

In The Beginning

John 1:1-18

December 28, 2008

I.

This reading from the opening of John's Gospel is one of the most lyrical and poetic passages in the Bible. It's also one of the most difficult to understand, and actually contains several sermons.

Today I'm going to talk about part of what we just heard. And I would ask us to think about God's eternity out there, our time and space down here, and how Christ's basic nature as both human and divine revealed God to us.

To help set the stage, we might recall the Christmas stories we heard earlier from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. We probably can visualize them in our minds. We have seen them on Christmas cards. They portray images of the manger, the shepherds, and the star of Bethlehem.

Today's reading, however, is cosmic and mystical. It's harder to visualize. We don't see many Christmas cards based on these verses, do we? There are no mangers, or shepherds, or stars.

And one of the usual reasons given for the uniqueness of John's Gospel is that it was intended to dispel certain heresies that were beginning to arise.

But another reason might be that John, after Jesus' death, took Jesus' mother, Mary, into his home and cared for her, probably for the rest of her life. Think about their time together. Imagine their conversations around the fireplace. What kind of stories could Mary have told? She certainly had a special understanding of Jesus, and she would have been able to share her memories with John while they were together.

No wonder John's Gospel is different. Part of his research probably came from the mother of our Lord herself. Think about that when you study John.

II.

But let's return to the reading. Two books in the Bible open with the words "In the beginning." One is the first book of the Old Testament, Genesis, which says "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The other is last the Gospel in the New Testament, John, which says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him."

And both books, Genesis and John, start in eternity beyond time and space, and both books then come into time and space. Genesis describes the creation of the universe from the formless void, and John proclaims the birth of Jesus from the eternal Word.

Now, stay with me on this, because at this point I want to explain how the term "beginning" in Genesis and John relates to the term "Word" in John. This is important because John identified Jesus Christ with the "Word" three times in just the first verse, and he mentioned "beginning" twice in the first two verses.

Let me again read the first two verses. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God."

The "beginning" refers to the story of creation within our time and space. It was the start of that biblical first day. We understand it in this way because neither God nor the Word have a "beginning." Both are eternal and always have existed outside of time and space. The

beginning therefore is the beginning of the story for us, and not the imagined beginning of the creator of the story.

And John proclaimed two basic theological truths about Jesus Christ as the "Word." One truth was that Jesus was out there in the beginning with God and was God, beyond time and space, when the universe was created within our time and space.

The other truth was that after humanity had lived on earth for many millennia, Jesus became the earthly expression of the eternal Word when he was born in Bethlehem. And because he was born of the heavenly Word and the earthly Mary, he was both fully human and fully divine.

This all means that the powerful and sovereign God who was universally revealed to all people in the Book of Genesis is the very same loving and merciful God revealed to us now in Jesus Christ. We look at Christ and we see God.

As a result, this reading from John's Gospel helps us know who Jesus was, both in eternity and on earth, and it deepens our understanding of what he did while he was here and continues to do through the Holy Spirit that he left behind. Let's examine both of these aspects.

III.

And we might begin with some background. In Old Testament times the Hebrew people had no way of understanding or knowing God personally. They never were able to see or touch or hear him. God was at a distance.

They knew God only through the law that he revealed to Moses. Later they knew him through the prophets who called them into obedience of the law when they went astray. Finally, they knew him by his actions as they were taken from the promised land into exile when they ignored the prophets. But they never knew God personally.

That all changed with Jesus' birth because Jesus, as the Word having come to earth, was the revelation of God to all who were here at the time. Jesus lived here, performed miracles here, taught and preached here, and died here for our sins that we might be with him in eternity. And through the Holy Spirit he lives on in a personal way for us now.

At first glance we might not pick today's reading as the best place in the Bible to learn these things about Jesus. We might think it's too abstract, and that there are other more user-friendly places to look.

I would like to suggest just the opposite. While John's Gospel is not the usual Christmas story with which we all are familiar, it adds meaning and significance to that story because John explained exactly who that baby in the manger was.

The traditional story in the other Gospels emphasizes the human side of the story of Jesus' birth. John's Gospel takes it further and proclaims that this fully human baby also was fully God because he was born from the eternal Word as the earthly expression of God.

I once heard a well-known preacher say that if God wanted to communicate with cows, Jesus would have been a cow. And if God wanted to communicate with birds, Jesus would have been a bird. But God wanted to communicate with us, and so he sent his Son to be with us as a human being.

Now, I personally think that if God wants to communicate with cows or birds, he can do it. After all, he created them. But that preacher's example makes a useful point.

This all means that in Christ we meet God as God wants us to know him. Jesus brought us face to face with God, not in some cosmic and eternal sense, but rather in a personal sense that shows us God's divine love. Jesus showed us what God is like.

IV.

And in addition to telling us who Jesus was, today's Gospel also extended to what he did. It said that "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."

What did John mean by darkness? Certainly it was something more than the absence of light. At some times the absence of light can be good, and not something to be overcome. Our natural cycle of day and night is part of creation.

So, darkness in the sense of John's Gospel means more than just the absence of something. It refers to a thing that has its own existence; its own reality. And that thing is the work of evil in the world that produces sin in our lives. Jesus was the Prince of Peace born into a world that also is home to the Prince of Darkness. And the light of Jesus overcame those dark works of evil.

Jesus as the light also worked in two other ways. Because he was both God and man, he was both the divine light and the worldly light. As the divine light he revealed God. He showed us who God is, how God loves us, and declared that we should love God. Jesus could do this because he was divine and knew God intimately.

But as the worldly light he shined on us and called us to love each other. The light that Jesus brought shows us how to live in Christian faith in the world. Jesus could do this because he was human and knew us intimately.

V.

If we would take a survey of what people think is the most significant event in all history, we probably would get a variety of responses. They might include the discovery of fire, or the invention of the wheel. Those looking to more modern times might select any number of medical breakthroughs or scientific discoveries.

For me, however, the story of today's reading is unsurpassed in its significance for us. It is a story of God come to earth. and it challenges us to reaffirm our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We can treat him in no other way.

If, for example, we think Jesus was only a man, or a great teacher, or a prophet, then we might as well forget about him. There will be nothing there to help us when we really need it.

But if he is God, as he claimed to be and as John told us today, then we are called to yield our lives to him. We are called to worship and serve him, and live in faith as he taught us, secure in our Christian hope of eternal life. God wants us to believe in him in the way that he believes in us, because he came to us so that we might come to him. *Amen.*