

The Nativity of Our Lord

Isaiah 52:7-10

Psalm 98

Hebrews 1:1-4

John 1:1-14

One of the things preachers do when we write a sermon is to see what other people have written. I was particularly impressed by what the Rev. Dr. George Hermanson had to say about our Gospel lesson this morning:

“God bless the preacher who tries to say something sensible about this text in 20 minutes or less.”

He continues, “Perhaps the best approach is to read it; then prop the Bible open in a visible place; then lie face down in silent, abject humility before the text; then, after 20 minutes - or twenty years - stand up and say, ‘Amen.’”

In his defense, our story this morning can be a bit baffling. But, it is also powerful, certainly worthy of the unorthodox response of awe suggested by Hermanson.

Our Gospel reading this morning is from the very opening of John. How the writer of John chooses to open his Gospel is radically different than the three synoptic Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Matthew and Luke choose to open their Gospels at a logical point, the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. Mark chooses to jump ahead to another sensible point, the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, when all of the really important stuff happened anyway.

And then there is John. Oh John. He had to go and wax poetic on us. Either that, or he had a need to outdo the other writers.

Shall I begin my Gospel with Jesus’ ministry? Not early enough!
How about the beginning of Jesus’ life? Still not early enough!
Where does John’s gospel begin? Where all things really do:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ. In the beginning.

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If these words sound familiar, they should. The book of Genesis begins with the exact same words, both in English and in Greek. In the beginning-- Ἐν ἀρχῇ. Even the Hebrew title of Genesis, *bereshit*, means, “in the beginning of”.

This is where the Gospel of John takes us. An odd place to begin on Christmas? Maybe. But maybe not.

Sure, John’s story doesn’t include any of the fanciful elements of Christmas that we’ve come to know and love. There are no shepherds, no angels, no magi, no Joseph (who is only mentioned, but never seen in John’s Gospel). There is no Magnificat, no manger, no stable, no star.

Everything that we as a North American consumer culture associate with Christmas disappears in John’s Gospel. But I think what John gives us is even more important.

John gives us another way of looking at Jesus and his coming in the world. John calls it The Word.

The way in which John uses The Word is a difficult concept to understand because, in English, the word “word” is just that—a word. And in our culture, we are bombarded by words. There are signs and billboards everywhere, the TV screams words at us at a mile-a-minute.

And when we get to church and the pastor gets up to preach, we may reach a point where we just want to scream out like Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, “Words! Words! Words! I’m so sick of words! I got words all day through; first from him, and now from you!”

We have gathered up these words and written them down in huge collections of words called books. I brought with me some of my favorite books:
The Bible (in case any of my seminary professors hear this sermon)
The Book of Concord
The Lord of the Rings
Collections of works by Jules Verne and HG Wells
The Divine Comedy

Hundreds of pages in each book. Thousands and thousands and thousands of words. And though some of these books are purely for enjoyment, we would not be able to live as a civilization without collections of words.

Even before the invention of writing, words had been the center of human existence. Laws, traditions, beliefs, stories and histories were all passed down orally, through words.

And if we go back to Genesis, we hear that God created with words. So words have power. A certain character once asked a poignant question:

“The universe began with a word. But which came first: the word or the thought behind the word? You can't create language without thought, and you can't conceive a thought without language, so which created the other, and thus created the universe?”

It's a riddle that can't be answered. The two are so intertwined that it's impossible to separate them. Words ARE existence.

But, words as we know them are also temporary. All of these books will eventually decay, even if it takes hundreds of years. A phrase that is spoken today may not be remembered tomorrow, and like that, will simply vanish.

Even the thoughts behind our words will diminish.

As an example, I keep a very special box in my room. One was given to every senior in my high school band the year I graduated. Inside is this little scroll, which contains a poem written to wish us well as we move on with our lives.

Its last lines are:

I don't know who wrote these exact words. But I can probably bet that now, 8 years later, these words don't mean what they say they mean anymore. They have been forgotten and become unimportant. Our words pass away.

But, while our words pass away, God's word does not. Which brings us back to John and his concept of The Word.

If we looked at The Word in John as just another word, then there would not be much hope in the world. If The Word was merely a collection of letters, or the construction of a human thought, it too would fade and pass away.

But it's not. The Word that John speaks of, what is in Greek the *Logos*, is not just a word. In Greek, *Logos* is the totality of the thought, the word, and the effect. It is the very reality of the power of creation.

Remember, John says the *Logos*, the Word, existed in the beginning. It was with God and it WAS God. All things came into being because of the *Logos*.

And when the time was right, the *Logos* was incarnated as a human being. Not only did it effect creation in the beginning, it became creation. And through that incarnation, all of creation was RE-made. What a powerful and moving idea, found only in John.

And so while I wasn't sure at first, I am glad that this reading from John is assigned for Christmas morning. Through these broad, poetic verses, John lays out the very hope of the world. But he also does it in the littlest of ways.

You see, Biblical commentators like to pick up on little things, and every once in a while, they pick up on something significant that people usually overlook.

For example, most of this morning's reading is in the past tense. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him. And so on and so on.

But every once in a while, John surprises us. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness—shines, not shone. As in, still shining.

Back in Advent, in my preaching I stressed that Advent is not so much about remembering the birth of Jesus Christ as it is about looking forward to Christ coming again, and again being God With Us.

The power of the Christmas story is not that this miraculous birth took place 2000 years ago and then ended with Christ's crucifixion 30 years later. If that was all Christmas was about, then Christmas would be no different from the words we speak and write every day.

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Christmas would be just another event in a world that remembers only a tiny, tiny fraction of everything that happens in it.

Instead, Christmas is about so much more. It is the story of The Word, The *Logos*. The effects of Christ's birth as Emmanuel reach both back into the past and forward into the future. The world changed when Christ came. The world was made free.

I will admit that I never used to like the Gospel of John. It may have been Martin Luther's favorite Gospel, but it was never all that interesting to me. But passages like this morning's text make me reconsider that position.

Here, in these elegant words of John, we have the heart and soul of the Good News.

“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.”

This Word will never decay. It will never be forgotten. It will never be misplaced and it can never remain hidden. This Living Word, Jesus Christ, is here to stay, and continues to shine in a darkness that cannot overcome it.

This is truly good news for a world stuck in that darkness. And as witnesses to that light, just like John the Baptist, we have the freedom to let it shine.

So let it shine, let it shine, let it shine. Jesus Christ, The Living Word, the *Logos*, was and is, and will be, forever and ever. Amen.