

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
BMPC – January 5th, 2014
2nd Sunday after Christmas

The Word

Today is one moment when I wish I had a deep bass voice. Not the low croaking voice I have when my vocal chords act up, but a voice like James Earl Jones, or John LaMotte ☺. A voice that is deep and powerful, resonant and rich. For that is the way I hear these words from John: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...”

Even before Rev. LaMotte read them for us, I hear them spoken with a deep bass tone. And since I don't really do that with any other Scripture, I've wondered this week if that is the voice that comes into my head because of the words themselves. Perhaps I hear them in a bass voice because the words that John uses are packed full of depth and power, resonance and rich beauty. With those simple words, “In the beginning was the Word,” the Gospel writer John poetically narrates his Christmas story. With that poetry, John tells us his version of the incarnation—God becoming flesh in Jesus. Now, today is the 2nd Sunday of Christmas, so by now, we've already heard the Christmas story several times just within the past few weeks.

On both December 22nd and 24th, we heard the Gospel writer Luke delving into great detail about how Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds acted that first Christmas. And prior to that, on December 15th, we heard Matthew's version of what Joseph went through with the angel and all his dreams. Just last Sunday, we turned again to Matthew and discovered what was going on with the magi and King Herod.

Like I said, if you have been around church, any church, for the last month or so, you have been steeped in the two different Christmas stories. Therefore, with those other two Gospel scripts playing in our heads, we immediately notice that John's version of the Christmas story is markedly different.

Where are all the nativity scene characters? What happened to the manger? We've heard nothing about angels or stars or animals. What is going on?! John does not seem one bit concerned with all of those details that are so important to us (like where does Joseph stand in the nativity scene¹). Rather, instead of focusing on the actions of the human players at the moment of Christmas, John draws our attention to what God was doing way before Christmas even happened.

With his poetry, John writes his version of Genesis, the story of Creation, with a Christmas incarnational twist. “In the beginning,” John says, “was the Word.” Barbara Brown Taylor points out that if John's Gospel were the only one we had, that is all we would know of Jesus' birth. Here is how she puts it:

All we would know is that before his name was Jesus, his name was the Word. Before he was born of Mary, he was with God from the very beginning of creation, bringing things into being, making things happen, shining light into the

darkness. Before he became a child who grew in wisdom and in strength, he was God's self, God's soul, God's life-force in this world, indivisible and indispensable. Before he called together a group of disciples, he was the breath inside all living things. He was the electric spark that charged their hearts. Before he walked the road to the cross, he was the fire inside the sun, the space between the stars, the axis around which the galaxies spun. Before he was Jesus, John writes, he was the Word.ⁱⁱ

And with that beginning, John starts his Christmas story. And it seems to me that he tells it with the clear intention of wanting to help us remember that God did not just start calling and loving God's people in the stable at Bethlehem or with the angels in the shepherds' fields. Rather, John knew that God had revealed God's presence before to God's people; from the moment of creation on, God has been constantly trying to be in relationship with God's creatures.

Our Old Testament is full of God's continued self-revealing to God's chosen people Israel. Think about the burning bush, Moses' smoking mountain, the pillars of fire and smoke. Remember the still small voice to Elijah, the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel, the call of the boy prophet Jeremiah. The Word has been circulating freely in the world since before time even started. It did not wait for the angel Gabriel and his surprise for Mary.

But by writing his own version of Genesis, John was just getting started with his Christmas story. And as soon as John sets the stage for what was going on in the heavens, John quickly moves to the earth. John writes that the Word was active in the world, whispering God's life and light into the ears of God's people, widely circulating love and God's presence to all who would hear. And yet, though the Word had been present to God's people all along, many could still not see that love nor trust that presence.

So in God's great mystery, God spoke in a new way. As Eugene Peterson has translated John, "And so the Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood." Now, John could have put his pen down right then and there because that one sentence contains his whole nativity scene. As a colleague puts it, what John is trying to say is that in Jesus, "God decided to speak body language..." In Jesus, the Word who had been circulating widely and freely, decided to take on flesh and blood, hands and feet.

In Jesus, the Word who had been whispering God's call of life and light to all the people decided to come and take on a voice of his own. In Jesus the Word who had always been God's message of embrace to the world decided to deliver that message in person. In Jesus, the Word became flesh and moved into our neighborhood. And God's decision to speak in a new way, a flesh and blood kind of way, a face to face kind of way, is the amazing and scandalous claim of Christmas.

For even though the Word had been on the loose from the beginning, up until this time in our history, the Word had always been veiled. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we read time after time that no one could see God's face and live. God would reveal God's presence,

but always in a way that protected God's mystery. God was always a bit hidden, even in God's self-revelation.

Yet the amazing and scandalous claim of Christmas, what we followers of Jesus are humbled to proclaim, is that we believe that in Jesus, God removed God's veil. We Christians claim that in Jesus, we are able to fully see God's glory, God's face, God's love first hand, for ourselves. In Jesus, our great God speaks to us in the most human way possible, giving us God's innermost thoughts and heart, in deeds that are as profound as his wordsⁱⁱⁱ. . . In Jesus, we profess the Word became flesh and lived among us, moved into the neighborhood. But do we even grasp all that it means?

It's doubtful we do, or that we even can. But this Word becoming flesh means that if we want to know how God feels about us, we look at Jesus. If we want to know what God dreams for us, we look at Jesus. If we want to know how God acts in our world, we look at Jesus. If we want to know how we are to act in our world, we look at Jesus. Jesus is God's Word in action, the same Word that was present from the very beginning. Jesus is God's self, God's soul, God's life force in the flesh.^{iv}

So I wonder if John did not include any of the stuff about Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the angels, the star and the animals, or even about the baby Jesus himself, because John suspected that we would be tempted to get so caught up in those details of how and when, that we might miss this whole "why" of it all.

We might be tempted to get so caught up in the Silent Night aspect of Christmas that we could completely gloss over the theology of the whole thing. But for John, that theology—what it tells us about God—is what Christmas is all about.

For John, the most important thing to help us see and know is that Jesus is the eternal Word made flesh, living among us. John felt it very important to proclaim to us that God loves this world so much that God decided to get explicit with us about that love and show us in our own categories of flesh and blood what that love looks like and acts like. Coming into our time and history as Jesus was not just some rash decision God quickly made. Rather, I believe it was a natural movement of God's ongoing self-revelation. Jesus is God's autobiography. And I think John wanted us to realize that it was nothing we did or did not do that prompted this eternal Word to become temporal flesh. Not at all. For what I read in John is that this Word becoming flesh was part of God's picture all along^v.

When I was in high school, my father preached at a Mo-Ranch Youth Celebration conference. In one sermon, he stated that from his biblical studies he had come to a conclusion. He was convinced that even if humanity had never sinned at all, the Word still would have become flesh. He preached that from what he sees in the Bible, God is always trying to be in relationship with us, calling us, yearning for us, loving us. And because of God's passionate desire to be in that relationship with us, God's own creatures, God would have come as Jesus, regardless of our actions—sinful or healthy.

I still remember that sermon, even though it was almost 25 years ago. But the reason I remember it was less do to what my father said and more due to the reaction his words received. Two youth leaders were so incensed by what Dad preached that they walked out in the middle of the service. Then, they filed a complaint and yanked their kids out of the camp.

And that was because for them, the only reason the Word became flesh was due to the fact that we were such big screw-ups. The only reason God would enter into our history, move into our neighborhood as Jesus, was in order to atone for our sinfulness; to pay the price with his blood; to suffer and die before the Father. Any other basis for the Word becoming Flesh was anathema to them.

Yet, as I read John's Christmas story, all I see is poetry expressing God's plan and desire for relationship with us. According to John, the Word becoming Flesh was not an afterthought for God. It was not a move of desperation. It was not a quick and rash decision, made because of our actions. The Word was part of God from before time. Before his name was Jesus, his name was the Word. And in the fullness of God's time, God chose to send the Word as Flesh. And as John writes, "From his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace."

And that reality, my friends, is the Gospel truth I believe John wanted us to hear. That is the version of the Christmas story John could not help but write. "In the beginning was the Word...and the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth." John's version may not have Mary and Joseph, shepherds and angels, animals and stars, but his version does remind us of God's immense love—a love that has been present from before we were even knit together in our mother's wombs, a love that will continue to be present long after we have returned to our Creator. John's poetic Christmas story is nothing less than a gift from God, deep and powerful, resonant and full of mysterious gracious beauty.

ⁱ Referring to the sermon I preached on 12/15/13

ⁱⁱ Taylor, Barbara Brown. Pulpit Resource. Jan 2, 2000. p. 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bruner, Frederick Dale. P 11. Gospel of John commentary.

^{iv} Taylor. Page 5.

^v I am grateful for how Bruner puts this: "I interpret the gradual process pictured in our verse (John 1:9-10) as the closer and closer coming of the Word into history—from creation through the patriarchs, the election of Israel, and their prophets until, finally, the coming of the Word in the flesh of Jesus Christ." P 49.