things he has created to help us understand the world around us.

In the version of the creation story found in [Genesis 2:18-23](#), God invites the first human to name every living creature.

Questions: What does the story of creation tell you about the power of words? What is the significance of God creating the universe, using only words? How would you describe the power of the Word of God?

What is the significance of naming things in the world? What difference, if any, does it make who is doing the naming? Why do you think God invited the first human to participate in the naming of creatures he encountered?

Proverbs 25:11

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. (No context needed.)

Proverbs 18:21 (The Message Bible)

Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit -- you choose. (No context needed.)

Although some people tend to disparage words today, saying that "talk is cheap," the writer of Proverbs finds a good word to be extremely valuable. A "word fitly spoken" is a truthful word that is spoken at the right time, in the right place, in the right way. It is a word that brings healing, not harm; life, not death.

The writer of these wise words says someone who is "hasty in speech" is more hopeless than a fool ([Proverbs 29:20](#)). Speaking rash words in haste is not only foolish, but injurious as the thrusts of a sword, comparable to dangerous floodwaters that "pour out evil" rather than good. He advises the reader to "ponder how to answer" in order to exercise patience, circumspection and self-control, particularly when insulted and provoked to anger ([Proverbs 12:15-19](#); [Proverbs 15:28](#)). Elsewhere he advocates quietly holding back anger rather than giving full vent to it ([Proverbs 29:11](#)).

Researchers have discovered that when social media platforms introduce a time delay before participants can comment on controversial posts, users are less likely to post negative, "knee-jerk" responses. A carpenter knows it is wise to "measure twice before cutting once" since impatience can ruin a project.

James echoes the "think before you speak" advice when he writes: "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for human anger does not produce God's righteousness" ([James 1:19-20](#)).

TWW team member Malia Miller writes: "As a counselor, I often encourage journaling or writing letters to unload emotions. I also often suggest that these letters be thrown away before they are read by anyone. Once they are written, they have served their cathartic purpose. We

sometimes experience negative thoughts in the moment, but before we apply the stamp or take the time to deliver the letter, those moments pass and reason prevails. Online communication is a different animal. It takes so little effort to hit 'send.'

Questions: When have you experienced the power of truthful words spoken at the right time and in the right way? What steps can you take to move your speech in a positive direction?

Think of a time when you failed to "ponder how to answer" and said or posted the first thing that popped into your head, without regard to how your words might affect someone else. How did your words affect others, and your relationship with others?

Think of a time when you paused to consider carefully whether and how to respond to something inflammatory online. Did you change your mind about whether to comment, what to say or how to say it as a result of delaying your response? If so, how did delaying your response impact any exchange you had with others?

Revelation 19:11-13, 16

Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and wages war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. ... On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, "King of kings and Lord of lords." (For context, read [Revelation 19:11-16](#).)

In John's vision of the last days, he sees a valiant warrior, judge and monarch who is called "Faithful and True," "The Word of God" and "King of kings and Lord of lords." He also has another name known only to himself. [John 1:1](#) identifies this person as God, and [John 1:14-18](#) names him as Jesus, "the Word made flesh."

Jesus later claims that the words he has spoken "are spirit and life" ([John 6:63](#)).

Questions: When did you understand Jesus to be the Word of God to you? What word from God do you hear in the person of Jesus? How does Jesus clarify and interpret for you the many words of God that appear throughout the Bible?

What is the significance of the three names mentioned in the Revelation 19 text? What is the significance of the name known only to the rider of the white horse?

Acts 2:4-6, 21

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ... [Peter said,] "'Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'" (For context, read [Acts 2:1-21](#).)

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled Jesus' disciples and gave them the ability to speak in other languages about God's powerful deeds. When those in the crowd, who came from all over the Roman Empire, inquired about what the event meant, Peter explained that the death and resurrection of Christ provides salvation to all who call on the name of the Lord.

In some churches, when Pentecost Sunday is observed, the Gospel lesson from the Bible is read in different languages simultaneously by several people. The impact is startling, since it sounds like a cacophony of unintelligible sounds at first. But if those present listen carefully, they eventually can discern God's message coming through in their own language, as if directed especially at them. It is the same message for all the listeners, but presented in words each one can understand.

Questions: Why was it important that the good news be delivered in many languages, rather than in only Aramaic, or Hebrew, or Greek? What implications might that have for the way we should communicate with people about our faith today?

For Further Discussion

1. Discuss this poem, "[May Our Words,](#)" about the power of words, by spoken word artist Charity Blackwell.

2. Respond to this, from Planet Word's Twitter feed:

Words matter. That's why we cover our museum's walls with the wise words of iconic writers, orators, and philosophers, which remind us every day about the power of language in all its forms.

- What wise words have shaped you?
- One word that makes me feel better is ...
- One word I use to describe myself is ...
- One word I wish people were more careful with is ...
- One word someone special calls me is ...

3. In his 1839 historical play, *Cardinal Richelieu*, Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote: "The pen is mightier than the sword." Do you believe this to be true? Why or why not?

4. React to [this video \(3:18\)](#), "Ellen Heck Introduces Her Innovative Alphabet Book A is for Bee." How does this book impact your understanding of the creative way words work in translation?

5. Words play a significant role in protests, political campaigns, reform movements and religious revivals. In what sense can "words create worlds," as Rabbi Abraham Heschel once said? When have you seen the world shaped by the power of words?

6. How important is the method or messenger God uses to transmit his message? Since God can speak through donkeys and even rocks, what attitude should we have if and when God uses us to share the gospel? What should be our attitude if God chooses to speak to us in unexpected ways?

Responding to the News

This might be a good time to reflect on how you can use words to better communicate God's words of Good News to people you meet.

Prayer suggested by [Genesis 1:1-5](#); [James 1:18](#); [1 Peter 1:23](#); [Luke 5:1](#); [Hebrews 6:5](#); [Colossians 3:16](#)

Almighty God, you created this world and gave birth to us by the living, powerful, enduring word of truth. May we always lean in to Christ to hear and taste your good word, and may the word of Christ dwell in us richly, so that the words that come out of our mouths may increasingly mirror the life-giving, healing, grace-filled words you have spoken into the world. By the power of your Holy Spirit, may it be so. Amen.

Other News This Week

Dogs and People Help Each Other Survive War in Ukraine

The Wired Word for the Week of June 26, 2022

In the News

Valerie Lisratenko and her mother, Liliana, had spent 40 days in a Ukrainian bomb shelter, caring for 17 dogs, so when they came to an animal shelter in Poland, the founder of the shelter, Aaron Jackson, hired them. He says, "[All] I knew was that they had no money and nowhere to go. And I could see right away that they were good with dogs. ... I couldn't help but notice that all the dogs really loved [them]."

Shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, Jackson had traveled from his home in Florida to the city of Poznan in Poland. There, he reopened an abandoned animal shelter and began to welcome refugees and their animals. To date, he has helped find housing for approximately 300 refugees, many of whom were dog owners who struggled to stay with their pets. "If you were walking through the camps, there were just so many refugees that had brought their dogs over," Jackson told CNN. "And that only makes sense. It's an extension of their family."

Soon after the war began, dogs coming to Poland from Ukraine had not been allowed to mix with local dogs in Polish shelters because shelter operators were concerned about disease. That's when Jackson found an empty animal shelter in Poznan and obtained permission to reopen it.

A rescue organization in Ukraine began to send transport vehicles to Jackson's shelter, including a van containing the Lisratenkos and 17 dogs. "The dogs helped [the women] get through the

worst 40 days of [their lives in the bomb shelter]," said Jackson, "and [the women] helped get those dogs through the worst 40 days of their lives."

Through a translator, the younger Lisratenko told her amazing story of survival to CNN. She said that she and her mother have always had a love for dogs. Since she was young, the two had puppies at home, and her mother would sometimes bring home strays in order to provide food and medical care.

Right before the war started, the two moved into a bomb shelter with their puppies. Then they found a safe place for some older dogs in a nearby factory, where the daughter worked as a guard. Initially, the two women would travel back and forth from the shelter to the factory, to feed the older dogs. But when the shelling became intense, they brought the older dogs to the bomb shelter. On their final run between the factory and the bomb shelter, a bomb exploded right behind them.

They did not want to leave the bomb shelter, but in early May, the drinking water became contaminated. Both people and dogs began to get sick. The two women moved to an animal shelter in Ukraine, and the workers there shared information about dogs crossing the border to Jackson's shelter. They reached out to Jackson, and he arranged travel for the two women to bring the dogs to Poland.

When the two women arrived at the animal shelter in Poland, Jackson could tell they were nervous and scared. "They didn't know Planting Peace," said Jackson, naming the organization behind the shelter. In addition, "they're in a new country. They don't speak the language. We don't speak their language."

Planting Peace was founded by Jackson as a global nonprofit organization. According to its website, it was "founded for the purpose of spreading peace in a hurting world. Our projects focus on a range of humanitarian and environmental initiatives, including our multi-national deworming campaign; a network of orphanages and safe havens in developing countries; LGBTQ rights advocacy; the Equality House; and rainforest conservation efforts in the Amazon."

Planting Peace was prepared to help the Lisratenkos as refugees, according to Jackson. But since they had a strong connection with the dogs, he hired them to work at the shelter. "They know these dogs incredibly well," he said. "So, they were able to pass this knowledge on to the vet." According to CNN, Lisratenko calls the dogs her children. She says that they have been through hell together and have reached paradise. Although the people at the shelter do not all speak the same language, she says, they understand each other "because it's love that unites us."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[After 40 Days in a Bomb Shelter, Two Ukrainian Refugees and 17 Dogs Are Ready to Start a New Life in Poland. CNN](#)

[Planting Peace Website. www.plantingpeace.org](http://www.plantingpeace.org)

Applying the News Story

All through history, Christians have seen the glory of God in creation. Use this story about saving dogs and saving people to reflect on how God uses creation to guide us in his will and way.

The Big Questions

1. What, if anything, do close relationships between people and animals tell you about the connections between different creatures of God?
2. Animal shelter founder Aaron Jackson saw many Ukrainian refugees with dogs, and he told CNN, "That only makes sense. It's an extension of their family." How has this been true for you, if at all? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having animals as an extension of a human family?
3. Dogs helped the Lisratenkos get through the worst 40 days of their lives in a bomb shelter, and the women helped get the dogs through the worst 40 days of their lives. What did each contribute? When, if ever, have you seen such mutual aid between humans and animals?
4. What Christian virtues can be developed by the discipline of caring for animals? What virtues can animals teach us?
5. Valerie Lisratenko says that the people at the animal shelter speak different languages, but they understand each other "because it's love that unites us." How does love for animals unite human beings, one to another? When, if ever, have you seen this to be true? Be specific.

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

1 Kings 17:2-6

The word of the LORD came to [Elijah], saying, "Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." So he went and did according to the word of the LORD; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the wadi. (For context, read [1 Kings 16:29--17:7](#).)

As the first book of Kings begins, Solomon becomes ruler of the united kingdom after the reign of his father David. He builds a temple, a palace and other royal buildings. After Solomon's death, the kingdom divides into a nation called Israel in the north and another called Judah in the south. In time, Ahab becomes king of the northern kingdom, marries a Phoenician princess named Jezebel, and erects an altar to the false god Baal. First Kings says that "Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him" (16:33). The prophet Elijah remains faithful to the God of Israel, and predicts to

Ahab that a drought will come to the land. God sends Elijah into hiding by the Wadi Cherith, where ravens feed him.

Questions: What message do you hear in the story of the ravens feeding Elijah while he is in hiding? Where do you see examples of God helping people through animals today?

Isaiah 55:12

For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. (For context, read [Isaiah 55:1-13.](#))

The prophet Isaiah lived in the eighth century before the birth of Christ, during the reigns of King Ahaz and possibly King Hezekiah. The first part of the book, through chapter 39, pronounces judgment and doom, while the end of the book, chapters 40 through 66, contains prophecies of hope and restoration, including this chapter which begins with the invitation, "Hear, everyone who thirsts; come to the waters" (v. 1). According to Isaiah, abundant life comes from seeking the Lord, trusting his word and seeing his abundant goodness in the natural world. Even the mountains, hills and trees of the field can teach us how to praise God.

Questions: How can the truth of God's word be seen in the cycles of nature? When has creation inspired you to praise God? Be specific.

Matthew 6:26

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (For context, read [Matthew 6:25-34.](#))

The Gospel of Matthew is concerned with placing Jesus in the story of God's saving work, which began in Genesis and continued through the Hebrew Scriptures. The book begins with an "account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1), and ends with a story of the resurrected Jesus commissioning his disciples on a mountain and telling them to teach people to obey everything that he has commanded them (28:20). Matthew seems to be presenting Jesus as a second Moses, giving new laws and teachings to Israel and to the world. At the heart of his teachings is the Sermon on the Mount, which contains a section on putting away worry and trusting God to provide for us as he provides for animals and plants.

Questions: Why do humans find it difficult to trust God to provide for them as he provides for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field? What important lesson can you learn from the birds and the lilies?

Colossians 1:15-17

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers -- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (For context, read [Colossians 1:15-23.](#))

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to the followers of Christ in Colossae, a city near Ephesus in what is now Turkey. Paul was concerned about false teaching in their community, and wrote to the Colossians to stress the supremacy of Christ as the greatest power in the universe. Far more than an influential religious teacher, Christ "is the image of the invisible God," said Paul, "the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created." Jesus is the human face of God, one who joins the Wisdom of God as being created "at the beginning of [God's] work" ([Proverbs 8:22](#)). He is the Word of God through whom all things were created, "and without him not one thing came into being" ([John 1:3](#)). He is truly a colossal Christ, and "in him all things hold together."

Questions: What is the significance of Christ being connected to the creation of everything that exists, from dogs to humans to "all things in heaven and on earth"? Where do you see evidence that "in him all things hold together"? What difference does this make, when you look at the world around you?

For Further Discussion

1. Most Christians understand God to be the creator of all that exists, and they see his handiwork in creation. They are careful, however, not to look for God in creation itself (except, perhaps, in the person of Jesus Christ, the only one who was fully human and fully God). What are the dangers, if any, of looking for God in the natural world? Is looking for God in creation the same as looking for God at work in creation?
2. On the sixth day of creation, God looked over all that he had made and said that it was not just good, but "very good" (Genesis 1:31). What are the very good qualities of dogs, cats and other animals that are worthy of human emulation? What characteristics of animals are not appropriate for humans to copy?
3. God said to the first humans, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food" ([Genesis 1:29-30](#)). From this passage, it appears that both humans and animals were designed to have a vegetarian diet; permission to eat meat was not given until after the flood ([Genesis 9:3](#)). Given the special relationship that exists between humans and animals, should humans focus on a plant-based diet? Discuss.
4. According to the [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychology](#), "Children raised with pets show many benefits. Developing positive feelings about pets can contribute to a child's self-esteem and self-confidence. Positive relationships with pets can aid in the development of trusting relationships with others. A good relationship with a pet can also help in developing non-verbal communication, compassion, and empathy." How has this been true for you and members of your family, if at all? How do you see God at work in the relationship between pets and children? Pets and adults?

Responding to the News

In the week to come, look for ways in which God is speaking through creation -- especially the animals in your life -- to reveal his will and his way.

Prayer

Help us, Creator God, to trust you to provide for us, as you care for the birds of the air. Along with the trees of the field, may we join all of creation in giving you glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.