

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning.

³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

⁶ There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-14)

The Word Became Flesh

If you went for a walk one day and saw a man in a park somewhere, you could probably tell some things about him, right? If he wore a beard and a flannel shirt and skinny jeans, you might conclude that he's a hipster. If you saw him playing a guitar, you might think he's a musician, perhaps even a professional musician. If you got close enough to see whether he was wearing a wedding ring, you might take a guess at whether he's married or not. All those conclusions would be reasonable and quite possibly true. But even if you were one hundred percent correct about all those guesses, would you claim that you knew that man? Obviously not. So how would you change that? You'd have to stop and talk to him. That's the only way to get to know someone. And you'd probably need more than the kind of casual conversation you have with someone while you're waiting in line at the grocery store. You'd need to really engage with that person, perhaps multiple times, for him to become someone that you knew well. And the reverse can happen, too. If a husband and wife never talk, they begin to know each other less and less. They find that they don't know what the other person is thinking or what they want. One day, they may even realize that they're married to a stranger.

In our gospel lesson for today, God introduces us to Jesus before he was born. Now, strictly speaking, we shouldn't use the name "Jesus" for the Son of God before he entered the womb of the Virgin Mary. He doesn't begin to use that name until that moment. But to make things easier, we will call him Jesus this morning no matter when we're talking about. John 1:1 says, **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."** If you took all the commentaries that have been written about this verse in the history of the church and stacked them up here in our sanctuary, they would probably reach all the way to the ceiling. The most challenging part of this verse is the person who is called "the Word." That's Jesus long before he ever entered the womb of the Virgin Mary or was born in Bethlehem.

Why does God call his Son "the Word"? You can't help but notice how similar this verse is to the very first verse of the Bible, **"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."** You know how God did that: he spoke. God said, **"Let there be light,"** and light came into existence. Hebrews 1 says that God sustains all things by his powerful word. So when the Bible calls Jesus "the Word" God is pointing to his Son's power to create and to run the entire universe. John 1 also speaks to the eternity of that word. Genesis 1 takes us back to the beginning of time, and God is already there. John 1 really points us beyond that beginning of time, and the Word is already there. He is with God and he is God. He stands with his Father and the Holy Spirit, three persons. And he is united with them into one eternal being, one God.

So calling Jesus "the Word" reminds us of all the mystery of God. He is beyond our understanding. In truth, even in heaven, we won't know all that there is to know about God. But when God called his Son "the Word" he was also reminding us of that we still need to know him. The gospel of John tells us that no one knows the Father unless they first know the Son. And how can we ever get to know Jesus? How can we ever get to know the Father that he reveals to us or the Spirit that he sends to us? Through words. The Greek word translated here means more than just a vocabulary word. It means a message, a concept, a communication.

Jesus is the one who communicates the unknowable God to us. In Jesus – indeed, only in Jesus – can we ever come to know God.

So Christmas then, is about God making himself known to us. All people are born with a natural realization that God is out there somewhere. Countless religions and philosophies have sprung from the truth. But none of those thinkers and sages and spiritual leaders could ever get close to the true God because none of them had Jesus. None of them had the Word. In the end, they created a god in their own image. But our God reached out from eternity and entered our world to reach us. He recognized that we could never come to him. So he came to us in the body of a baby boy that was born in stable in a little town in Israel.

John says, “**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.**” That’s how the Word made God known. But in the process, Jesus came to know what it means to be us. He shared our experience. Now, God knows all things. He knows our lives even apart from Jesus coming. But in Christ, God experienced what it is to be a human being living in a sinful world. Jesus was born on what was probably a chilly night and he was wrapped in cloths to keep him warm. He got hungry and tired. He grew and learned, even while he knew all things and held the whole universe in his hands. Jesus experienced pain and sorrow. Not only did he weep at the grave of his friend Lazarus, his father is not mentioned after Jesus turned 12. The most probable reason is that Joseph had died. Jesus faced brothers who argued with him and followers who disappointed him and enemies who hated him and killed him.

My friends, what is your life like? How much does it hurt? Never imagine that God doesn’t “get it.” Never imagine that God doesn’t see you or know what pain really feels like. In Jesus, God walked in your shoes. One of his gifts on that first Christmas is a God who knows and understands exactly what your life is like. And he loves you enough to help you, to listen to you, to be with you every step of the way.

But Jesus did more than just walk with us. He is more than just a friend who listens to us. Jesus took our place in life and in death. That baby in the manger began life just as we do. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, but then he grew for nine months in his mother’s womb. He was born in the normal way. And he grew up and faced the life we have to face to replace all our failures and sins. Every day that we are here, we fall short of what God calls us to do and to be. We sin. God knows our sin better even than we do because God can face it as it actually is. All too often, we engage in self-deception and excuse making and self-justifying. We work hard to convince ourselves that we’re really not all that bad. But God sees our sin and he condemns it outright. He says we all deserve hell. But he sent Jesus to live the perfect life we can’t. His one perfect life counts for all of us because it is the life of God made man, of the Word made flesh. Then Jesus laid that life down for us on the cross. He suffered the hell there that all our sins deserve. He paid all that we owe. Bethlehem was the first step to that cross for us.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us – that’s John’s way of summarizing all that Jesus did while he was here in this world. The Greek word John uses to say “made his dwelling among us”, he uses again in Revelation 21 where he says, “**Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.**” Only there, he’s talking about eternal life. Jesus came and lived with us here so that God will come and live with us in a perfect world forever. That, too, is the gift of Christmas.

John says, “**In him was life, and that life was the light of men.**” Only God can give life. I know that we parents supply the biological material and the biological activity necessary to “make a baby.” In a sense, we give that child life. But even then, God decides when a child is actually conceived. God decides how long it lives and when it dies. When he walked this earth, Jesus showed his power to give life when he healed the sick and raised the dead. And of course, the greatest gift of life comes from his own resurrection. In that act, he gives us eternal life. We will rise and live with him in a new and perfect world forever. We will live in a world that no longer knows death just as we will never meet it again. If we die before that day comes, he will preserve the life he gave us by taking us home to heaven to live with him there. Knowing all that gives us life already here. We live spiritually – we have faith in Christ who lives in our hearts now. In all those senses, only God can give life. Jesus, the Son of God, came here to give us that life.

How did God give us that gift? That life was the light of men. Last night, we meditated on the image of light and darkness. Jesus was born into a world trapped in the darkness of sin and death and he shines on our hearts. How does he do that? Practically speaking, again, through words. Jesus gives us the word of God, the law that condemns our sins and makes sense of why we die, and the gospel that gives us faith and eternal life. The gospel that rescues us from death and hell. The Word made flesh, Jesus, comes to us in the word that is

written and the word that is proclaimed and the word that is joined to bread and wine in communion. And he shines light into our hearts and makes us new and different. That light is the gift of Christmas.

That word is how we get to know Jesus. We explore it. We follow Jesus in the gospels from Bethlehem to the cross and to the empty tomb. We hear his words and see his miracles. We hear St Paul and St. John and St Peter explain the meaning of his life in the epistles. We go back to the Old Testament and we hear these rich words of preparation. God uses his word to call the world into existence and he uses his word to promise a Savior to Adam and Eve and to Abraham and to David and to Isaiah. He uses his word to call a people out of slavery and he uses them to give flesh to his Son. We read all these words and Jesus becomes far more than a passing acquaintance. He knows us and we know him. Knowing him means eternal life.

John says, **“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”** Sin gets in the way. Sin hides the love of God from us. Sin makes us sinners unwilling and unable to recognize our Savior and so it leaves us alone, in the dark, without his love. But Jesus came. As John says, **“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”** Once God shines the light of the gospel into our hearts, he makes us part of his family. He takes us orphan beggars off the street and he moves us into house and he trusts us with all that he has. He loves us and calls us his children. In fact, he says we have that right. We can claim it wherever we are and in whatever situation. Never are we truly alone in this world. Our Father loves us and watches over us and brings us home. All that is ours because that baby was born in Bethlehem. All that is ours because of Christmas. Amen.