

The Word of God
John 1:1-18

Why do we like Christmas so much? Certainly it brings to mind many warm memories from childhood. We remember the smell of Christmas dinner. We remember the magical sight of the lights on the Christmas tree and the excited anticipation of opening the packages on Christmas morning.

From more recent years, we recall the smiles and bright eyes of those we love as they open gifts we spent so much time picking out. Now we know how much better it is to give than to receive.

But of course, we also know the real reason for the season. We know that we give gifts to each other in remembrance of the greatest gift of all, God's gift to us of Jesus.

But I suspect another reason that we love to hear the Christmas story so much is the safe feeling the story gives us. Not only is this the Bible story that is most familiar to us. It is the one time in Jesus' life when we really feel comfortable with Him.

Think about what would happen if Mary brought baby Jesus to church this morning. We would all press in for a look, and we could all enjoy holding Him. And so while we find some of grownup Jesus' teachings too challenging and while we are amazed by grownup Jesus' miracles, we can understand Jesus as a baby.

Or, at least we think we can. For if we can imagine ourselves picking up the baby Jesus, after reading today's passage we can also imagine the apostle John saying to us, "Do you know Who that is you are holding? That's the Word of God made flesh." John, what do you mean? How can a person be a word? And how can a word become flesh?

Well, part of what John means we find in verse 18. Jesus is the One Who declares, Who reveals God fully to man. John thus means that when Jesus speaks, it is God talking.

Well, we can understand that, can't we? After all, the Old Testament prophets also spoke words from God. Perhaps John means that Jesus will be a great prophet. After all, that's what the Muslims believe.

Sure John believes in prophets and prophecy. In fact, he introduces John the Baptist and specifically says that he gave testimony about Jesus. But in today's passage, John the Apostle doesn't say that Jesus spoke words from God as prophets do. He says that Jesus is the Word. That means that Jesus was the Word that all those Old Testament prophets spoke.

But how could Mary's baby have told the prophets what to say? He wasn't even born until hundreds of years after they wrote all those books of the Old Testament. John, you can't be right. That doesn't make sense.

But John is insistent. "He was in the beginning with God. This little baby you are holding is as old as the universe – even older!"

And we think back to the story of creation that we read in our responsive reading this morning from Psalm 148. Why should the sun and moon and stars praise God? "For He commanded, and they were created." And if we were to turn back to Genesis 1, we would indeed find the Word of God present at creation.

For how did God bring everything into being? By His Word. God said, "Let there be light." And as God spoke, because God spoke the Word, light appeared. It is the Word of God that contained and focused and directed His creative power.

Yes, that's what John is saying. It is the Word through whom everything was made. Nothing came into being without the power and presence of God's Word.

And so the Baby in the Manger was with God every step of the way when the world was created. Through Him everything was made. The Word is not only the revealer of God's will and God's person to man. He is the agent of creation.

Knowing all this, we would be a little less comfortable holding this baby, wouldn't we? I mean, how would someone cradle his Creator?

But we can still try to understand what's going on. So what if God had someone to help Him make everything? The Egyptians believed that Re, the Sun God, created everything by first creating lots of other gods. So, was Jesus some sort of demi-god, standing alongside the Creator?

Hindus believe in avatars, gods who came to earth in human form. The Greeks told stories of superhuman heroes like Achilles and Hercules who had great power because they were the children of gods. Even as a baby in his crib, Hercules was said to have strangled two huge snakes, one with each hand. Was Jesus an avatar? Was he a hero like Hercules?

No, John tells us that the Word was God. He was not just a great hero. He was not one god among many. He is the One True God. He is the One Who Is. He has always been. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever He had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, He is God.

But how can Jesus be with God and be God at the same time? How can He call Himself the Son of God, and at the same time say, "I and the Father are One?" If Jesus is God, how can

Jesus come up out of the water of His baptism and hear God's voice from Heaven saying, "This is My beloved Son?"

The Church, throughout the ages, has never been able to explain this mystery. We simply confess what the Scripture teaches. We know the words of the Apostles' Creed – We believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, Our Lord.

The Nicene Creed, first set down in A.D. 325, goes into more detail: "We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, True God of True God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made."

That's what we confess and that's what we believe. We believe that Jesus is True God, yet the eternally begotten Son of God. We believe that God is One substance, but that within the Godhead are three distinct persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Each of the three is God. The Son and the Father are one, yet the Son is not the Father, and the Father is not the Son. That's what Jesus taught. That's what John told us in different ways throughout his gospel.

So, how did John put it again in today's passage? Jesus is God, and with God. Jesus is the Word of God. He not only spoke the universe into existence, but as verse 18 says, he declares God, fully reveals God to us. Verse 14 and verse 17 say that Jesus brings truth. Verse 5 tells us that Jesus is the light shining in the darkness.

Yes, it's all quite amazing. But is all this good news? Is the coming of the Light of the Word good news? It isn't for the darkness, is it? After all, what happens to the darkness when you turn on the lights? It just goes away, doesn't it? It vanishes the same way your sleep does when someone turns on the light in your bedroom at 2 in the morning. And to those who prefer the darkness of sin, the light of Christ is no more welcome.

No, it's no wonder that, even while John tells us of the glory and the wonder of Christ the Word, who brings light and truth into the world, John also reminds us that for many people, this wasn't good news at all. When Jesus showed up as a baby in a manger, it wasn't just that the world He had created didn't know Him. It wasn't just that the darkness into which the light of Christ shined didn't understand Him. No, verse 11 tells us that the world didn't receive Him. The world didn't want Him or His light or His truth.

But we really shouldn't be surprised that the world rejected the truth, should we? After all, verse 17 reminds us of another revelation of God's truth – the Law of Moses. How many of us feel comfortable with all of the demands, all of the commands contained in that law? Do we really keep that Law in the way that Jesus explained it?

You remember what Jesus said. Do we really love our neighbors as ourselves? Do we really love our enemies, praying for those who persecute us? Do we really love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, giving God all we are and all we have all the time? That's what the Law says we are supposed to do, you know. That's what Jesus says the truth means. That's the sort of light Jesus came to shine.

And if we don't want to hear this truth or see this light, aren't we also hiding in the darkness, the darkness of self-deception in which we tell ourselves that we really are nice people, or at least that we are nicer than others to whom we prefer to compare ourselves? If we don't want to hear this truth, aren't we also closing our eyes to the light of Christ? And if the light of Christ brings life, if we evade His truth, won't that just bring us death?

No, if we have trouble understanding the Word, if we have trouble accepting the light, we shouldn't be surprised that in verse 11 John says many people who call themselves the people of God don't in fact want to receive Jesus. That sort of resistance is all too easy to understand.

No, what should amaze us is that somehow we ourselves, in spite of our willfulness, in spite of the continuing sin in our lives, in spite of our all-too-frequent preference for darkness, that somehow we have come to trust Jesus, even a little bit. What should amaze us is that Jesus would have come to any of us.

But that's exactly what Jesus did for, as verses 14 and 17 both tell us, Jesus didn't just come to bring truth. He came to bring grace. That means He came to give us something that we can't earn for ourselves, something that we really don't even deserve to have. It is only by His grace that any of us can understand anything about Jesus. It's only by His grace that our blind eyes have been opened to see His life. It's only by His grace that our hard hearts have been opened to receive His truth.

John will explain this more fully as we move deeper into his gospel, most famously in chapter 3, but for now, just look at verse 12. Those who receive Christ are those who believe in, who trust in His name. And how does anyone come to trust Jesus? Look at verse 13. Those that are born again, are born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man.

What does that mean? Well, did you choose to be born? Did you have anything to do with your being born? Can you even remember anything about that day?

In the same way, Jesus says that those who receive Him, that those who trust Him, that those who see the light and walk in the light instead of continuing to stumble in the darkness – Jesus says they are changed in such a profound and fundamental way because of the will of God.

In short, the good news is that the Word didn't become flesh and dwell among us because we asked Him to. He didn't bring light into the world and into the sinful recesses of our hearts because we want Him to. He came to do all of this because He wanted to. He came to reveal God in all His fullness to a world that wanted to have nothing to do with God simply because of His own grace and truth.

That's the good news that John the Baptist proclaimed about Jesus. That's the good news that John the Apostle wrote down for us. That's the good news we still celebrate today – that God came to be with us, that God came to save us by His grace. Let's sing His praise.