

The Word
United Church of Broomfield
January 5, 2020

John 1:1-18 The Message (MSG)

1 ¹⁻² The Word was first,
the Word present to God,
God present to the Word.

The Word was God,
in readiness for God from day one.

³⁻⁵ Everything was created through him;
nothing—not one thing!—
came into being without him.

What came into existence was Life,
and the Life was Light to live by.

The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;
the darkness couldn't put it out.

⁶⁻⁸ There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light.

⁹⁻¹³ The Life-Light was the real thing:

Every person entering Life
he brings into Light.

He was in the world,
the world was there through him,
and yet the world didn't even notice.

He came to his own people,
but they didn't want him.

But whoever did want him,
who believed he was who he claimed
and would do what he said,

He made to be their true selves,
their child-of-God selves.

These are the God-begotten,

not blood-begotten,
not flesh-begotten,
not sex-begotten.

¹⁴The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.

We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Parent, like child,
Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.

¹⁵John pointed him out and called, "This is the One! The One I told you was coming after me but in fact was ahead of me. He has always been ahead of me, has always had the first word."

¹⁶⁻¹⁸We all live off his generous bounty,
gift after gift after gift.

We got the basics from Moses,
and then this exuberant giving and receiving,
This endless knowing and understanding—
all this came through Jesus, the Messiah.

No one has ever seen God,
not so much as a glimpse.

This one-of-a-kind God-Expression,
who exists at the very heart of the Creator,
has made him plain as day.

Listen to the following words and phrases and I want you to visualize what they would mean if we were to take the literally

- "I'm on top of the world" -- we see someone literally standing on top of a globe representing the world.
- "I am at the end of my rope" -- calls to mind someone desperately clinging to a rope on the side of a cliff or even worse, someone about to be hanged.
- "He's been pretty low since she left him" -- conjures up the picture of a man whose stature and body language make him shorter than before.
- "The mind is a receptacle" -- suggests the brain as a trash can into which anything can be dumped.

- “Are you out of your mind!!?”-- implies that one’s mind and body are indeed separate entities, the brain having been removed physically from the body.

These **literal** visualizations of commonplace phrases are entertaining, because ordinarily, we don’t take them literally. Instead, we understand they are metaphors.

- “I’m on top of the world” -- means a person is so full of joy and excitement she can hardly stand it.
- When a person says, “I’m at the end of my rope,” -- we understand him to mean he is experiencing so many pressures and stresses that he is overwhelmed and doesn’t know how to cope with it all.
- When we hear a friend remark of another, “He’s been pretty low since she left him,” -- we understand that this mutual friend is emotionally hurting and depressed.
- To describe “the mind as a receptacle” -- is to remark upon its incredible ability to absorb a phenomenal number of different ideas and experiences.
- And to ask with dismay, “Are you out of your mind!!?” -- indicates our belief that our someone is not thinking clearly or is operating out of the norm of expected behaviors and actions.

A metaphor is the linking of two dissimilar concepts to create a new insight or understanding. Not many of us can define the term exactly, but we intuitively understand the intended meaning of metaphors when we hear or read them. This intuitive ability to recognize the correct meaning of a sentence or phrase rather than its literal meaning is a skill that older children, teens and adults possess that small children do not. Few individuals of age, say nine or ten and older will look at a religious painting of a be-robed old white man with a gray beard and a staff and think, “That’s exactly what God looks like.” Rather, they will look at the picture and think, “That’s the way an artist decided to portray God --- as elderly, wise, white, male and as the shepherd and caretaker of his people.”

In contrast, a younger child may look at the same painting and think, “That’s God. God is old. Will God still be alive when I grow up?” Small children are literal and concrete in their thinking and understanding of language. That’s why the comical but literal events in *Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes* make sense to children, while metaphors such as the introductory words of John’s gospel, “In the beginning was the Word” do not make sense to them.

Well, John’s gospel is written for children as well, God’s children. Today, the second Sunday after Christmas we encounter the metaphorical language of John’s well-known Prologue. The concrete images and particular events of the Christmas story remain fresh in our minds. We still can see “Round yon Virgin Mother and Child.” We can hear “Angels, We Have Heard on High” and visualize the “Shepherds” as they “Watch Their Flocks by Night.”

Yet as we listened to the reading for today, it is clear John has a very different literary style and purpose in writing this gospel. John's account of Jesus' origins includes only one human character, John the Baptist and absolutely no details about Christ's birth in Bethlehem, for John's purpose is to encapsulate the entire theological mission and meaning of Jesus' incarnation as it will be presented in this gospel.

When John says, "The Word became flesh and lived among us," John means that Jesus is God's Word, and John is interested in what Jesus makes known about God.

And what Jesus makes known about God happens through what Jesus shows of himself.

John's words about "The Word" make it possible, at the very beginning of this gospel, for concrete-thinking human beings to get some inkling of God's infinite Godliness. God's unity with and use of the word "Word" is already familiar to God's people. Words are a significant form of communication from God to humanity: Abraham's covenant, Joseph's dreams, Moses prophetic leadership and recording of the Sinai Covenant and Law, Israel's history, and the prophets' prophecies all are recorded in words.

If the world was created through the spoken Word of God, it makes perfect sense that the Word writ large has from the beginning been God's primary way of communicating with God's earthly children.

John understands that irrespective of age we are children, God's children. Just as a young child cannot fully grasp abstract concepts or metaphors, neither can we grasp all that God is, was and will be. We need something – we need *someone* -- to make God's being comprehensible, accessible. We need someone who is not beyond our reach or understanding. We need the Word made flesh. Jesus of Nazareth, human carpenter and divine Son, is God's revelation to us, God's autobiography.

God is revealed most fully in the man, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is God's autobiography, the Word made flesh. God continues to reveal God's-self via the work of the Holy Spirit, the words of scripture and through those glimmers of insight we get now and then while stirring a pan of peas on the stove or tying the shoe of a 4-year old. God reveals God's-self through human experiences, and it is important that we share those experiences with one another. Preacher Charles Rice puts it this way, "If we believe that the Word of God continues to come in some way analogous to the "Word become flesh," then the life we have together with all God's creatures becomes the place of God's continuing revelation and redemption."¹ When one sees or hears Jesus, one sees and hears God. What Jesus reveals is revelation from God. "Everything came into being through the Word and nothing was created without the Word."

¹ Charles Rice, *Preaching the Story*, 35.

Commentator Gail O'Day points out that "The Gospel of John contains two overarching themes: Jesus' identity and the believer's identity in relation to Jesus."² It's no mistake that most of us change our minds about some belief or bias as the result of another person's influence upon us and love for us.

In contrast, cognitive arguments rarely change anyone's mind about who to elect president, what to think about the ordination of LGBTQ Christians or whether one should be pro-choice or pro-life. In fact, we can argue with one another until we're blue in the face, but what ultimately convinces people and converts them to a new political ideology, a new religion or a new way of living in the world is often the friendship, love and influence of someone they admire.

The incredibly popular book *The DaVinci Code* by Dan Brown deservedly has been criticized by Protestants and Catholics alike for its many fictions about Jesus, Mary Magdalene and early Christianity; however, there is one facet of the story that rings true. The assassin Silas, offers unquestioning obedience and loyalty to the young priest who took Silas in, tended his wounds, nursed Silas back to health and showed him a level of kindness and love Silas had never before experienced. As a result Silas becomes a member of the Father's Catholic sect Opus Dei and willingly dedicates his life to showing his gratitude toward the man who inspired and saved him. While the blind obedience Silas offers is misdirected in *The DaVinci Code*, the point of the story that rings true is **the power of love** to elicit love and transform a person's life.

Jesus Christ is God's Word and love incarnate. The first five verses of John's Prologue prepare us for the sound of God's spoken Word, God's voice in the man Jesus. If you know Jesus, the man, then you will know Jesus the Christ, and you will know God and respond in faith. The words written for this Prologue go beyond narrative, poetry and metaphor; they are a confession of faith. All that has been and is to come is summarized in these verses. It is the early church community's confession of faith and our own.

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² Gail O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol. IX, 514.

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AMEN!