

IN AND ABOVE THE WORLD

John 1:1-18

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 24, 2017, at 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

*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.

Those of you who spend a good deal of time around our church have likely noticed that, so far, each service in Advent has been newsworthy, some for rather “non-Adventy” reasons.

- On December 3, we said goodbye to a longtime member of our staff, Eileen Jinks, who for nine years has cared for our more senior members *and* given countless hours to a handful of people whose needs are deep, special, and largely private, and who live in more dignity for her care and effort.
- On December 10, we heard wonderful lessons and carols from what seemed like every person in our congregation who has musical aptitude; and we heard four younger members read from the King James Version of the Bible, the youngest of whom pulled herself up above this pulpit and left us with the word “cockatrice” ringing in our ears for days to come.
- Last Sunday, with neither a seat vacant nor an eye dry, we said goodbye to longtime Associate Pastor Casey FitzGerald, with laughter and hope, memory and gratitude, and of course with story.
- And today, we have welcomed Ben Hutchens as our new Director of Music Ministries, by simply excising the word “Interim” from his title. “Cockatrice” is in; “interim” is out. All’s well with the world.

And by the way, tonight is Christmas Eve.

I.

In the midst of these moving worship services, you may have noticed that our sermons this Advent are drawn from the opening to each of the four gospels in the New Testament. We heard the beginning of Matthew three weeks ago; the beginning of Luke last Sunday. Today, we focus on the opening of John’s Gospel.

Both Matthew and Luke begin their stories of Jesus with his conception and birth, not an illogical place to begin. As we will see next Sunday, Mark begins with Jesus is an adult. By contrast, John takes the origins of Jesus Christ all the way back *to* and even *before* creation.

In fact, when we open the Gospel of John, we wonder if we haven’t by accident opened the Book of Genesis.

*In the beginning [John says],
In the beginning was the Word,
And the Word was with God,
And the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.*

The technical term for what John seeks to describe is “the preexistence of Christ.” John is not concerned with the earthly origins of Jesus of Nazareth. He writes nothing about Mary and Joseph, shepherds and angels, wise men bearing gifts. Rather John seeks to bear witness – through the cadence of music and poetry – to the existence and presence of Christ as Word *with* God *prior to* creation. “The *pre*-existence of Christ.”

Why does John refer to this pre-existent Christ as “Word”?

- To get slightly academic here, John is writing around sixty years after the life and death of Christ.

- He is writing for an audience – a community of which he is likely at least an intellectual or spiritual leader – some of whom have been brought up under Hellenistic modes of thought and education and some under Jewish modes of thought and education.
- Those of Hellenistic background would recognize “Word” as *Logos*, a divine idea above the material world and bodily life to which humans in our higher, more spiritual and intellectual natures, would aspire.
- John’s Jewish readers would understand “Word” as akin to Wisdom, that which, especially in the Books of Proverbs, was with God from the beginning, even at creation.¹

What John is doing is taking these two concepts – *Logos* and Wisdom – which are deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of his readers, absorbing these concepts into his hymn to Christ, and more importantly transforming and exceeding them both. John’s combination of *Logos* and Wisdom into Word represents “a unique contribution of Christianity...beyond all that has gone before, even as Jesus is [likewise] beyond all who have gone before.”²

*In the beginning was the Word/Logos/Wisdom
And Wisdom was with God,
And Logos was God.
The Word/Logos/Wisdom was in the beginning with God.*

II.

John then continues his hymn:

*All things came into being through [the Word],
And without [the Word] not one thing came into being.
What has come into being in [the Word] was life,
And the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness,
And the darkness did not overcome it.*

Notice that in this ringing, poetic, silence-inducing hymn, John has not yet spoken the name Jesus of Nazareth. He has not yet uttered the words “Christ,” “Messiah,” “Good Shepherd,” “Bread of Life,” “Lord,” “Savior,” “Master,” “Rabbi.” John is still speaking the language of his hearers and readers: Word/Logos/Wisdom. And centuries later his words continue to mesmerize us with hope and promise:

*All things came into being by him...
What has come into being in him was life...
The life is the light of all people...*

And finally:

*The light shines in the darkness,
And the darkness did not overcome it.*

¹ Proverbs 1:20-33; 8; 9. See “Appendix II: The “Word,” in Raymond E. Brown, S. S., *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc: 1966), 519-524.

² Brown 524.

It is poetry, positive and powerful, in music, hopeful and heartfelt. John's versification does not deny darkness, but denies that darkness will prevail, that evil and death will have the final word. Because of John's affirmation, we hear these words every year, at this time, with hope and even with joy.

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From time to time one of the longtime members of our church will call me. She never quite seems to catch me in the office, so she leaves a voicemail. I always listen to the voicemail before I call her back, partially because she has one of those voices, even despite the medium of voicemail, in which you can feel her expressiveness as if she is sitting across the kitchen table from you.

This week I received such a voicemail:

Good afternoon, Dr. Hayward.

My goodness, wasn't Sunday spectacular in all ways.

What a wonderful day.

Oh my Gosh.

I am so happy to be a Christian.

And I am so happy to be a Presbyterian.

I am so happy to be alive.

Sunday was just wonderful in all respects.

It really was.

It must be a great day to be a minister.

Very great day.

As I listened to her voicemail a second time, writing this sermon, I noticed that her cadence was poetic *in the same ways* John's prologue is poetic. Words are repeated. Phrases are repeated. Rhyme and meter emerge.

Happy to be a Christian

Happy to be a Presbyterian

Spectacular in all ways

Wonderful in all respects

Great day

Very great day.

In addition to the *pattern* of her words, her *message* follows John's message as well. Like John, she turns to the theme of light *and* darkness, light *in* darkness, light *overcoming* darkness.

Larry I wanted to tell you something very quickly.

I don't know if the word has gotten to you yet.

And that is

That I do not have to have any chemo.

I do not have to have any radiation.

And the only treatment I am going to have

Is to take a little pill every day for five years.

*That's all.
What was found through the surgery was so teeny, teeny tiny,
And it was all removed.
It was all removed.
And now the little pill
Is to keep nothing from returning again in my body,
Hopefully, hopefully.
I didn't know if that word had made it to your ears yet.
And I just wanted to tell you.*

Then her message continues with light and darkness, darkness and light:

*What a wonderful ...church we are a part of.
And I thank you for being there for all of us.
I do always remember that you arrived
Very, very shortly after my sweet husband died.
I am sorry you did not get to know each other.
He was a wonderful man.*

*Christmas blessings all around, all around,
For my whole family, and I hope for you.
Bye Larry.*

In her joyful message, there is no denial of darkness, there is no denial of death, no denial of evil and sadness and loss and mourning.

But there is a vibrant sense that the light which has shined in her life – “*What was found through the surgery was all removed*” – has shined in darkness – “*I'm sorry you didn't get to know my husband*” – but the darkness *did not and would not and has not and could not* overcome the light she has known for many years. “*I'm so happy to be a Christian. I'm so happy to be a Presbyterian. What a wonderful church we are part of.*”

III.

As John moves further through his hymn, he moves on to more darkness, this of the human kind:

*[The Word] was in the world,
And the world came into being through him;
Yet the world did not know him...
... his own people did not accept him.*

John may be referring to the times in the Old Testament when wandering in the wilderness and then during the God's people did not recognize his presence in their midst; or John may foreshadowing what would happen to Christ, which of course had happened by the time he wrote, the reality that many of God's people simply could not recognize in Christ God's presence.³

But John doesn't dwell in this dark space; rather he moves on to say that for those who are able to accept Christ's light as Light, Christ's word as Word, Christ's presence as God's presence, there is enormous power – power to become children of God – for some, in a new way – like the remnant of God's people in Exile, like

³ Brown 28-29.

people today who worship and serve and cling tenaciously to faith – whether in palace or poverty, prison or oppression, illness or depression – when all data seems to point in any direction but that of hope.

*...to all who received him,
Who believed in his name,
He gave power to become children of God,*

IV.

John then makes his way to Christ, though still without naming him:

*And the Word became flesh
And lived among us...
Full of grace and truth.*

John is making a bold, somewhat scandalous statement here, saying the Word not only *entered* into flesh, the Word not only *abided* with flesh, but the Word actually *became* flesh. Instead of *liberating* us from the material world and human history, that we might focus on things above, Christ has *bound himself* to us, that we might focus on things in this world.

In this binding of Word with flesh, even during the darkest times, the times Hamlet describes as “this harsh world...of pain,”⁴ Jesus Christ brings “grace and truth.”

V.

Finally, interspersed through John’s vaulted poetry are prose sections about John the Baptist – rooted, as prose always is, to earth.

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.

If John’s poetry lifts us *above* the world, his prose drives us back *into* the world, so that, like John the Baptist, we draw strength from above while we live here, in the world.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we, like John the Baptist, have the *duty* and *privilege* of *bearing witness* to the Word made Flesh both in situations marked by *life* and in situations shrouded in *darkness*.

We bear witness by showing up.

We bear witness by telling the truth, standing for the truth, speaking the truth, in love.

We bear witness by taking action.

We bear witness by forgiving.

We bear witness by accepting forgiveness.

⁴ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act V, Scene II, 346. Available at http://nfs.sparknotes.com/hamlet/page_332.html.

We bear witness by loving.

We bear witness by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the foreigner and the stranger, the immigrant and the refugee, the asylum seeker and the exile.

We bear witness by caring for the Old Testament calls “the widow and the orphan,” the most vulnerable of the earth; and we bear witness by caring for the earth on which they and we must live.

And we bear witness by seeking to build a world whose economy and forms of governance lift people out of poverty and illiteracy and disease, out of tyranny genocide, into safety, self-sufficiency, and opportunity.

The true light
Which enlightens everyone
Is coming *from* above
Into the world.

We like John the Baptist
Are here *in* the world,
To await its coming,
To welcome it,
To bear witness to it
With all we say and do,
This light,
Christ Jesus,
The Word made flesh,
Full of grace and truth.

Amen.