

John 1:1-18

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“My Word”

This is an odd sort of holiday weekend we’ve got going on. With New Year’s Day falling yesterday on a Saturday, some businesses observed the holiday on Friday, while others will be closed tomorrow and some took a four-day weekend. The church calendar is sort of caught in-between, as well. Nominally today is the second Sunday of Christmas, the eighth of the twelve days of Christmas. But in some ways Christmas Eve now seems a long time ago. At Plymouth we have chosen to observe Epiphany today, even though technically it doesn’t fall until this Thursday, January 6; because if we waited until next Sunday it would be January 9. Only the college football bowl season gets dragged out *that* long.

But this relaxed, in-between time gives us a chance to think a bit about what Christmas means before we pack it away. What better resource could we have than John’s majestic statement on the incarnation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Do you remember Peter Ustinov? He was a British actor, director and author who died in 2004. In 1977 he wrote an autobiography with the best autobiography title I’ve ever heard: *Dear Me*. Every time I hear the opening to John’s Gospel I think it could be the beginning of the autobiography of God, which would be entitled, *My Word*.

Our lesson from John is often read as though it were an impenetrable morass of philosophical jargon. But I think that actually it is a poetic bridge to what for many of us could be a refreshingly new understanding of Jesus.

A lot of us here at Plymouth have had protracted wrestling matches with our concept of God. We decided at some point that we didn’t really buy what we regarded as conventional doctrine: God as a person-like being somewhere “out there” with superpowers; God as us... only more so.¹ This sort of God has many of the characteristics of Santa Claus: “He—and it’s always a “he”—sees you when you’re sleeping, and he knows when you’re awake. He knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be good, for goodness’

¹ This whole discussion on the nature of God is indebted to Marcus Borg, particularly his discussion of “Two Concepts of God” in chapter four of *The Heart of Christianity*. HarperSanFrancisco: 2003, pp. 65-70. As Borg himself points out, however, this line of thinking is not original to him, but has ancient antecedents in the Christian tradition.

sake.”² This God is a stern but benevolent father/judge/king who first makes rules we can’t keep and then stands ready to mete out punishment we richly deserve; or perhaps to forgive us if we express our beliefs in just the right way and/or follow the right rituals. In this scenario God’s justice and God’s mercy are always in tension so we’re never entirely sure precisely where we are. But the church stands ready to help us manage our anxiety over the issue.

The unvarnished truth is that many of us don’t believe in such a person-like God; and even less do we trust institutions that grow up around such a concept, inflicting the disease of guilt and dispensing the antidote of grace.

I have friends and relatives who are atheists. (Broad-minded of me, don’t you think?) When they tell me they don’t believe in God I sometimes say, “Tell me about this God you don’t believe in.” Invariably they begin to describe a person-like being somewhere “out there.” And I can honestly say that I don’t believe in that God, either.

I have come to understand God much more in the terms of the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, as an “Eternal Spirit” who “calls the worlds into being.” God is in us and around us: a life-giving spirit who is creative and loving. Marcus Borg says God is “*the encompassing spirit* in whom everything that is, is.”³ The fancy name for this way of thinking of God is “panentheism,” a word that simply means that God is in and through everything. God is not somehow “out there” inflicting harm and dispensing favor, waiting to be appeased or enticed into intervening in miraculous ways. Rather, God is “in here,” within us and around us. The aim of religion is for us to become more aware of God’s presence and to align our lives more completely with God’s creative, loving purposes. So in faith communities we seek to practice the presence of God through worship and prayer, and to do the will of the God whose nature is love. In other words, we strive “to grow in love of God and neighbor.”⁴

I realize that not everybody is entirely comfortable with this sort of language about God. In the back of our minds we have another religious script running that tells us what we think we’re supposed to believe, usually

² From “Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” by J. Fred Coots and Haven Gillespie, 1934.

³ *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 66. Italics are in the original.

⁴ Yes, these are the eight words which express the central mission of Plymouth Church. They are derived from Jesus’ Great Commandment that we love God with all our heart and soul, strength and mind and our neighbors as ourselves. For a full development of how the Great Commandment relates to the church see H. Richard Niebuhr’s important work, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956.

formulated from things we learned as children. But it is exciting and liberating to realize that there have always been, as a part of our Christian tradition, these other ways of thinking about God.

But once you've seen God in this way, what do you do with Jesus? There are aspects of the Jesus story which, if we think we're required to take them literally, create serious issues for some people: things like Jesus' miracles, some of his harsher, more judgmental-sounding teachings, and stories about his life... beginning with his birth.

The whole virgin birth concept, imagery taken directly from birth stories about ancient warriors, kings and emperors, doesn't square very well with what we know of human experience and what we've come to believe about God. And so some folks just walk away from Jesus as we find him in the Bible; cross their fingers when they get to him in the Statement of Faith; or reduce him to an influential historical figure or an interesting moral philosopher or even a symbolic personage who never actually lived.

But in the opening verses of the Gospel According to John we find Jesus described in terms of his relationship to a God who is the Eternal Spirit. And we are challenged to redirect our thinking about Christmas and Christ.

"In the beginning was the Word..." John is saying that Jesus makes God known as words make known our innermost thoughts and feelings. In Genesis we read that God created through words. Before creation the Word of God was with God, a part of God, waiting to be uttered. The Word of God participates in the being of God.

What does the Word of God look like in the world? It looks like light. How does the creation story begin? With a word: God says, "Let there be light." Nothing can be revealed without light. The light that is the Word of God, that is God, shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. Where there is light, God is.

There are many witnesses to God. One of them was John the Baptist, who came to bear witness to the light of God as it entered the world in the person of Jesus. Other traditions also bear witness to the light of God. But as Christians, we see it most clearly in Jesus Christ.

When we make promises we often say to one another, "I give you my word." In this sense we are to understand that the Word of God can be trusted. As the Torah meant light and life to Israel, the living Word of God that is Jesus means light and life to those who entrust themselves to him. That

word “trust” is important. We often speak of the Christian faith as though it were a fixed set of beliefs, specifically beliefs *about* Jesus, or beliefs *that* Jesus did this or that, said this or that. But the word commonly translated “believe” is the verb form of the word for faith. “Faith” is not a verb in English. But if it were it would carry more of the connotation of trust. It’s not so much that we’re supposed to believe *that* Jesus is the Son of God because the circumstances of his birth were biologically unique; rather we’re invited to believe *in* Jesus as the Son of God because his life is God’s Word for us. We trust in the way Jesus gave of himself to reveal the nature of God as self-giving love.

So at Christmas we celebrate that this God who is in and through all creation, who is within us and among us, who is a part of us as we are a part of God, is revealed in a particular way to those who trust in Jesus as the Word of God. God is revealed in other ways to other people, but this is the particularity of how we as Christians know God. The word, “epiphany” means “revealing.” The Word of God, the light of the world, is revealed—made known—in Jesus Christ.

We begin this season of light by rejoicing that by his birth Jesus Christ becomes a part of us. We receive the symbolic presence of Christ into ourselves through the sacrament of Holy Communion. As the elements literally become a part of us, we remember how Jesus gave himself to his disciples; and we affirm that he gives himself anew to each of us. We renew our commitment to have Christ’s presence grow in us and through us: to shine through our lives.

Christ is born. God is with us. We can trust in God’s Word. Thanks be to God.

Amen

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