

THE PROLOGUE OF JOHN
Gen. 1:1-5; John 1:1-9
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Today, and for the next seven Sundays, Jana and I want to try to get inside one of the most haunting and mysterious, and yet simply written books in the literature of the world. If there ever was a piece of writing that is deceptively simple, this is it - the Gospel of John. There is hardly a word in it that a five-year-old couldn't understand. And yet every sentence carries undertones and overtones of meanings and allusions that open up endless vistas for the mind and the imagination. The surface meaning will usually be the same for all of us. But when we get inside, we're on our own. It's like one minister said to the congregation, "I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant." Now all I ask is that we try to forget any conclusions we may have already come to about this Gospel, whether it's our favorite of the four, or the one we would rather skip - and listen to it again.

All the gospels were written to tell us about the good news of Jesus Christ. Not one of the gospels is intended to be a straightforward biography of Jesus of Nazareth, but a series of stories designed to confront the reader with one who claims to be a unique Son of God, and Savior of the world, and to strengthen those who are trying to be Christ's disciples. Now John, in his writing, states his purpose quite explicitly. Admitting that he has made a selection out of a great number of stories that he might have used, John says near the end of his book that, "These have been written that you may believe...and that through this faith you may have life in Christ's name." He forestalls any modern criticism to the effect that his book is written to promote some cause, that it is not impartial, that it is biased. He forestalls all that by saying it most certainly is. He wants us to believe in Jesus Christ and find that liberation and sense of purpose that he calls life, light, truth, grace, glory. These are the notes that keep sounding with infinite variations through the rich symphony of his gospel.

Those same words ring out in the prologue. This introduction to the gospel is unique in the New Testament. It is the prelude to the divine opera about to unfold, and in it we hear the themes that are to reappear again and again throughout the stories and conversations he is going to record.

Now Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus back to Abraham, and Luke's genealogy leads all the way back to Adam. But John, well he goes back, back, back -beyond creation itself to the ultimate source of all that is - the eternal being of God.

"In the beginning....," he wrote. What does that phrase with its echo of the first chapter of Genesis convey to you? Let me make a confession. On the few occasions I have trouble in dropping off to sleep, I try repeating some pieces of scripture. And one of those I repeat is this prologue. Very, very slowly - trying to think of the meaning of each word. And quite often these very words "In the beginning" are enough to set my mind reeling drowsily back to unimaginable regions, where sleep very naturally takes over. Now I know this is a very risky suggestion to make while I am preaching, but I will risk it. "In the beginning" - why does John introduce the historical figure of Jesus with this startling leap into the infinite and the eternal? It is a mind-blowing prologue beyond all time and space.

"In the beginning was the word." The whole prologue revolves around this word - the Greek word "logos", which never occurs again in the Gospel. Now a word is a symbol of our outgoing, our communication with others. To speak is to give oneself away and in that sense, to say something is to do something. **I love you. I hate you. I forgive you. I am afraid.** Who knows what such words do, but whatever it is, it can never be undone. Something that lay hidden in the heart is irrevocably released through speech into time, is given substance and tossed like a stone into the pool of history, where the concentric rings lap out endlessly.

Words are power, essentially the power of creation. By my words I both discover and create who I am. By my words I elicit a word from you. Through our converse we create each other.

When God **said**, "Let there be light," there **was** light where before there was only darkness. When I say I love you, there **is** love where before there was only ambiguous silence. In a sense I do not love you first and then speak it, but only by speaking it give it reality.

Nothing yet about Jesus. But can you guess how this brain-expanding adventure into ultimate origins, into the nature of God, is going to lead us gradually into the story of the Christ whose human adventures he is going to relate? This Word, who is God's outgoing self, God's creative spirit, is now seen as the source of Life and all creation. It is interesting that some of the theories of creation of some modern physicists sound very like "in the beginning was the Word."

"The Word was the source of life, and this Life brought light to all people." Here are these great little words so important to John. And right in this midst of this wide sweep of poetry we learn that God sent a messenger, a man named John. From the realm of eternity and cosmic consciousness we are now into history. Poetry has suddenly become prose. And with the mention of John, the stage is set for the arrival of Jesus.

Isn't it amazing how in a few short verses we come from eternity and infinity to what is happening right now. I know few definitions any better of what I, as a minister, am called to do than to tell people about the Light. "He came to tell them so that all should hear the message and believe." Now that is as true on Michigan Avenue in 2010, as on the banks of the Jordan when John the Baptist preached. And now we are very close to the arrival of Jesus. We have returned to the theme of the Word, the "logos" and we are reminded of the mystery of human resistance and rejection. And this is to be the theme of the whole book - how the Son of God was bitterly opposed, attacked and finally thrown onto a cross to die. "The Word then was in the world. God made the world through him yet the world did not know him. He came to his own country, but his own people did not receive him."

The dark side of human history, the dark side of your life and mine, can be vividly depicted as the refusal of the light we have been given. And with these words John reaches the climax of the prologue - perhaps the most astounding sentence ever penned. A literal rendering of the Greek says, "The Word was made flesh." This is the great, and along with the resurrection, the only miracle that really matters in the whole Christian message. This Word that from the beginning moved out in creation, has been the illumination of the whole human race, actually became a human being. The word "flesh" simply rubs in the amazing truth - the divine becoming weak

and vulnerable.

The prologue ends with words that summarize the purpose of his gospel. For a moment he startles us with the statement that might seem to contradict all that he has been saying about this God. He writes, "No one has ever seen God." And with these words, John rejects the mysticism that claims a personal and private vision of God. In this sense, John was not, as some have claimed, mystic, at least not the kind of mystic who claims to have gazed directly into the face of God. His is the mysticism of the sacrament - the thing we know that becomes the vehicle for apprehending what we cannot know directly. We know bread and cup - they are a part of our human life. And through them we know the Jesus we have never seen with these eyes.

Here then is the setting for John's gospel, in all its bewildering and stimulating splendor. You and I are now invited to come inside, with all our hesitations, our unresolved questions, our lingering doubts, and be prepared to meet again this Jesus - the Word of God made flesh and to receive the light, the life, and the grace that Christ is still bringing to people like you, and like me. Thanks be to God. Amen.