

FROM THE PULPIT AT KNOX
Genesis 1:1-5 John 1:1-9, 14-16
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I chose the readings for today's sermon, because I have never understood them. I think the journey from beginning to understanding in these verses may be very long. However, I like these passages. What I recognized in John's opening verses was the poetic grip these lines had on me. The meaning in these verses holds some surprises, and as I speak today, forgive me if I paint them with brushstrokes that are too broad and reach what may be unorthodox conclusions.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

“ God said, ‘ Let there be light’

“and his light was the life of all people”

These two texts even as I have mingled them here, are dramatic and profound. Their words take sweeping charges at the goal of defining life and divinity. In Genesis, God speaks and the world is created. In John, the word, or logos, is attributed to God and to Jesus. I think that the poetic nature is intentional, especially in John. I think these lines were from an oral tradition – which would befit John the Baptist as the originator of this book – and were probably meant to be read out loud or spoken from memory. The sounds of these words, even in our current translation, are powerful.

In comparison, other books of the Gospel start differently. Matthew begins with a list of the genealogy of Christ. Mark clearly spells out that his version is the story of the beginning of the good news that was written and that was predicted by John the Baptist. Luke states that the author has decided to write an orderly account of the affairs of Christ. These are important beginnings, but are hardly poetic.

In these lines from John, the central figure is not really Jesus or God, but is what is called, “The *Word*.” This ordinary noun is repeated in short phrases.

In Greek, the *Word* as used in the Bible is translated as “logos.” In English, this root leads to words related to logic, but it’s meaning in earlier times was more philosophical and much grander and would be defined as the source and fundamental order of the world. Again, the source and fundamental order of the world. This overlapping set of meanings, from a unit of speech or writing - to logical thought - to the source of the cosmos is part of the paradoxical nature of these first lines of John. Is the unit of grammar related to knowledge and thought and those related to our understanding of creation? Is it really possible that units of language, despite their multiple meanings in several languages, might still lead us to the message originally delivered by our creator? Could our current English understanding of “word” still point to the message intended by the biblical authors two translations ago? I don’t know, so I did some analysis of the verses. It’s how I try to understand the written text.

Let’s look closely at the first part of John.

“ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

The *Word* is said to exist, and to be with God, and then to be God itself. In ordinary terms, there is just no way to comprehend this set of references. I think *that* is a message. The subject of these lines is no ordinary thing. It is not a thing at all. It is as mystical and metaphysical as the phrase implies. Analyzing the terms like this doesn’t get one any closer to understanding them. If you step back a bit, and read the mystical message, it comes through as a description of a concept that is larger than definition and transcends human understanding. That does seem appropriate for a way to convey the idea of God. Remember that God’s name was so unlike ordinary speech that the Jew’s would not dare to write it directly in the Torah. However, the idea that is being conveyed in John can be understood. This is a statement of the entirety of God. It exists, it’s been here, it is God. It establishes the authority of God. It says, “Look no further. This is it. It is a complete truth.” There is no wiggle room here. The author of John is not talking about something that applies some of the time or in certain settings. It can’t be argued with. In common terms, it comes signed, sealed and delivered. End of story.

As soon as the reader gets that far, the next line ups the ante.

“He was in the beginning with God.”

He? We are trying to grasp a mystical concept and the next line refers to someone? This line deepens the paradox, but introduces the element of Jesus into the message.

Then, if there was any question about the authority of this concept of the word and a person the text states: “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” It’s repetitive but clear. This is the whole story. Nothing is missing. Don’t wait for the sequel to come out with a change.

Moving on, the phrases become more familiar to us as Christians. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” God becomes one of us? And God also known as Jesus and also known as the *Word* lived among us? Lived among us? Sat on a chair like you and I do? Breathed in and out in the same manner as us?

“Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” We start to recognize the meanings of these. We accept the truth of Jesus’ teachings. We have a concept of grace. And now, we have Jesus firmly identified as the agent of the Word, of logos, of God.

So, in these few lines, it has been established that this is the all reaching and authoritative truth, and that Jesus is a new and unique manifestation of God. Does that have a familiar ring to it? Isn’t this a condensed way to express the “Good News” or the gospel of Christianity? These poetic lines hold logical argument for the gospel of Christ? I think so.

So, if we are to interpret, for ourselves, the Good News, what do these verses illuminate for us? I think that the Good News message can be seen in three main ways.

I think the Good News can be interpreted using the more human meanings. The *Word* has been passed on in ordinary phrases, that is, using ordinary words, and we can respond to this news by speaking and writing. We refer

to Good News, and are reminded that “news” is a verbal or written word based communication. When we talk of the Good News, we are carrying on the gift of creation. We can evangelize, or tell the stories, or discuss the meanings of the New Testament. Speaking the *Word* is holy.

I think the Good News can be interpreted at the level of human logos, with study and meditation and logical examination of the testament. Especially in the Protestant tradition, we are allowed and, perhaps, required to analyze and to think about our faith. Thought, knowledge and understanding are a part of creation as well. Remember in Genesis, God creates, and then reflects and says, “It was good.” Thinking about the new world was a part of its creation. As humans, we use logic and thought and reflection, too.

I think the Good News can also be interpreted as the divine logos, by living aware of creation, aware of being accepted as a child of God, and behaving as we have been commanded to: by loving our neighbor and living in respect of God, our maker. Knowing that you are accepted and have every bit as much value in God’s eye as anyone else is also a way to state the Good News. Trying to live in a God-like or Jesus-like manner continues the gift of creation as well.

Going back to Genesis, we see echoes of these ideas. What happens in creation? God spoke. He didn’t wave his hands or anything of the sort. He spoke. Realizing the linguistic background of the Bible, perhaps this means he applied logos. He spoke, he did and he was holy. All at once. This applies to our lives, too. We can emulate God when we create with our words, or our actions or with our belief.

And look what else happens in the early part of John: The *Word* become flesh and lived among us. The divine *Word* and the human word are connected by Jesus. The spoken words of Jesus, as described in these verses, are the creative work of God. Our ability to speak and think of God is God himself. Personally, it is a bit of revelation to consider that this means that reason is a part of believing. And it makes sense. Jesus teaches us with parables and by example, and the text states that he brings something different than the law of Judaism. He brings grace and truth. Much of this text is paradoxical, and it speaks of reason and divinity together. Still, to me, that makes sense. The divine Word becomes human word and action. And not just in the time of Christ. It still does today.

It might sound simple and obvious to you, but to me, this fills in a missing step in my ongoing questioning about where I fit in as I follow my journey of faith. Let's state this again: We can emulate God when we create with our words, or our actions or with our belief.

You see, I wonder about myself sometimes. I have been involved with the church in two phases of my life: as a youth and teen and again as an adult. Whether I am living a life consistent with Christ has been looked at many times in my heart and mind, and my Baptism here in this very room came more from realization than from an epiphany of feelings. It is the way I am. I'm analytical and find it hard to believe in things that don't make sense. But is that really being a Christian?

One of my good friends is a pastor in Michigan. All my life, I have understood only about a half of what he has said. He just thinks and expresses himself at a very lofty level. I don't study, meditate, or speak as he does. So I wonder, is he a better Christian than me? Will he get a better seat in Heaven's stadium or something silly like that?

I have friends in this room that are so comfortable talking about Christ in their life that a conversation with them outside church would reinforce one's faith without leaving them feeling pushed or converted. If I approached someone to discuss Christ, it would probably sound forced and feel a little awkward. It's not my gift at the moment. Does this mean my friends are better Christians?

In some areas, I wonder less about my role as a Christian. By actions, and by the beliefs that guide them, I do a pretty good job of being the body of Christ. The things I do are more convincing faith activities than other parts of my Christian living, but the fact that I can help spread mulch and change a light bulb at the Church doesn't make me a better Christian than someone who doesn't.

The point is that John tells us that God can be served by any means: by speaking, by doing, and by believing. That is all a part of the Good News. We all have our ways of serving God. To me, this passage reassures me that my way fits, too. The Good News here is that our creator came to us and gave us new life. In our lives, whatever we do that is guided by our belief in Christ, is what God expects of us. This life we have been given is it. It is the real deal, and what we do in our lives can be many and varied, and all

ways of living that incorporate love of our neighbor and respect of our creator, are acceptable. There are no better Christians than others. There are only Christians – and all are valued in God’s sight.

How we respond to the poetry of John’s gospel is our question for today. By my reading of it, we are free to use many modes of interpretation. The world today, is not much different than the world of Jesus. Many renditions of what is considered holy argue for our attention. For example, the conflict between Christian and Muslim people rages worldwide. Many people of the world are still oppressed by foreign leaders and far too many live in poverty with no security that there will be food and shelter. Our temples and churches still fail to live up to holy standards, with scandals and financial impropriety still occurring.

At times when the world seems in disarray, John’s word still come to heart and mind. With this gospel ringing in our ears, we are reassured that we belong. That God is with us. Perhaps that is the best part of a poetic passage. It is easy to carry about with you like a familiar charm or a rosary that reminds us of comfort and a greater truth. It is my hope that parts of these verses will stay with us as we leave here and go through our lives outside church. My charge to each of us is to look again at how we respond to these verses, and be aware how we apply our faith, be it through words or by our actions or by faithful living and prayer.

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Amen.