

In the Beginning was our Light

Gospel of John 1:1-18

December 30, 2007: First Sunday after Christmas

The Rev'd. Gretchen S. Grimshaw

St. John's Episcopal Church, Jamaica Plain, MA

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.

Gospel of John 1:1-18, NRSV

In the beginning, says the Fourth Evangelist, John, there was no manger, there were no shepherds, no magi, no Mary, no Joseph, no angel of the Lord...no human birth. No, in the beginning, says John, was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God. In the beginning was not only Creation, according to John's Gospel, but the New Creation as well.

My friend Pam, who is also an Episcopal priest, and I were chuckling the other day about the apparent one-upsmanship seemingly happening among the writers of the four Gospels with respect to the true roots of the Jesus story. The Gospel of Mark, unquestionably the earliest of the four Gospels, begins with the baptism of Jesus. *That* is where the story begins in the first Gospel. Matthew, the next in line chronologically, begins with the birth of Jesus, and traces his earthly lineage back to Abraham. *That* is where the story begins in the second Gospel, in chapter 11 of the Book of Genesis with Abraham. Luke, the third Gospel to be written, also begins with the birth of the Messiah, but goes on to trace his genealogy all the way back to Adam....the creation of the very first human being, chapter 1, verse 27 of the Book of Genesis. And then there is John. And the last shall be first.....John the Fourth Evangelist says no, the start of the Jesus story is not his baptism in the Jordan River, nor his birth in Bethlehem, nor his roots with Abraham or even Adam. The start of the Jesus story, says John, is in the beginning...the very first words of the Holy Bible are identical to the very first words of the Gospel of John. The Jesus story begins, according to John, with creation itself. In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God. And John's Jesus wins. Hands down.

According to John, Jesus is the divine light. Not just a human agent of God, at once fully human and fully divine, as in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. In John, Jesus is God's own self, God in human *form*...fully divine, but not so much fully human. As theologian Ernst Kasemann says, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is not presented as a credible human being, but rather as "God striding across the earth."¹ But Jesus has been with us from before time began. From the dawn of creation.

And so unlike the synoptic Gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke - which point us to the cross and the end time, the eschaton, where we will find the kingdom of God, John points us in a very different direction. For John directs us not to the end, but to the beginning. To creation itself. To the primordial light that shatters the darkness with life. *That* is where the Jesus story begins in John. And that primordial light connects Jesus, not just with the chosen people, not just with human history, but with the entire universe, with all of creation. And so the good news in the Gospel of John is that the kingdom of God is not yet-to-come, the kingdom of God is here-and-now, and it always has been. The kingdom of God has been with us since the beginning of time.

Which begs the obvious question, so what's up with this Jesus story? Why do we even have a Jesus story? If Jesus is just a pseudonym for God, as John infers, what exactly are we celebrating this Christmas season? Why did God even bother "striding across the earth", especially knowing that such an endeavor would not end up being such a walk in the park, as it were.

And the sad but probably true answer is that practically from the get-go, God *regretted* God's own handiwork in the creation of human beings. Now I have recounted God's abundant disappointment with God's human creations, in various forms, from this pulpit during Christmases past, but I think it is worth remembering today as John directs us back to the beginning....

For from the beginning, the whole Hebrew Bible is pretty much a history, a long and arduous history, of God's tumultuous relationship with God's unruly children. And through that tumultuous relationship, God has tried just about everything to get God's message across...the simple, clear cut, but non-negotiable message that we, as God's children, are to have no other Gods before God. Simple. God does not care if we are successful doctors or lawyers or Indian chiefs. God does not say that we must do good things, or that our socks must match, or that our children must be spit shined. God says simply that we are to be present first and foremost, only and ever for God and God's purposes. That's it. That's all. That's the whole human job description. And yet...God has been waiting for what must seem like forever. Waiting since God created humanity, or so it says in Genesis, for us to live up to God's simple hope and dream and vision for us.

¹ Ernst Kasemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* (London: SCM, 1968) 73.

Since the third chapter of Genesis. Verse 5 to be exact. Adam and Eve heard God walking around the Garden of Eden. And when God could not find them, God called out “Where are you?” And when they came out from behind their hiding place God said to Adam, “did you eat from that tree that I told you not to touch?” And Adam said, “She made me do it.” And God said to Eve, “did you eat from that tree that I told you not to touch?” And Eve said, “the snake made me do it....” And the human race was off and running.

And so by the sixth chapter of Genesis, God had pretty much had it with the selfishness, and the greed, and the cruelty of God’s beloved children. “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And God was sorry that God had made humankind on the earth.” [I am quoting now from the Bible – I’m not making this stuff up!] “And it grieved God to God’s heart. So God said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created ...for I am sorry that I have made them.’ These are God’s words, not mine.

Fortunately for us, “Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.” And God rewarded such favor by instructing Noah that he would need to work harder than he had ever worked before. He would have to build an ark...yes, that’s right, a boat big enough to hold a sample of all of God’s creation. Talk about good news / bad news. And then, when you are finished, favored Noah, you will be trapped on that boat, which will be stuffed to the ever lovin’ gills with a sample of all of God’s creepy crawly creation for at least a few months, during which time the ark will toss and turn for forty days and forty dark, dark nights as the wind and rain of God’s perfect storm relentlessly rails against your home-made vessel. Then, you will float aimlessly around the entire globe for an undisclosed period of time until some swatch of dry land, in some foreign location with Lord knows what extreme climate and possibly limited supply of food and fresh water, presents itself on the horizon. Not exactly the kind of “favor” that we humans expect from God. Not the easy life that we generally associate with blessings from on high. This is our first clue that God’s hope and dream and vision for us may be simple, but it will not be pretty....or comfortable....or even remotely easy. Nonetheless, after the flood, God makes a covenant with Noah. God promises never again to inflict such a harsh punishment on God’s children. God promises never again to wipe humanity off the face of the earth. And as it happens, the rainbow is the steadfast sign of God’s steadfast promise.

However, such a promise pretty much ties God’s heavenly hands for the rest of all time, as the one thing that can be said without question about God, is that God always keeps God’s promises. So, when God’s children again fail to heed the simple, clear-cut, but non-negotiable commandment to have no other God’s above God, God decides to take the next best drastic step. So God’s rebellious rabble, the chosen people I might add, are summarily stripped of all of their earthly attributes and attachments, all of their *other* Gods are mowed down and plucked up like grass. Their property and

prosperity, their power and privilege, their everything. God destroys the very fabric of their false idols and sends them into unholy exile. Banished from their beloved homeland. God says, through his prophet Isaiah, that perhaps when God's children are relieved of all of their other.....preoccupations, maybe *then* they can and will be present for God alone.

But as the history of the hapless human race would have it, God's children again lose sight of their simple charge and begin coveting and concentrating on their own purposes rather than those of God. And God is practically at God's wits end. How can I get through to these thick, but beloved, children, God lamented. How can I show them how they are meant to live? How can I show them what they are created to be? How can I show them their value, their potential, their meaning, their belovedness? How can I get them to reflect my likeness? And so having tried pretty much everything else, God decides that the only thing left to do is to join them, to join us; to show us, personally, how to love God with all of our hearts and all of our souls and all of our might, and how to love our neighbors as we love ourselves....that is, how to be present always and ever for God and God's purposes alone. And so God decided to join humanity, to show the world what love....what God's love, actually looks like and feels like, up close and personal.

*But, from the beginning.....*was the Word. And the Word created the heavens and the earth, the day and the night, the sky and the dry land and the seas, the vegetation, the sun and the stars, the fish and the fowl, and all of the animals that crawl on the land – The Word said, “let's make humankind. And lets make them in my image, according to my likeness....So the Word created humankind in the Word's image, in the image of the Word we were created.... And the Word blessed us.”² The end.

And therefore, through the transitive property of the image of the Word etched on each of our human hearts we are, every one of us, connected with the whole universe, bearers of the divine light of all of creation. The primordial light of all creation is within each and every one of us, and has been from the beginning. We are inherently, as the Gospel of Thomas proclaims, children of the light. And the key to the kingdom of God is simply the realization of our affinity to God and our willingness to embrace and live into our birthright...a birthright that has been with *us* from the beginning.

In the beginning was the Word...and the Word was etched on every human heart. And that, my friends, is both the beginning and the end of the Good News that we celebrate this blessed Christmas season.

Alleluia! Amen.

² Now, just as a footnote to the following, I have chosen to use the masculine pronoun for God in the interest of oral clarity, but that does not mean, as the tee shirt says, that God is a boy's name.

© December, 2007 The Rev'd. Gretchen Sanders Grimshaw