

Sunday, December 26, 2021
First Sunday after Christmas (Year C)

John 1.1-18

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/252870346926064>

(Sermon begins at about 17:00)

“Speaking the Word into Being”

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (Jn 1.1-3a).

These words are the beginning of what is known as the Prologue to the Gospel According to John, and is one of the traditional readings during the Christmas season. In fact, it is so important that it is designated for reading twice during the Christmas season—on Christmas Day and on the first Sunday after Christmas. While beautifully poetic, at first glance we may wonder how this could possibly be a Christmas story. It hardly compares with the dramatic, even romantic, imagery of the birth story recorded in Luke that we heard on Christmas Eve. There is no decree for an imperial census, resulting in Mary and Joseph leaving their home in Nazareth to make the long journey to Bethlehem. There is no mention of Bethlehem being so crowded that there was no room available in any inn, so that Mary and Joseph had to seek refuge for the night in a stable. There is certainly no description of the birth of the baby Jesus, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. There are no shepherds in the field, keeping watch over their sheep. There is no angelic visitor telling the shepherds “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Lk 2.10-11). There is no accompanying multitude of the heavenly host “praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’” (Lk 2.13-14). So where is Christmas in John’s message of “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”?

If anything, what we hear from John sounds more like the beginning of Genesis: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . .” (Gen 1.1). In fact, the Prologue is actually meant to evoke the imagery of creation, and even to expand on it. According to Genesis, all of creation came into being through a simple word from God. “Let there be light.” “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters.” And so on. What the Prologue tells us is that in the beginning—before the act of creation even began, before God uttered the first words beginning it all—there was another Word, with a capital W. Not just the spoken word of God, but something more.

At the time that Jesus was born, Greek philosophy and thought pervaded the intellectual world, giving meaning to life and the created order. The Word, or *Logos* in Greek, was understood to be the divine principle that gives order to the universe. *Logos* is God active in creation—in the initial act of creation, and in the ongoing processes of creation that are evident around us even now. But even more, *Logos* was understood to be that which links the human mind to the mind

of God. *Logos*, the Word, is that which connects God and us humans. John's Prologue uses this understanding to describe a new reality, the establishment of a new connection, between God and us. That *Logos* is not just God active in creation, but also God active through revelation. The revelation of God to humanity in a way that is only made possible through Jesus' birth.

We know from the Old Testament that God had been in relationship with—that he sought to be in relationship with—his people from the beginning of our existence. God established a covenant in an attempt to make a formal connection. God spoke through the prophets in an attempt to maintain and reinforce that connection. But that was not sufficient. How can we be in true relationship, have a true connection, with a God who is so far beyond our limited human nature, who is so far beyond our limited understanding?

So, as John tells us, “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” (John 1.14). The revelation of God to his people, the true connection between God and us, is only made possible by the Word becoming human, as we are. True connection is only made possible by God becoming human. To provide the opportunity for a direct connection between God and humanity. To do this, God had to first come in the form of a baby: Jesus, whose birth we celebrate during this Christmas season.

The Prologue may not use the beautiful imagery of a child born in a manger, watched over by animals and shepherds; a birth that was signaled by a star and choirs of angels. But the Prologue tells us something that the birth narrative in Luke or in Matthew does not. That this child is not just the Son of God, but is Emmanuel: God with us. It is true that this revelation was made to Mary at the announcement that she would bear the Son of God. But the birth narrative taken in isolation does not explicitly make this point. That this birth in a manger in Bethlehem is the birth of God in the flesh. Implied, yes. Explicit, no. The Prologue, on the other hand, definitively makes this point. “The Word became flesh” revealing his “glory as a father's only son.”

This act of God coming to us in human form says something about God's love for us. That he loves us so much that he is willing to take on our flesh, our limitations, our frailty, just to be with us. So that he could relate to us face-to-face. So that we could relate to him face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh. That is what Christmas is really about. That God came to us in the flesh. That God is with us.

But that's not all the Prologue tells us. As already noted, the Prologue expands on the story of creation in Genesis. What is the first thing that God spoke into being? He began creation with “Let there be light” (Gen 1.3). All else in creation, all life, proceeded from there. Notice that the Prologue also speaks of light. John tells us “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (Jn 1.3b-5). The Gospel then talks about how God sent John the Baptist to testify to this light. “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (Jn 1.9).

In these words, John evokes the imagery of the bringing of light as the precursor to all the rest of creation, to all life, letting us know that the coming of the Word is the beginning of a new

creation. Just as the original story of creation involved the bringing of light which began creation, so the coming of the Word into the world is also a bringing of light beginning a new creation. A light that manifests God's grace and love. A new light that is the source of life for the people. That our lives flow from that light. That we are made a new creation through the Word. Through the light that Word shines in the darkness of the world.

It is not just our lives that are made new. So is our relationship with God. Just as Adam and Eve were the children of God in the first creation, the creation imagery in the Prologue is also meant to evoke the image of us being children of God. Of us being made children anew through the light and life that proceed from the Word. As John tells us, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God" (Jn 1.12-13). Again, we are a new creation born of God's love for us. No longer merely the people of God. No longer the servants of God. Rather, we are now the children of God. We are loved and cared for as beloved children, with all the benefits that entails.

The Prologue of John's Gospel and the birth narrative from Luke's Gospel are, therefore, merely two sides of the same coin. The Prologue reveals God's divine plan, spoken from the beginning of creation. The birth narrative speaks the Word into fulfillment in very human terms. And in turn, the Prologue reveals just what this means for us and for our relationship with God.

Our Gospel reading ends with the words "It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1.18b). Through the Word who has come in the flesh to dwell among us, we see God in a new way. We experience God in a new way. And God experiences us in a new way. We are made a new creation through this new light that comes into the world. And not just a new creation, but children of God, heirs of the eternal kingdom that is being ushered in. The eternal kingdom that God envisioned all along. The eternal kingdom that has been prepared just for us. In this, we are heirs to the love, grace, forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life that were intended from the beginning of creation when God spoke a simple word. Made possible through the Word made flesh, born as a child in a manger in Bethlehem. The Word who was from the beginning, spoken through the cry of a baby. Spoken through the love and obedience of Mary and Joseph. Spoken through the song of angelic messengers. Spoken through the witness of simple shepherds. And even now, spoken in and through our own lives, as God's beloved children.

Merry Christmas!