

The Light Came into the World¹
John 1:1-18
Psalm 130: 5-8

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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John 1:1-18

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. 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.

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

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But 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 of the will of man, but of God.

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. (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."') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Psalm 130: 5-8

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

Ron read from the Gospel of John this morning.² Except for Christmas, we will be reading from the Gospel of John all Winter and Spring, through Easter. John is always a little

¹ This sermon owes some structure and points to Rev. Dr. Thomas Slater's commentary at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3322.

² I am aware of the scholarly debates on the authorship of the Fourth Gospel, and (for the purposes of this sermon, anyway) I am deliberately not taking a position on any of them. For the purposes of this sermon, what the

challenging, because John is a mystic and a poet. He does not always necessarily tell the story in A-B-C order, with Who, What, Where, When, and Why laid out neatly enough for a newspaper editor.

But John tells us parts of the story that the other Gospels don't, and he tells them in gorgeous language. I mean, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." That's beautiful.

But what does it mean?

It means that this Gospel, this story that tells us who we are as God's people, starts with relationship. Before God made the first human beings, before the earth existed, even before God spoke the Big Bang into existence, God was already in relationship. God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit already existed and were already in relationship with each other. This Gospel is about relationship.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, they referred to the Word of God as God's Wisdom. The Hebrews understood that God's Wisdom had been God's companion since before the creation of the Earth, "rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race."³ God's Word first appears in the third verse of the whole Bible, when "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light."⁴ All through the Old Testament, God's Word is spoken to the prophets, and they speak it to the people.⁵

Fourth Gospel says is far more important than who wrote it down. That means that calling this individual "John" is accurate enough for the purposes of this sermon, and far easier in a sermon than, for example, the more scholarly "The author of the Fourth Gospel."

³ Proverbs 8:31

⁴ Genesis 1:3.

⁵ Isaiah, for example, speaks of, "The word that Isaiah...saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem." (Isaiah 2:1).

The Old Testament and the New Testament are not talking about different Gods, or a different people. “In the beginning,” are the same words that begin Genesis. That is not an accident. We are talking about the same events here. God the Father created everything, but all things came into being through the Word. In the Word was life, and that life was the light of all humanity.⁶

So, the Word that was spoken to the prophets came into the world, the same world that had come into being through him. The Word became flesh and lived among us. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness is not able to overcome it. We spoke about light in the darkness a few weeks ago. You may recall.

When you’re used to being in the darkness, light changes things.

The Irish theologian C. S. Lewis said that, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen: not only because I see it [,] but because by it I see everything else.”⁷

Light lets us see what’s around us, and what’s really going on. Light does not make bad things cease to exist, but light lets us see them, and avoid them. Light lets us see what is good, and seek it out. Light lets us see the way through the snares and brambles of our lives to peace and abundance and God’s holy *shalom*.

The light for all humanity is in the Word that came into the world. We call that Word Jesus, or literally, “God saves.”⁸

⁶ John uses images of light and darkness to refer to life and death, and closeness to God and distance from God, all through his Gospel.

⁷ “They Asked for a Paper,” paper delivered to the Oxford Socratic Club. Published in *Is Theology Poetry?*, 1962.

⁸ Literal translation of the Hebrew *Ye-shua*.

God did not send a representative to talk with God's people. God had tried that. You may recall. They were called prophets, and they went to God's people to tell them about the light. In the last few weeks we have heard words from Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

Their words were important. Their words were often beautiful. Their words were true. Their words were not merely true in the little-t sense, literally true, but their words were Capital-T True: they were telling the Hebrew people and us cosmic Truths.

But sending prophets didn't work in the long term. Each time, the people would act like they "got it" for a generation or two, and then they would go back to following the idols of stuff, or power, or anything, it seemed, other than God.

So, God came down here personally. This is a personal connection between the God who created the Universe and God's people, us. That personal connection is grounded in loving grace.

So, what does this mean for us?

It means that these events of Christmas are all about relationships.

God loves you and God wants to have a loving relationship with you. God wants that relationship so much that God left Heaven and came down here where we are and was born, lived, and died for you and for that relationship.

But you can't have a relationship only with God. A one-on-one relationship with God, with nobody else mattering, is not offered on the menu. It never was.

You are not the only one who loves God. You are not the only one whom God loves. God always brings his other kids along.

John's first letter says that, "Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."⁹

The late, great Mohammed Ali put the same truth more simply: "If you love God, you can't love only some of his children."

One of the problems with parts of the Church today is the fallacious, erroneous, inaccurate, mistaken, and, in all other ways truly bad, idea that, proper doctrine guarantees proper ethics. In other words, the idea that, if you believe and say the right things about God, that you're allowed to rationalize doing whatever you like and treating other people however you like. Nothing could be further from the truth. Often the Christians who speak the loudest about God's love expressed to them as divine grace are the last people to demonstrate love or grace for their brothers and sisters. They act as if being saved exempts them from being more like Christ.

That is not how this works.

If we have seen that the Light has come into the world, then we ought to act as though we see. Act as though we see God's other children, our brothers and sisters. Not all of whom are doing as well as we are. That may mean spiritually. That may mean financially. That may mean legally. The Scriptures do not mention Jesus ever shying away from someone because that person was poor, or an outcast, or even contagious.¹⁰

⁹ 1 John 4:20.

¹⁰ q.f. Jesus healing lepers, who were all three. Matthew 8:1-3; Matthew 11:5; Luke 5:12-13, etc.

We all need to have a conversation about what “Grace” is. It does not mean that people who regard themselves as saved can look down their noses at non-Christians or at Christians who aren’t “up to our standards.”

I will use myself as an example. I do not abuse drugs or hit my spouse. As I am certain that my wonderful and long-suffering wife will agree, though, I have my other shortcomings. I do not get to say that I am a better human being than other people because I sin in different ways. And neither does anybody else.

Scripture tells us that,

“The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we’ve compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we’re in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.”¹¹

We still need to ask God for forgiveness. We do not confess our sins every Sunday out of an abundance of caution, in case somebody here has done something wrong. We confess our sins every Sunday, because we know that every one of us has “sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”¹² And every Sunday, we are assured of God’s amazing love and grace and forgiveness, because every Sunday we need it, and every Sunday it is true.

The Lord’s Prayer asks God to forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. We have to extend the same kind of grace to other people that we receive from God. Just as we need to confess our sins and start over, so do they. Just as God lets us start over, we have to let them start over.

¹¹ Romans 3:22-24, *The Message*.

¹² Romans 3:23

God calls us all to be righteous, but God calls no one to be self-righteous. When we extend God's love, we are representatives of God. We are not God. All glory, honor, and righteousness are God's, not ours. We may be the medium, but it is God, the God who is Love, who is the message.

When we manage to walk that line, righteous but not self-righteous, in the world but not of it, then truly I tell you, the Word has become flesh and still dwells among us, and we see his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son.

AMEN