

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Friends, first of all, thank you for a beautiful Advent season and Christmas Eve together. And thank you for letting my family and I spend some time together last weekend. It was a good time to get away and play with the kids' new toys.

But I want to go back and revisit Christmas Eve, because it's still Christmas time, as Mary reminded us last Sunday, and we get the opportunity to dwell on Christmas for two more days. On Christmas Eve, we heard the Christmas story from Luke along with lots of carols we know and love but in the midst of the very familiar story, there was one other scripture passage thrown in - our scripture for today from John. It's a beautiful passage to read right before we pass the light from the Christ Candle to a hundred small candles, but, I realize, the John passage sticks out like a sore thumb in the midst of Luke's beloved narrative.

Now, we've talked before about how different John is from the other gospel writers. Matthew, Mark, and Luke follow a very similar storyline. Their quotes are similar enough. Their miracles carry the same characters and instructions. That's why in the lectionary, there is a year for Matthew, a year for Mark, and a year for Luke.

John doesn't get to have a year in the lectionary. He gets sprinkled in, selectively. And I understand why. He's . . . different. He's eclectic. It doesn't matter to John when Jesus did what. The chronology doesn't matter. Details are not as important as drama. Quotes aren't as important as symbolism. John is a poet. He has a license - a poetic license - to rearrange things to create a different kind of story. For you who know your art history, think of comparing a portrait by Michelangelo to one by Salvador Dalí. (You know, if you installed a projector in the sanctuary, I could give you those visuals, but then I might get struck by lightning, so you just have to use your imagination.)

But my point is, both artists are masters of their craft. Both teach us about perception, they evoke emotional responses, they teach us something. And the same is true for the Gospel of John and the synoptic gospels. Though they are quite different, they both can teach us something important.

But John can be a challenge for those of us who don't naturally gravitate to poetry. I know that's true for me. Recently, I've been hearing more poetry by the late

Andrea Gibson. Gibson died last summer at the age of 49 from ovarian cancer, just a few years older than me. Gibson was a powerful poet. Colorado's poet laureate.

The poems Gibson wrote and performed often move fast through your ear drums into parts of your brain that work hard to digest what is being said even as your body starts to rock in rhythm with the tempo. It is emotional, and there's oceans of depth to them. In perhaps my favorite and least favorite, Gibson speaks directly to her cancer itself. So, I can't just move from one Gibson work to the next. I need time to let the words settle. Time to process and reflect. I mean, Gibson didn't create new vocabulary. The words are words I am familiar with, but the way they're put together is unique in this world.

And John does that to me, too. He takes the familiar - the very human Jesus, the little boy who was born in a stable and was held by Mother Mary. The human with flesh and bones who occasionally burped and likely snored and certainly got hangry and with a stroke of a quill scratching on parchment, John rips me from that comforting story and transports me through a metaverse wormhole and suspends me, weightless, in the middle of the dark and empty universe at the beginning of time, and I get to see the first burst of light that ever was in the void of nothingness. Light that makes me squint and turn away but captivates my eyes so that I cannot look away at the same moment.

And John says to me, that's the same being. The little baby Jesus who loved hugs and the sound of laughter and the taste of figs is the same being that burst into the nothingness at the beginning of . . . everything.

And as completely bonkers as that sounds, it's important for us to dwell on it this Christmas season. We get so enamored by the nativity scene. And I get it. Who doesn't love a baby? Who doesn't admire the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph? The intimate scene in the stable is awe-inspiring and very human. And we can imagine ourselves there, as shepherds or innkeepers or Mary or Joseph and there are some of you who remind me of the stubborn donkey sometimes! Our children can get dressed up in cute costumes and reenact it for us. It's adorable. We love the carols and bells and lights and feasts and trees. And Luke's version, especially in the voice of little blanket-carrying Linus is the best.

Can you imagine if, in the Peanuts movie, Linus had walked to center stage and the lights had gone down and he had suddenly burst into John 1 instead of Luke 2?

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The light shines in the darkness, Charlie Brown, and the darkness did not overtake it.”

Yeah, the Christmas Eve story just isn't the same without the shepherds and angels. Try as we might to do a nativity scene of John 1, I think we'd fail. We'd have a booming bass voices hidden from view, a black backdrop, a bright spotlight, and crazy-looking John the Baptist denying that he's the Messiah. Pointing to one who is coming but not here yet.

It just wouldn't work. But John does evoke a lot of emotion in his words. One of the most important things is the use of a familiar phrase – words that meant a lot to the readers. “In the beginning.” In Hebrew “bereshith.” In Greek, “en arche.” In English, “in the beginning.” But John doesn't plagiarize. He reconstructs. In light of what he has learned by living with Jesus and watching miracles unfold and witnessing the resurrection, he says, “In the beginning the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word took on flesh, and dwelled among us” and the name of the flesh was Jesus.

But in John's beautifully poetic, metaphorical mind, he doesn't say Jesus. He calls Jesus “Logos” – the Word.

But what does that even mean? Logos isn't referring to a word like hat, cheese, or Amazon Prime. It's not “a word,” it's “the Word.”

In the 6th century before Jesus, Greek philosophers were talking about logos, the universal order of existence, the meaning of life, the principles by which life is guided. What is the point of life? How are we to live? How should we interact with others? Heraclitus and Plato and Aristotle and more all expounded on these ideas and called the concepts “logos.”

Logos, or “the Word” was the existential question of “why are we here?” “What is our purpose?” People were searching for the logos before Jesus was born.

And Plato even began to connect the philosophical concept of logos to religion saying, “It may be that some day there will come forth from God a Word, a Logos, that will reveal all mysteries and make everything plain.” Let me say that again. Plato said, “It may be that some day there will come forth from God a Word, that will reveal all mysteries and make everything plain.”

Friends, John may have been a simple fisherman at one point, but eventually, it seems, he studied or heard Plato’s words. John didn’t come up with the idea for “the Word.” He didn’t originate the idea that the Word was with God in the beginning. There was already an understanding that there is a divine meaning of life, a reason for living, a guiding principle to live by. What John did was claim that the Word, the meaning of life, became flesh and dwelled among us. What John did was name the Word Jesus. What John did was declare that the Logos – the meaning of life, is radical, life-giving, merciful, selfless love. That the guiding principle of our lives should be love. That the order of the universe should be love.

I want you to hear now what the scripture sounds like if we turn the “Word” into what I think it meant to John.

In the beginning, there was God and God’s love. God intended for love to be the core of everything, but nothing had been created yet. There was just darkness waiting for something and someone to love. And then, BOOM! There was the most fundamental building block of life. Light. And then the combination of love and light created life. BOOM!

Explosions of iron, calcium, hydrogen, helium and oxygen flew through time and space, and God watched as those elements found themselves balancing in a place not too far but not too close to a star. But then, we stumbled through the eons, growing and learning and craving power and wealth. And we failed to love creation and God and our neighbors as we should, so that Logos, the order of existence, the love that was there from the very beginning, did the complete opposite of what had been done before.

Instead of big booms and cosmic dust we get two scared and weary travelers seeking shelter suitable for the birth of a child they didn't expect who would change the entire world in about thirty-three years of life on earth. The meaning of life in the flesh - love, teaching us the guiding principle – love.

And now our work as followers of Jesus is to reflect that light-giving love to the world. We are modern day Johns. We are not the light. We are here as witnesses to the light. To show people the way to live and love that brings peace and hope and community, that does not leave anyone wandering alone blindly. We are supposed to be pointing people to God's goodness. To the logos that gives life meaning.

In the beginning was the Logos, the meaning of life, the universal order of existence, the purpose for everything. And the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. ³ All things came into being through the Logos, . . .

¹⁴ And the Logos, the divine plan for the world, 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.

Jesus is love in the flesh. Love with skin. Love has always been God's plan for the universe, for us. Love created all things and can redeem all things. Love will remain. Love will last. The light has come, and now we are to live as bearers of the light and live according to the Logos. Amen.