

John 1:1-18
July 3, 2011

South Plains

The Transcendent Word

In the beginning
When earth was a formless void
Darkness covered nothing
And all was dark
And only God
Only God
Was
Yet God was not alone
The Word was with God
While a wind from God swept over the face of the waters
Wind and word speak light
Light covering darkness
Dividing the nothing
That out of nothing comes good
In the beginning was the Word
A Word spoken into the mindless void
Heard light years later
The echo of creation
Resounding Nano-seconds
Behind the blinding light
The Bang uncompressing nothing
Into something
And God saw that the light was good.
And the Word was God
He was in the beginning with God
Pronoun masculine singular

Signal of incarnation to come
And the Word became flesh and lived among us
Like Abraham pitching his tent in Canaan
The Word dwells as one of us
Bangs his finger instead of the tent peg
Speaks pain
He will die
In the end
But
In the beginning was the Word

I wanted to begin with a little meditation because the Gospel of John presents Jesus poetically, mysteriously, metaphysically before plunging into the concrete history of Jesus. Although our subject this morning is that part of the Apostles Creed that talks about Jesus, we cannot go far without realizing that in speaking of Jesus we're also speaking about God.

Jesus Christ, truly God and truly human, is the scandal of Christianity. We don't like to think of our religion as scandalizing anyone, but it does. My Jewish friend Rabbi Silverstein was one of the most faithful members of the Ministerial Association and served for a time as our president. But, he told us one day how deeply offended he was to hear prayers offered on behalf of the whole association in the name of Christ. We have that same theological barrier between Christians and Muslims. For Judaism and Islam, the oneness of God leaves no room for the incarnation. Buddhists and Hindus have less trouble with Christianity on that score

because their notion of God is so different from ours. We make different problems for them. All of which means that in order to speak without giving offense about Jesus, we Christians often resort to ignoring the divinity of Jesus and speak exclusively about his humanity. But, not the gospel of John.

John plunges into its most radical claim about Jesus: that he was in the beginning, right there with Genesis before the thunderclap of the Big Bang brought the worlds into being. Of course John doesn't know about our theory of the beginnings of the universe, so he doesn't use the Big Bang as his figure of speech. He uses the best science of his day, the philosophy of the word or in Greek the *logos*. Jewish and Greek philosophers used the term *logos* to mean the principle of order and rational thought that holds the universe together. So when John's gospel says, "In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God," he is melding biblical faith with philosophy. He is claiming that Jesus Christ is both the word in Genesis that God spoke at creation and the word understood by Greeks as the orderly reason of the universe.

The hot button word for today is "multicultural." In the gospel of John, Jesus is the original multicultural man, the epitome of Jewish culture and the best of Greek culture. More significantly, Jesus is both truly human and truly God. The culture of humankind and the culture of God are united in him.

For most Christians, the first chapter of John is one of the most beautiful and inspiring passages in scripture. We hear these words every year at Christmas as we celebrate God taking flesh, our flesh and blood and bone. In John 1, the first five verses, Jesus' birth takes on cosmic significance.

But, suddenly in verse 6 the scene shifts from the light and darkness of vast creation to "a man sent from God, whose name was John." Not Jesus, but John. And, this John is not the one whose name appears in the title of the gospel. This is John the Baptist, a character so severe that some people call him the last Old Testament prophet; a rough-hewn, frontier evangelist preaching fire and brimstone. He seems to intrude on the majestic cadences of the preamble to this gospel. As improbably anachronistic as the John the Baptist may seem, he is critical to the fourth gospel for two reasons:

First, the Word, who is the subject of the Gospel of John, is a historical figure, not just an abstract idea about God, but a real person located in history. And second, John the Baptist's job, his real calling as a preacher or prophet is to point to the person of Jesus.

Some readers of this gospel would be happy for the author to stick to a philosophical, theological discussion of *logos*. And that's a legitimate direction for a dissertation or essay, but not for a gospel that announces good news so earth-shaking that it intends to convince us to put our trust in this Jesus Christ. You may remember

from last week's gospel reading that Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And, one answer is that people are saying Jesus is really the reincarnation of John the Baptist who had been beheaded by King Herod. John the Baptist was a first century celebrity who had been killed too soon. It was important to say that Jesus was not John. John "was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." Let there be no mistake. Jesus Christ, the Word of God who was present at the beginning, was a historical person whose importance is testified by none other than John the Baptist.

Once when I was considering a call as an associate pastor, I sought the advice of Bill McCorkle, a minister who had been moderator of the General Assembly and who was serving at the time as an associate pastor himself. In order to illustrate the job of an associate pastor, he quoted John the Baptist. "Well, David," he said, "you must decrease and he must increase (John 3:30)." That's how John the Baptist described his role to his own disciples, giving way to make Jesus more prominent.

The Baptist makes a brief appearance in John, chapter one, just as he does in every other gospel, in order to point to Jesus, the one who is greater than himself. Ultimately, that is the purpose of the gospels. It may explain why the gospel writers reveal so little of themselves in the story. Pride of place belongs exclusively to Jesus, not only in his life story, but

especially in the lives of his followers. Our calling, like John's, is to point to Jesus.

The best teams are not the ones with the most super stars. The best teams put the team ahead of their individual achievements. It's a commonplace observation that most of the trouble with the government of the United States today comes down to one political reality: winning is too often defined in terms of me and my party and too seldom sought for the good of the country. That's the nub of our country's economy woes. That problem will be solved only when all the people can put the good of the country ahead of what's good for me and mine.

The wonderful paradox of Jesus Christ is that he brings God into clear focus as an ordinary human being. He is the definitive Word about God, pointing unmistakably to the kind of God we worship, the life God wants for us, and the abundant life we find in God. "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

Jesus Christ invites us to this table because he wants to share life with us. Let us pray.

Jesus Christ, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, reveal yourself to us again and again, day after day as the light of our lives. We want to point our lives at you, our hope and salvation. Amen.