

Prologue and Epiphany, Part One
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
January 5, 2014
Rev. John M. Cleghorn
Scripture: John 1:1-18

Today is the last of the 12 days of Christmas. The world shifts back into high gear tomorrow.

In the church we move from the season of Christmas, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, to Epiphany. Epiphany is a time to consider the full meaning of the claim that our God is not one to remain aloof, ruling at a distance to avoid getting involved in our messy lives. Rather, God came into the world, this broken, wayward, needy world and lived among us. Epiphany is the time when we think about just what it means that the desire of the Divine is to be present to and with us on a personal and intimate level.

In Advent and Christmas, we spend time with the two traditional birth narratives in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. We follow Mary and Joseph as they learn of their parenthood, travel to Bethlehem and welcome baby Jesus in an animal stall, surrounded by livestock and received by shepherds and kings. Over the years, these accounts have become so familiar that we can almost picture the stall, hear the Christ child's first wails and smell the aroma of the frankincense and myrrh.

The Gospel of John gives us a very different account of how God came into the world. While the other birth narratives are earthy, John's is ethereal. It speaks of God in Christ as the Word. It relates Christ to all of time and creation. It mentions Light and Darkness and their age-old conflict.

We love these verses for their melody and poetry, their triumphant tone, their reassuring words. They remind us just how big and old our God really is, including the Christ, as one who was always within God. They remind us that it was always God's plan to come in grace and truth and that God's desire to dwell among us was and is for now and all time into the future.

John's opening, which has come to be known as simply the "prologue", also speaks to those who may struggle with the claim that God took form as flesh and blood. John's claim is no less bold. But John gives us language that is more expansive, even cosmic. Despite all of these differences, it is still a claim of Emanuel, God with us. John's entire gospel is written to emphasize that Christ was the messiah. His prologue sets all of this

up. It follows a clear structure that orders and organizes how we can understand who God is, who Christ is, how we benefit from God in Christ and how we can respond.

If you were here on the first Sunday of the church year back in December, you heard my call for us all to spend this church year in a search for who Jesus Christ was and is for us. The prologue to the Gospel of John is a good jumping off point for that journey. And in these days of Epiphany, it's worth taking some time today and next Sunday to dig into John's prologue so that these soaring, victorious, comforting words might have even more depth and meaning for us.

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Theologians and academics have found many ways to break down the prologue. Perhaps the most popular breaks these 18 verses into five sections. The first part consists of the first two verses, the second of verses 3-5. For today, let's look at these first two parts, leaving the other three for next week.

The prologue opens with these five 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. 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.

In his description of Christ as "the Word," John seeks to connect a number of theological dots. He draws on ancient Wisdom literature, which would have been familiar to his audience of first-century Jews. For them, Wisdom was almost as big a concept as Yahweh himself. Wisdom is described in the Old Testament as the Divine force that looked after the children of Israel. She – yes, Wisdom is a she – delivered Israel from its oppressors and served to inspire the leadership of Israel's kings.

From Wisdom, the ancient Jews believed, came all creation. Through Wisdom, God spoke creation into being. But John's claim in the prologue goes even further – that as the Logos, the Word, Christ was a distinct and particular Word, sent by God from within God, as a mediator between God and creation.

For the first time, then, the Logos, the Word, is identified with a particular historic figure, Jesus Christ. Christ came into the world in Jesus but had existed within God all along. As you might guess, this line of thought was later developed into what we know as the

Holy Trinity, one Godhead with three distinct but inseparable manifestations. All of that, friends, believe it or not, is in just those first two verses. Not bad for just 24 words.

At verse three, John bores in even more deeply on how we might understand the relationship between God's Word, the Logos, and life itself. As one commentator writes, John's claim is that: "Apart from the Word, nothing has an existence: life outside of God is a contradiction in terms."¹

This is not just life as a general claim or a vague, impersonal proposition, friends. It is your life, my life, the birds and the bees and the flowers and the trees; all life is animated by the will and the breath and the wisdom of God. Whatever you make of the creation story in Genesis, however you square it with similar creation legends from other traditions and religions, however you square Genesis with what we know about science and evolution, this is a profound claim all by itself, isn't it? That our Creator God is one who seeks to be known through life in all of its forms, a God whose expression of love is to give life abundantly.

And what is it that sustains life once it is created? Light. In verses three and four, John writes: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being was life, and the life was the light of all people."

We know this to be true, don't we? Without light, nothing that is alive lives. Plants wither (just ask the ones in my office, which have been sitting in my cold, dark office these past weeks). Even human spirits wither and weaken. It is a proven fact that darkness, actual darkness, and depression are profoundly connected.

And so John ends his first section of the prologue with that comforting declaration that we have all clung to at one time or another, that truth that we symbolize on Christmas Eve as we hold up our candles and sing Silent Night.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

This is our God's promise. It is a promise that does not shrink from the reality that there is darkness in the world. There is war and violence. There is evil in men and women's hearts. There is deception and greed, hunger and want, loneliness and mourning, injustice and suffering, hate and bigotry. But, despite all these things, the giver of life will not forsake us, but has sent a light so victorious and triumphant that it withstands all the darkness this word can ever gather.

¹ Susan Hedahl, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1, p. 192

So there, at verse five. is where John ends the first part of his prologue, this soaring, expansive introduction of our God in Christ. We will pick it up there next week with verse six.

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Sisters and brothers, as we cross over from Christmas to Epiphany, we move from celebrating the entrance of the light into the world to the showing forth of this light to all the world. In Christ, life and light are no longer just for some of God's people. The invitation extends to all.

Decades and decades ago, somewhere in the American South, an unknown enslaved African-American put this story into verse. For many, those verses have become just as memorable as John's prologue. They have been sung in fields and on buses, from small country chapels to high-church chancels and in the streets in civil rights marches.

In their own way, the verses that started with that unknown slave tell us how to move from Christmas to Epiphany and out into the world as messengers of light and life.

While shepherds kept their watching
Over silent flocks by night,
Behold throughout the heavens,
There shone a holy light:

The shepherds feared and trembled
When lo! above the earth
Rang out the angel chorus
That hailed our Saviour's birth:

Down in a lowly manger
Our humble Christ was born
And God send us salvation,
That blessed Christmas morn:

When I am a seeker,
I seek both night and day;
I seek the Lord to help me,
And He shows me the way:

He made me a watchman

Upon the city wall,
And if I am a Christian,
I am the least of all.

Go, Tell It On The Mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, Tell It On The Mountain
That Jesus Christ is born.

Amen.