

“Let’s Keep Christmas”

John 1:1-9

I.

At Christmas and advent we typically read from the synoptic gospels— Matthew, Mark and Luke. Advent readings tell of the adult Jesus’ cryptic apocalyptic pronouncements. While Christmas readings turn to stories of Jesus’ birth and early years. But, John 1 is a Christmas story too. It’s really a Christmas sermon insisting that before all God was... in all God is... beyond all God will be. And throughout all of creation this divine thread unites all that has been and all that will be created.

The theologian Robert McAfee Brown likes to use in his writing the musical metaphor of themes and variations. There are many musical compositions, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony for example, which begin with a clear, identifiable musical pattern, or theme. What follows in the music is a series of variations on this theme, the theme being repeated in ever more complex combinations. Sometimes the texture of these combinations is so complex that the theme is hidden, seemingly obscured by the competing and interlocking notes.

But those who have heard the theme clearly stated at the beginning of the work can still make it out, can feel the music being organized by the theme. In Jesus Christ "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" That's the theme of all of life heard clearly by the ears of faith, and those who have heard that distinct theme can hear it being sounded wherever the music of life is being played, no matter how jangled are the false notes surrounding it.¹

II.

In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. The word here in John is translated from the Greek word Logos. Logos was the Greek word for ‘word’ but it also was a philosophical category describing essence, reason, truth. The Logos or word of God signifies God’s power of creation and redemption — it is the combination of what God does and who God is. It’s truth and articulation of that truth. It’s power and power to act. God is who God is. Was who God was. Will be who God will be. God acts

in ways that corresponds with his will and character, without error. The Logos is the binding point—the place where heaven and earth meet. Where God’s intentions become realized.

This was a popular idea in Judaism of the 1st century. Many Jews held to the idea of a Logos or Sophia— word or wisdom— that emanates from God but is a separate entity. Though, they were still monotheistic... yes, it’s a complicated theology much like our Trinitarian theology. This Logos or Sophia communicated God’s will and acted as a link between heaven and earth or between the divine and human. Translations of the Hebrew bible during this time reflect this theology. When they quote scripture they will include the word. For instance, Genesis 1:3 they translated, “And the word of God said, ‘Let there be light.’ And in Exodus 17 they translated, “And the word of God was leading them during the day in a pillar of cloud.”

So when John begins by speaking about how the Logos was with God and was God, he is speaking the common language. His preaching is directed at the opening verses of Genesis— “And God said: Let there be light, and there was light.”

It is the “saying” of God that produces the light, and indeed through this saying everything was made that was made. Not until v. 14 does this sermon diverge from classical Jewish preaching. When John says the “Word became flesh,” things change and now the Logos or Word of God is threaded into something new. John 1 is a sermon based off of Genesis 1 using the interpretive lens of Proverbs 8:22-31. In those verses from Proverbs the author pictures wisdom or the Logos being fashioned before time— “When there were no watery depths I was given birth... I was there when he set the heavens in place.” All this is called to mind when John begins— “In the beginning was the Word.”

And the implications of this idea are still being worked out. John’s sermon gives us some definition of our role in how it talks about John the baptist. The Gospel of John is attributed to the “disciple whom Jesus loved” — this anonymous figure is there for the main events of Jesus’ life. Traditionally we have associated this gospel with John son of Zebedee, one of the 12 disciples. So, that John points to another John to help explain the logos. John the Baptist— That John’s purpose was testifying to

the light. His calling is not self-fulfillment, that never fills us. It's not only to find the light within himself... though it is there too. Purpose in our lives is about more than our own fulfillment, it's about our role in the larger picture of what God is doing for creation. We testify to the light so that all might believe through him.

III.

The great advancements in modern life— technology, democracy, capitalism— have made us more free and able to be greater agents in building our lives. At the same time secularization has set us free from the more sacral forms of society. This has moved authority from institutions like the church or the state to the self. Indeed, truth itself becomes a result of how we feel about truth itself. Secularization re-mythologizes our world view so that we see ourselves as creators and agents responsible for our actions. This can be a good thing... but it also creates a crisis of purpose when it leaves no space for transcendence. The transcendence of a God who is wholly other, beyond, yet ordering and empowering. In previous centuries people turned to the

church to understand their place in the world and to give them prompting on how to live the good life. The church no longer has that kind of authority en masse. Because there's no central authority for what to believe or how to act there's a greater burden placed upon the personal responsibility of each individual.

Author and ex-CIA officer Martin Gurri studies the global information landscape; he says, "There used to be something called a "mass audience"— there were massive numbers of people all essentially looking into a gigantic mirror in which they saw themselves reflected. So most people were consuming the same content and there was a common denominator...The digital revolution has shattered that mirror, and now the public inhabits those broken pieces of glass. So the public isn't one thing; it's highly fragmented, and it's basically mutually hostile." There's nothing worth uniting around except that which we want to reject. There's no positive project of transformative progress.

What if John's sermon could be a means for us to create momentum toward that cause— positive

progressive transformation founded in the Word? John gives us John (the Baptist) as an example of how to make this vocation our own— we find purpose by pointing beyond ourselves to the One who is beyond time, beyond ourselves and yet deeply within us. And so we take the progression of modern life— the gifts of our time— and we partner with God in the renewal of the world. For John the Baptist being a witness like this meant moving out to the wilderness and eating locust... it meant unplugging from culture and calling people to renewal. On the other hand, Jesus jumped head first into people's lives. He ate and drank with Pharisees and tax collectors. He prayed for his disciples to be in the world but not be of it. These 2 visions of life complement each other. This leaves opportunity for you and I to find our calling in this life... to look for where the Logos leads and use all we have to point our lives toward the Word of hope. And to begin putting the broken shards of glass together so that we might collectively begin to see something bigger than our own reflection.

IV.

The Word is in our language. John Claypool once talked about walking around the farm in Kentucky which had been in his family for generations. He happened to look down and saw a giant anthill. There must have been thousands of ants scurrying back and forth. It was a world unto itself. And as he looked down, he thought “they have no way of understanding something as big and complex as a human being.” If they were aware of him at all, he must have loomed over them as some kind of ominous presence. Then it dawned on him that if he had the power to somehow become an ant and yet take into that new condition as much of the reality of a human being as would be possible - in other words, if he could cross this chasm of otherness from his side - then it would be possible for ants to understand the human in ways that they could never have known before.

As he walked away, he began to realize that the chasm between an ant and a human being, vast as it is, is nothing compared to the chasm between a human being and this mysterious, divine reality that gives life. And Claypool says,

“We are as incapable of understanding God on our own as an ant would be incapable of understanding us.”² The word is best lived... and when it is lived then our lives point to that which is greater than us, beyond us, and at the same time deeply within us.

There’s an old story about a woman named Kathleen. Growing up, she dreamed of serving God as a missionary. She wanted to share the gospel all around the globe. But it didn’t work out that way. She got married, had children, the family needed extra income, so she went to nursing school. She ended up as a public health nurse in Asbury Park, New Jersey. If you know Asbury Park, you know that in the 1930’s and 40’s it was a fashionable seaside resort, with great hotels and shops and a boardwalk that rivaled Atlantic City. But then came the 60s. And urban blight. Corruption. Poverty. The boardwalk rotted. The hotels became flop houses. The shops and restaurants closed. By the time Kathleen was there Asbury Park looked like bombed-out Berlin. In one of those dilapidated hotels someone had opened a home for older adults – a retirement home in a flop house. Most of the residents were sick. All

of them were poor. The management wouldn’t let public health nurses into the hotel, because they didn’t want them to see the terrible conditions in which those people were living. And, the corrupt city government of Asbury Park at the time backed them up.

So Kathleen took off her nurse’s uniform and put on ordinary clothes and went incognito into that hotel and got hired as a maid. Every day, she went from room to room scrubbing toilets, changing linens, and covertly taking blood pressures, and checking medications, and speaking a word of encouragement. In short— she was a missionary. And she said that she saw in every person in that hotel the face of the risen Christ. She went from room to room to room. And where most of us see only darkness and death, she saw Jesus.

Before all God was... in all God is... beyond all God will be. And the word binds us to him.... it binds us to each other. The best part of Christmas is the feeling that we are all a part of a celebration that’s much larger than ourselves or even our ‘group’. There’s a kindness in the air that’s different

from other times of the year... or
maybe we just are more prone to
noticing it. Still, there's a feeling
that we are woven together and
reliant upon each other more than
other times. We act this out on
Christmas eve lighting candles to
remind ourselves of the way we
are the light of the world now...
waiting in darkness but through the
light the darkness is overcome.
Word was made flesh at
Christmas... through you the word
is made known today.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Something Is about to Happen*, CSS Publishing Company

² John Claypool, *God Became What We Are*