

“The Word Incarnate”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
Christmas Day – 25 December 2011  
John 1:1-14

I’m going to share a little secret with you. With rare exception, preachers dread Christmas Day. I like being here to celebrate the birth of Jesus, but John spoils the pulpit. We work beneath his shadow, and it makes me feel dim. John’s incredible elegance makes the common preacher feel like a blundering buffoon, and the inspired insight he expresses in the opening fourteen verses of his Gospel defy explanation. Nevertheless, I shall endeavor to do my best, pathetic as that may be in light of what John has already done.

Put as plainly as possible, John tells us that Jesus is the Word of God Incarnate, made flesh. What that means is that God sent His only son, whom we know more personally as Jesus, to become a human being, so that all who receive him will be given “power to become children of God.” That had to be a tremendous sacrifice, but one God felt worth making, because God loves us more than we can imagine.

The list of what God’s Son gave up is endless. Consider time. God dwells in eternity where there is no time. How they schedule appointments escapes me. Maybe they don’t have them. But the point is that God left a timeless realm to be with us in a world where the sun rises and sets. People get tired and hungry and thirsty. And most of us have to work for our daily bread, which must have been frustrating for God, who created the entire universe simply by speaking. What astonishing love!

This brings us to the second part of what makes John remarkable. Somehow, through the Holy Spirit's guidance, John knew that Jesus is the Word of God with a capital "W." Here John refers to the Word that brought creation into existence. Hence, the glorious opening verse, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

In the first chapter of Genesis, God says, "Let there be light," and there is light, and so for and so on through the six days of creation. God says the Word, and the Word becomes reality. Wouldn't it be great to get up in the morning and say, "Let there be coffee," and there would be coffee? Even better, wouldn't it be wonderful to say, "Let there be sermon" and there would be sermon?

The fact that the Son of God is the Word that brought all things into existence gives us a big clue about how John saw Jesus. Jesus is more than a Savior who rescues us from the clutches of sin. Jesus is more than the provider of our promise of everlasting life. Jesus is the creative principal of the universe. That broadens our understanding of his mission significantly.

Beyond offering us a better life in the here and now and an infinite life after Earth, Jesus as the Word of God comes to restore all creation. I like what John has revealed about Jesus, because it keeps us from focusing too much on our own needs and desires. Jesus has come with the purpose of healing and setting straight the whole universe, nothing less.

We're included in that project, as a small but terribly important piece. But far from making us feel insignificant, we ought to rejoice all the more, because in the midst of renewing all that is, seen and unseen, Jesus chose to spend his time and exert his effort primarily on us. The implications of this are mind-boggling.

Part of what it means for us is that as the recipients of God's grace, as those chosen to be given power to become children of God, we enter into a covenant with the Creator. People of faith, therefore, have a responsibility to pursue our own salvation within the context of the whole creation. So when we care for the Earth, brought into being by God's Word, we do something redemptive. Who knew that energy efficient light bulbs and cars with good gas mileage had anything to do with salvation? Evidently, according to John's view of Jesus, they do.

But the most striking aspect of John's message is how inclusive it is. Nothing gets left out. Everything with faith gets saved. It's hard to imagine how a planet or a galaxy can have faith. We tend to think of faith as something only human beings enjoy, but faith is simply a relationship with God. What you think or believe is only a small part of faith. Faith is about relationship. And if God created everything, then there is a relationship with each piece of that creation. The difference with human beings is that we can say "no" or "yes" to that relationship, whereas everything else lacks the basic freedom to do so. Faith is a gift we either receive or decline, and the consequences are enormous.

Another fascinating feature of how John sees Jesus as the Word is the continuity with what has gone before. The arrival of Jesus is something new and vitally necessary yet it is part of an ongoing, never-ceasing effort to bring creation to fruition. This enlarges our view of Jesus and his mission, and it expands our understanding of what it means to be a disciple. When we embrace faith, God empowers us to create in a way similar to His own. As the first chapter of Genesis says, we are created in God's image, and that means that we have creative potential. We cannot say, "Let there be peace," and expect there to be peace, but we are endowed by grace through faith to do something constructive about peace.

Maybe we can't make the armies stop marching, but we can bring peace into our lives and into the lives of others. Think of the people with whom you suffer an impaired relationship. It might be a parent or a sibling or a child or a friend who proves difficult. You may not have spoken for some time. They may not seem to care, but this broken relationship probably hurts them as much or more than it hurts you. What better day than Christmas to make that call and speak words of peace that may, over time, result in restoration? In doing so, you do a creative thing, a redemptive thing, even if your offering is rejected.

Perhaps you have a troubled relationship with yourself. Many of us feel guilt and shame. We do not like what we see in the mirror every morning. What better day than Christmas to accept God's love and seek solace in the truth that Jesus became human so that each of us might "receive power to become children of God?"

Well, that's enough. I've wrestled with this text as a preaching topic for seventeen years, and I've come off pinned to the mat every single time. To be honest, I'm glad, because as much as I would like to give the perfect the sermon on John's gorgeous Prologue, it would scare me to death if I ever managed such a feat, and it would somehow lessen the mystical quality of this brilliant piece of work that strives to illuminate a mystery beyond our complete knowing.

So I encourage you to go home and read it again. Make those calls I invited you to make. If they hang up on you, take in stride and pray for that person, and dial the next number. Look in the mirror when you get up and when you get ready for bed, and say out loud, "Jesus came so that I might receive power to become a child of God," and keep saying it until it sinks in. Revel in the fantastic news that God became man, and the Word that created everything chose to dwell among us, and Jesus remains with us still. Amen.