

The Living Word  
John 1:1-14

Do we Americans have anything in common anymore? Politics: Liberals watch MSNBC and Conservatives watch FoxNews, and each group wonders why the other group is so strange, and neither group really talks that much to the other. Clothing: rappers wear their pants around their knees, hunters wear jeans and boots, and all of us are woefully underdressed by our grandparents' standards. And then there's music, with a radio station for every taste from rock to rap, from Classical to country to Christian contemporary. American culture isn't so much fragmented as fractured.

But at Christmas time, something strange happens. All of a sudden, all the radio stations are playing songs like "I'll Be Home for Christmas," "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire," and "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," even though many of the artists who have re-recorded these songs weren't even born when they were written before the end of World War II.

And this is the one time of the year when every congregation, black or white, traditional or contemporary, sings Christmas carols that were already old when this sanctuary was built. Joseph Mohr and Franz Grüber wrote "Silent Night" in 1818 because they needed a carol accompanied by guitar. Charles Wesley wrote "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" in the 1740's. And "O Come All Ye Faithful" is so old it was first written in Latin and no one even remembers who wrote it.

And don't we turn off the cable news and the talking heads and turn on specials like "A Charlie Brown Christmas?" It was first broadcast in 1965, and millions of viewers are still gathering around to hear Linus repeat the Christmas story from Luke chapter 2 once more.

So, even in our harried, hectic world, Christmas is the one time when all of us somehow come together. But why? Among all the Christian festivals of the year, why has Christmas been so universally adopted? After all, we 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. So why is Christmas so meaningful even for nonChristians, even for Jews like Irving Berlin who wrote "White Christmas?" Bing Crosby's recording of that song is still the all-time world-wide favorite, with over 50 million copies sold.

I suspect that the real reason most people love Christmas so much is the safe feeling we get this time of year. Not only is this the Bible story that is most familiar to us. It is the one time in Jesus' life when everyone feels most comfortable with Him.

Think about it: we always enjoy having guests at our Joy Gift supper, but what if the adult Jesus were to show up? How comfortable would we be around Him? He can read your mind, you know. And He has a habit of asking really difficult questions, saying things that cut to the very center of your inmost being. Yes, we love the adult Jesus, and we respect Him. But He confuses us. He would probably make us feel guilty, and certainly uneasy. He is just so – different.

On the other hand, if Mary brought baby Jesus to the Joy Gift supper, we would know exactly what to do. Babies are cute and cuddly. Everyone can understand Jesus as a baby.

So, imagine yourself holding baby Jesus. All the warmth and love and wonder you feel for all babies would only be multiplied, knowing how much Jesus loves you, and knowing that He came into the world to save you from your sins.

But think again about what John has tried to tell us in today's Scripture passage: "Do you know Who that is you are holding? That's the Word of God."

Okay, what does that mean? How can a person be a word? Well, in part, John means that the Baby Jesus is the One Who reveals God fully to man. When Jesus speaks, it is God talking.

You look down at the baby again, this time with awe, but still with some degree of understanding. 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.

But John 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.

If the prophets were streams, bearing the water of life to God's thirsty people, Jesus was the spring that formed the streams. If the prophets were shepherds who led the people of God, Jesus was the path they all walked on. The Baby in the Manger is the Word of God.

But how could the baby Jesus have told the prophets what to say? The prophets all lived hundreds or even thousands of years before He was even born. That just 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 when we go back to the story of creation that we read in our responsive reading, we do 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 God's creative power.

And indeed, we find John agreeing with us. Yes. It is the Word through whom everything was made. Nothing came into being without the power and presence of God's Word.

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 are a little less comfortable holding this baby, aren't we? Come to think of it, how would Mary have felt on that first Christmas, knowing that the baby to whom she had just given birth had actually brought her into existence? How could she cuddle and cradle her 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. Lots of religions believe in many gods. 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 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 have the Holy Spirit descend upon Him like a dove and hear the Father'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 all we know. We believe that Jesus is True God, yet the eternally begotten Son of God. We believe that God is one essence, 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. We believe this because this is what Jesus lived and what Jesus taught. But no one claims to understand it.

So, given all that we know about Jesus, one thing is clear. That comfortable, familiar feeling we experience as we draw near to the Baby in the Manger is totally out of place. For in the face of the sleeping infant is the unutterable mystery of the Trinity – One God in Three Persons. In the person of that little Baby is the unimaginable mystery of the incarnation – Jesus was fully God and yet fully man, a divine nature and a human nature in one Person.

But perhaps there is an even greater mystery here – that this Living Word of God, this pre-existent One, this One through Whom all things were made, would choose to become flesh, would choose to become one of us, would choose to come into our sinful, fractured, messed-up world, would choose to dwell among us, even among those who as verse 11 says did not receive Him.

And the word translated “dwelt” in the King James Version actually means “tabernacled.” Since the Tabernacle was the tent in which God’s people worshipped Him at the time of the Exodus, that means Jesus came to pitch His tent alongside of ours, not just during the holiday season when our hearts are full of thanks, but all the time, even when we are guiltiest, even when we are neediest, even when we are loneliest, even when we are most desperate.

Why would anyone, let alone the Creator of the World, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, do all that? John gives us a hint in verse 14, doesn’t he? He says that when Jesus came into the world, He was not only full of truth, full of the holy majesty of God. His coming into the world was also the fullest expression of God’s grace.

Grace – that means that in Jesus Christ God was giving us something that none of us deserve and that none of us can earn but that all of us desperately need. Jesus, the living Word of God, the light of the world came into our dark and sinful world to die so that we might have light and life, so that we might even become the children of God.

How can we possibly hope to understand grace like this? How can we understand this kind of radical, selfless, unconditional love? The good news is that God does not ask us to

understand Him. He simply asks us to worship His Divine Son. And so as we approach the manger, our lack of understanding should only serve to increase our wonder and our awe.

So, let's take another look at that baby in the manger. What do you see? That's the Prince of Peace, the Sun of Righteousness. That's the everlasting Lord of Lords, God incarnate, God with us. That's God's anointed Messiah, the newborn King of Kings, the One Who came to reconcile us to God, the One Who was born to raise the sons of earth and to give all who trust in Him a second birth, eternal life with Him forever and new life with Him today.

No, we may not really understand any of this, but let's join our voices with the angel chorus anyway. Let's sing His praise, using all the stanzas of "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing."