

**John 1:1-18**

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world

<sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. <sup>15</sup>(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") <sup>16</sup>From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup>The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (330)

The story of Jesus begins in the beginning. This is according to John, which gospel begins not with the beginning of Jesus' ministry, as Mark does; and not with Jesus' lineage and the announcement of his birth, as Matthew and Luke do; but with the beginning of the created order. John harks back to the beginning, beginning his story in the same terms as the writer of Genesis begins that, "In the beginning."

The stories deviate from there.

Genesis gets right to the action of creation. God speaks, and it is so. God speaks, and it is so. Light! Dry land! Sun, stars, and moon. Creeping things.

John lingers amidst pre-creation, takes a moment to imagine more fully this creative Word. It was God Himself: "The Word was God." It was also other than God: "The Word was *with* God." An intimate other, the sort of thing that is inseparable from you, but is also not entirely of you: this is relationship. Your marriage isn't you entirely, but it also has no being without you. You with your best friend, this friendship isn't yours entirely, but it ceases to be without your

participation in it. This intimate other, the exchange between the One and the Other that becomes its own entity—love, mutual regard and recognition, the countenance that confers being: it can't help but to create. Light! Life!

And on it goes.

And on it goes.

In this way, also, the two stories that begin the same way, “In the beginning,” deviate from one another. In Genesis, God completes the creation. For six days God worked through God's word, but with the close of the sixth day the creation was complete, and now God could rest. In John, there's no having come to completion, there is yet coming to completion—and because of this, there is no time of rest—not yet, not yet.

This is the generative spirit of the whole book. The Word had come in Jesus, to which John would testify; and Jesus was coming to the world to complete God's works of creation—to bring to perfection, full fruition what God and the Word had begun in the beginning. For this, Jesus is heard throughout this book to speak of having come to do his Father's works, having come to work the works his Father meant for him. Also for this, he's seen time and again in this gospel to work on the Sabbath—because in this book there is no Sabbath. This day which God first honored for having completed the work of creation, this day which people honor by way of participating in the divine presence: as God rested on the Sabbath, so people rest on the Sabbath in order to participate in God, to participate in the occurrence of God. But according to John, Sabbath rest was premature. We're not there yet. We're yet in the middle of the creative action, we're yet becoming made, not yet fully made, still yet becoming children of God—though in Jesus as the Word of God we're now given the power to become children of God.

The world is not yet complete, is yet becoming, is yet being cultivated.

I like this better than understanding the world as “fallen.” I like this better than conceiving of the world as broken. I like the orientation toward the future rather than toward the past. We don't have a perfect past back to which we should aim to get, according to John's conception of Jesus. We have a perfected future, a time beyond time, which we can anticipate by practicing our faith, by availing ourselves to that power to become children of God.

We don't need to be made great again. We need to aim ourselves to God's aim, that we and all the creation might ever become what we are, ever cultivating this wild nature into

something perfect for human thriving and for the thriving of all that is and has been and ever shall be.

At the end of this gospel, Jesus has been buried in a garden. Mary the Magdalene returns to the tomb, as is remembered in all four gospels Mary to have done. In this one only, when she encounters the risen Christ, she mistakes him for the gardener.

She wasn't entirely wrong.

For what it's worth, the assertion that the Word of God, this so-called in the Greek, *logos*, became flesh would have struck as absurd among those to whom John first asserted this—whether Jew or Greek. In John's case, it could have been either, or would more specifically have been both, these Hellenized Jews, Jews who had been raised in a thoroughly Hellenized world. A world thoroughly Greek in thought and aesthetic, for these Jews who had been cast out of the synagogue so cultivated less and less to be Jews, they'd have been both. This gospel comes to us late in the earliest days of the Church, when the rupture between Jews and Jewish Christians had made any once-possible coexistence now untenable. By now, Jewish Christians had been exiled, cast out even of their families, made to rely only on each other.

Of these two ways, then, the Jewish embodied way of obedience to the Law and the Greek idealistic way of dialectic and discourse, John's community would make a third way—and it would begin with this assertion, that the Word became flesh and lived among the created order that the Word had itself made.

And it would be absurd to the Greek about them, maybe even offensive—that the *Logos* of the universe could come to live among us. This entity, which is the logic of the universe, the divine reason implicit in the cosmos that ordered it in the beginning and that continues throughout time to give it form and meaning: this *Logos* permeates all reality, as providence, nature, god, or the soul of the universe. But it was not particular in any way, not thought to abide in any matter or being in an acute way. Indeed, this would violate the purity of such soul, such reason. The body was corrupt, would decay. The soul though: this was beauty and freedom! This *logos*, then: it simply couldn't come to live as one of us, right?

And it would have been absurd to the Jew about them, maybe even offensive—that the *Logos* could come as a thing amidst the creation, this which had been imagined as pre-created and transcendent. Called *Ruah*, breath; called Wisdom or *Sophia*, whom was God's companion and

consort before time began, God's co-creator in the beginning, and God's continuing delight as a child is to her parent: Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher from the 1<sup>st</sup> century, taught that Logos was the intermediary between God and the cosmos—both the agent of creation and the agent through which the human mind can apprehend and comprehend God, both immanent in the world and transcendent over the world, but still very much contained of the one true God, who could not be represented, otherwise would be violated.

This *Logos*, then, simply couldn't come to live as one of us.

Right?

Merry Christmas.

When it comes to the incarnation, that the Word became flesh, I always think of Cynthia Bourgeault, her book, *The Wisdom Jesus*. She writes of life in this world, that it “presents us with a series of seemingly irrevocable choices. To do one thing means that we have to give up something else; to marry one person means we can't marry another; and to join a monastery means we can't marry at all. Our confused agendas clash both inwardly and outwardly, and we cause each other pain. Our bodies age; we diminish physically; loved ones fall out of our lives. And the force of gravity is tenacious, nailing our feet to the ground and usually our souls as well...”

But, “...could it be,” she wonders, “that this earthly realm, not in spite of but *because of* its very density and jagged edges, offers precisely the conditions for the expression of certain aspects of divine love that could become real in no other way?” Could it be (and this is me now speaking) that the limits and edges essential to the created order provide the perfect realm for an urgent realization of abounding love? Could it be that this world presents the perfect chance that divine love might be most acutely felt and offered, could indeed be our saving grace?

Then there's this: how dreadful it would be, this world of density and jagged edges. How dreadful it would be if it weren't also a place cultivated in love.

So, that it *is* a place cultivated in love, that it might be all the more a place cultivated in love for our taking up the task, the urgent work, of such loving cultivation: good news! Hopeful news.

That we're not done yet, that we haven't arrived yet to God's realm of perfection and wholeness: this is likely not news at all, not given the actual news we heard this week. There's a new strand of COVID even catchier than the last. The vaccination process is slower than we need.

People are falling into ever more desperate financial situations. Households are stressed beyond what can be managed. And the government seems non-responsive to these facts on the ground, though this is what governments are for—taking action together when action alone simply won't do. For every practical reason we have to hope as to what lies ahead in the new year, there's reason also to doubt, even to despair. This is a long exercise we're involved in here, and we're about halfway through the workout. So say the voices of moderation and caution. September is when we may be back to some semblance of the familiar. Some say spring, others say next winter, most seem to split the difference.

So, add this to your prayer life: Christ as ever at the work of cultivating in love. Add this to your internal monologue: the Word of creative love which calls us each to become. As you wander through your quarantine, talking to yourself (that can't just be me, right?), wander with the Spirit, and speak in accents of affection and beauty. As you bump up against the frustrations inherent in life these days, notice also the fruits of mercy and love. Moreover, grow those fruits as ever you can.

I learned this week that joy, and to enjoy, and to rejoice, all come to us from the Latin *frui*, which as well gives us fruit, and fruition, and fullness. I learned also that the opposite of *frui* is *frustra*, a thing done in vain, frustrated for not having produced any fruit or *fructi*, sweetness and fulfillment.

I love the connection between joy and fruit, I love the possibility that to rejoice is to enter into fulfillment, a foretaste of what's been imagined as God's aim for all the creation since the beginning. I love how this makes the garden that King Jesus keeps all the more the place for me, perhaps the place for you.

Imagine that. Really, imagine that. We are in a state of frustration unlike I've ever known. We bump up against the walls of our limited lives unlike has ever happened to me before (lucky duck that I am). Imagine instead these suddenly limited lives that we're leading as plots that we might at last manage with some care, as garden plots we might at last join with Christ to cultivate in love.

We're not done yet. This is no surprise, though it might be newly a word of promise, especially if Christ is yet with us, having come incarnate that we might come divine.

Maybe so.

Merry Christmas.

Thanks be to God.