

John 1:1-18 (NRSV)

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.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's Gospel lesson is John's version of the Christmas story. For all of you whose confirmation is a long time ago, remember that the Gospel of Mark has no story of Jesus' birth – it begins with Jesus going out to meet John the Baptizer. The stories of Christmas that we share on Christmas Eve come to us from the Gospels of Luke and

Matthew. Luke tells us about shepherds directed to the stable by a sky full of angels. Matthew tells us about wise men from the East who come in search of the Messiah whose sign is in the heavens.

And John tells us about ... well, John tells us about the Word. Until fairly far into John's Christmas story, we don't even know who the Word is. We know, "In the beginning" – these are the same words that are used to introduce the Creation in the book of Genesis, and the readers of John's Gospel would not have missed that clue either. "In the beginning" – John is telling us that the Word was present at the moment of creation, was with God, *was* God. What Word was it?

The "Word" in Greek is Logos and Logos even at the time of that the Gospels were being written was a philosophical term. It was used by Greek philosophers and by Jewish philosophers writing in Greek. It could mean many things. A few years ago when I first preached on this text here at Saint Nicholas, I pointed out that Logos could mean "conversation," the sharing of words, so that the beginning of John's Gospel might be translated, "In the beginning was the conversation." In John's Gospel the Christmas story begins a conversation with God in a new way, a conversation that is still going on. I liked that idea – I still do.

Logos could also mean logic, as in an area of study – so, Logos forms a part of "psychology" or "sociology" or "theology." That might imply that the basis of everything is logical, but I don't think that is what John had in mind. Rather, Logos can mean "the deep order" of things, the way things are put together and work together. He might mean that the activity of God in creation was to place a deep order to things, to make things fit together and work together in productive ways.

In Genesis, in the beginning the earth had no form, and so much of what God does in the act of creation is to separate things that should be separate, and join things that should be joined. So, God

speaks light into existence and separates it from darkness. God speaks Heaven and sea and land into existence separates them from each other. And in this passage from John's Gospel, we learn that the Word, the Logos, was the agent, the channel of God's creative spirit, the giver of life, the light of all people. The Logos was the deep order to everything, that would make things fit and work together. And with John's Christmas story, this deep order is revealed in the person of Jesus. Jesus reveals how we all fit together and work together for good.

Finally, Logos might simply be a word. My constant muse Barbara Brown Taylor says that each of us has a word that we have a gift for bringing to life. For one person, that word might be "compassion." For another it might be "kindness," or "hospitality," or "integrity." Maybe John's Christmas story is an invitation to you to wrap flesh around a word, to make a word real for someone else. A word made flesh with and through your own life.

Now, it's obvious that this is a different Christmas story than the Christmas stories we remembered on Christmas Eve. They aren't inconsistent really, but the emphasis is different. The stories in Matthew and Luke tell us about Jesus' humanity without neglecting his divinity. John tells us about Jesus' divinity without neglecting his humanity.

Much of what John's Christmas story tells us is a summary of what we will learn as the Gospel story unfolds. Jesus is the true light who comes into the world that he created and yet the world does not know him. The people he created did not recognize him. This is the sadness, but, thankfully, is not the complete story. Because the light continues to shine in the darkness and the darkness did not and has not and will not overcome it.

This message of hope is the consistent message of all of the readings for the day – the second reading, from the letter to the Ephesians, tells us that we are destined for adoption, that in the

fullness of time, God will gather all to himself and will redeem us as his own people. This is the same message of Jeremiah, that God's people will be gathered to him, this great company will be returned to God.

So in this respect, John's Christmas story that seems so strange and convoluted is full of hope and promise, just as the stories of Matthew and Luke are. John's story may not have shepherds and wise men and a sky full of angels or a baby swaddled in a manger. But what it does have is the promise that in spite of everything that we do that is mistaken or foolish or wrong-headed, that the One who created and ordered and sustains creation has not and will not give up on us.

And John's story also includes a challenge to us. For those who receive him, who believe in him, he gives power to become the children of God, born of God's good and generous will. Will we be those people, will we act on those beliefs and be God's children in the world? Will we be the people who make a word into flesh, to embody a good word like "hope" or "hospitality" or "compassion" or "courage?"

This message of hope is a good message here at the beginning of the year, and the challenge of whether we will share actively in that hope is a good challenge for us, this year and every year. Last year at this time, we were deciding that we needed to add sprinklers back into the design of the North Wing even though we weren't sure whether we had the money to do that. This was not the news anyone wanted to hear at the start of the year. But we all pulled together and after much prayer and hard work, we stand now at the verge of getting our use and occupancy permit for a completed North Wing.

This year will bring new hope and new challenges, of that we can be certain, both in the world and here in this family of faith. But we can be sure, as John was sure, that from God's fullness and God's generous will, we will receive grace upon grace and that that grace

will be sufficient. Welcome to this New Year of our Lord, 2010.
May God be praised!

Amen.