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A Sermon for Christmas Day

St. John 1:1-14

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December 25, 2020

“In the beginning was the Word.” Just like the words, “Once upon a time” or “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away,” that introduction “In the beginning” tells us that we’re reading the opening lines of a great story. But *unlike* those other introductions, St. John’s opening words in his Gospel signal that this story is very much rooted in history. “Once upon a time” and “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away” offer us no point of historical connection—just the opposite. But John grounds the story of Jesus in history. Yes, it’s a long time ago. No, we can’t put a date on it. But we can follow the biblical story, generation by generation right back to that beginning. And that’s where John anchors the story of Jesus. John anchors the Gospel in those events by which the God of Israel spoke, and by his word brought light out of the darkness, order out of the chaos, and created life—human beings to live in his presence—to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. And as we know, not long after and by our rebellion, we broke that joyful fellowship and subjected ourselves instead to sin and death. We drew a cloak of darkness over the world.

Here is what the gospel is about: The creator God himself entering the darkness of this fallen world to restore the light and to set it to rights. But what’s this “word” got to do with it? For that we need, as always to return to the Old Testament and to Israel’s story. When John writes of the word—the Greek word he uses is one you’ve heard before, *logos*—he’s not using it the way the pagan

philosophers like Heraclitus, Plato, or the Stoics used it. If that’s where we start, we’ll be on the wrong foot from the get-go. They spoke of a sort of deified universal reason, a pantheistic mind behind the universe. No, John’s *logos* is grounded in Israel’s story and he tips us off with those words, “In the beginning”.

John lays Genesis here like a foundation stone and from it we take our cue to look to the Jewish scriptures. Repeatedly in Genesis 1, God speaks and life-sustaining order and, eventually, life itself springs forth from the dark chaos. Psalm 33:6 echoes Genesis 1: “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.” In Isaiah 55:10-11 the word of the Lord brought hope to a fallen Israel:

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Like the rain from heaven bringing life to the earth, the word of the Lord will proceed from his mouth and accomplish his purposes with absolute certainty—in this case, to restore and to renew his people. Isaiah 40:6-8 speaks of the everlasting nature of the word of the Lord:

All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Flowers fade, grass withers, people die, but the Lord’s word stands forever. But what actually is this “word”? With his statement that the word was, in the beginning, God and with God, John points us back to passages like Proverbs 8, which speaks of wisdom as that which was not only there with God in the beginning, acting with creative force, but that which continues to sustain creation and guide aright those who will listen.

“The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water...

...then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.

Similarly, Sirach 24 places wisdom at the creation of the world, but also associates wisdom with the law given to Israel and established in Jerusalem and in the temple:

“Then the Creator of all things gave me a commandment, and the one who created me assigned a place for my tent. And he said, ‘Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance.’ From eternity, in the beginning, he created me, and for eternity I shall not cease to exist. In the holy tabernacle I ministered before him, and so I was established in Zion. In the beloved city likewise he gave me a resting place, and in Jerusalem was my dominion. So I took root in an honored people, in the portion of the Lord, who is their inheritance.

What John says here is that by which God creates and sustains the life of the cosmos has taken on human flesh and been born into the world. And yet this is no inanimate force emanating from God or merely with him. It is, somehow, God himself. Humanity's sin has brought the darkness of death upon creation, but God himself, in all his creative and life-giving power, has come to lighten the darkness by restoring life.

Of course, in keeping with our fallenness, people failed to recognise the light. John the Baptist was sent to herald the light and even many who believed him failed to recognise the light when he arrived. And yet, John tells us, to those who did receive him, he gave the right to become children of God. John gives us another hint or two here of the story. Who were the "sons of God"? That was Israel's title, given at the Exodus—God's beloved and firstborn son. In Jesus a new family has been born. It began with the old. The first believers, the first sons and daughters of this new family were drawn from the old. And yet John hints at the blossoming fulfilment of the old Israel's mission in this new family. There's a universality in those words, "to *all* who did receive him" and we know that he doesn't just mean all those of the old family who believed, because he goes on to say that the sons and daughters of this new Israel are born not of blood or the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God himself. Descent, desire, and human power are not the basis of this new family, but rather God himself by the power of his life-creating and life-sustaining word. The Lord created life by the power of his word in the beginning and humanity rejected that gift of life. Now a new beginning has been made as the word has returned, this time wedded to our flesh, bring life from death and to restore the rejected gift.

And then those final words: we have seen the glory, the glory of the Father revealed in the Son, full of grace and

truth. John draws on the words of Psalm 85:10, "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (KJV). Psalm 85 is a prayer—a prayer of the exile, seeking the Lord for forgiveness and for restoration. It is very much an Advent sort of hymn. Here at the end of our Christmas Gospel those words stand, "full of grace and truth". In Jesus the prayer has finally been answered.

Brothers and Sisters, take heart. We walk through difficult days. They're hardly the most difficult days humans have ever faced, but they are, for many of us, the most difficult days that our generation has known. To make matters worse, the world is practically shouting at us right now that our faith is irrelevant, that it doesn't matter. Things seem very dark. Thanks be to God that the light has come into the darkness and that the darkness has not overcome it. The worst the darkness could ever do, it did on that Friday almost two thousand years ago when it crucified Jesus on a cross. Three days later the light burst forth from the tomb, brighter than it ever had been before. Take heart. We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Let's pray: Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born this day of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honour and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*