

## The “Beginning” Word

John 1:1-5, 14

December 31, 2023

About 100 years ago, two pastors in Switzerland found themselves disheartened and disillusioned at the state of the world. War had broken out in seemingly every direction, and the best and brightest were failing to do what was right amidst politics gone wild. They agonized over where things went wrong, both in and outside of the church walls. They examined their own hearts and paths along the way and put all they had into trying to figure out what was the best way forward, personally and collectively. In the end, they came to a very simple resolution: “we must begin, again, at the beginning.” This set the stage for one of the most pivotal moments in the Church in the 20th century, where Karl Barth, like Martin Luther 500 years before him, discovered—or rather was encountered by—the Good News of the Gospel anew through God’s Word, which paved the way for a new beginning, a fresh, courageous, and impactful witness to Jesus Christ in the world.

We, too, must begin again and again at the beginning. This is where the Bible begins. It’s also where John’s Gospel begins—at the beginning of all creation. John’s opening words are rich in meaning and held in the highest esteem by some of the best minds throughout church history. “A certain Platonist once said that the beginning of this Gospel ought to be copied in letters of gold and placed in the most conspicuous place in every church.” So says St. Augustine in *City of God*. Yes, these words are priceless, but what do they mean? To begin to understand, we too have to go to the beginning.

In the beginning, we see that God makes a very important decision: to create the cosmos and everything therein. How does God do this?

By speaking all things into existence. “Let there be…” and so it goes. The way God creates, Scripture tells us, the power to create is by way of God’s Word. Genesis goes on to describe in beautiful, poetic detail how God created all things by speaking them into being. “Let there be stars. Let there be vegetation. Let there be swarms of living creatures, in the sky, under the sea. Let there be wild animals of every kind on the earth.” And finally, “Let us make humankind in our image.” And after each new thing God delighted in each one of them, called each one “good,” and called human beings “very good.”

God creates all things by the power of God’s speech, God’s Word. This is important because it’s precisely what John is footnoting in the creation story. God’s creative Word is what John wants us to pay attention to here. John is saying that this Word—that was with God at the beginning, that was and is God, through whom all things were created—that Word has entered into creation in the form of a human being named Jesus.

So, I want to pause and point out a few things here.

First, notice that the very first word God uses to describe each aspect of creation is “good,” and human beings are described as “very good.” Remember that God’s Word creates what it says, creates the very thing it speaks—which means that God not only calls us good, but by calling us good, God makes us good. Period. That’s something that we ought to take in: God’s estimation of you is that you are very good.

God speaking those words is itself a creative act of God, just as any other creative act and speech of God. It makes you good. So, as we begin the New Year,

remembering God's beginning Word about each of us, you are very good. Whatever else you think about yourself, whatever else anyone else thinks about you, God at the very beginning and continues to call you very good, and so you are.

Second, in the beginning, God is making a monumental decision: to be our God. And not just some of us, but all of us. To be clear, God, being God, does not need us, but God does want us. Put more strongly, as Rev. Henry reminded us on Christmas Eve, "God does not will to be without us," and furthermore, "God does not will us to be without Him." In other words, God creates us out of a desire to be in relationship with us.

The pages of Scripture are littered with stories and examples of God's desire faithfully lived out again and again and again, and of our fickle and fleeting desire to be in a faithful relationship with God. Again and again, and again.

And this is where John's Gospel picks up in these opening passages. John's first verses describe this dynamic both in hindsight but also in looking ahead, from the beginning of creation until he pens these words, but also in looking ahead to how the Word became flesh and how he was received by those he created, those he loved, those with whom he came to live.

Let's look at verse 5 again. "The Light shines in the darkness..." John is using this word "darkness" in a particular way and on multiple levels. Like Leonardo da Vinci, John likes to use contrast to paint his pictures, and his pallet is made up of pairs of words on opposite ends of a pole: above and below, Spirit and flesh, truth and falsehood, sight and blindness, Light and darkness.

"The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Darkness here is not just a lack of light. For John, it's a lack of true sight and therefore true understanding. That word, "overcome," it's important to note can also be

translated as "understand." As in, the darkness did not "understand" the Light, the Word, that is, Jesus. Just as in English, ancient Greek words could have more than one definition, and this word means both, and so does John. When the Word became flesh in Jesus, those who met him did not understand who he was. They saw him, but not really. And because they didn't really see him, in their darkness, they dismissed him. They accused him. They betrayed him. They abandoned him. They denied him. They killed him. Darkness.

And yet, even though we, in our darkness, did not understand him, the Light overcame all that darkness. God's Light not only illuminated the dark and ugly inclinations that we have, our unjust and backward ways, it also overcame all of that ugliness. It continued and continues to shine in the darkest corners of our world and of our hearts. God's desire, from the beginning, to be in relationship with us has and will never waiver. Remember that. Let that Light shine in whatever dark doubts you may have about how God feels about you. "The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not, and will not, overcome it." That Light is the only true Light by which we can truly see ourselves for who we are, and truly see others for who they are.

That Light, John says, is Jesus. And this means something worth remembering. When we truly see Jesus for who he is, we will then truly see ourselves for who we are, and others for who they truly are.

So, then, who is Jesus? John says he is the Word of God, through which all things came into being, who became flesh and lived among us, who "moved into our neighborhood."<sup>2</sup> God's desire to be in relationship with us comes to a climax in the person of Jesus. God meets us on our level, sympathizing with us in our weaknesses, being tempted and tried in all the ways that we are, understanding us from the inside out. This tells us a few things:

God sees us, really.

God means to help us, completely.

And God means for us to see one another not just with our physical eyes but with spiritual eyes, illuminated not just by physical light but by the spiritual Light of Jesus. That was and is the only way to truly see Jesus for who he is. It's also the only way to truly see ourselves for who we are, and others for who they truly are.

Late in my grandfather's life, he wrote a short piece entitled "Reflections on the Imminence of Blindness." Earlier in his life, he had lost one of his eyes in an accident. As he grew older, his remaining eye began to fail, despite all the best medical interventions available at the time. He wrote, "After 79 years of basking in God's sunlight and enjoying the sights of this world through my God given gift of human eyesight, my rheostat is now in irreversible motion which will turn my light from dim to dimmer to darkness, and eventually, apparently, to total blindness." This situation led him to an intense reliance on the Light of God's Word, and especially on those verses in scripture that speak to spiritual sight, such as, "We fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen, for what is seen is temporary. What is unseen is eternal." It's no surprise that his favorite hymn writer was the blind hymn writer Fanny Crosby, who wrote countless famous hymns, like "To God be the Glory" and "Blessed Assurance" among others. All of this led him to a deep spiritual insight: "In the same sense that a photographer must use the eyes of his camera to focus on the object of his picture, we can use the eyes of our soul to focus on all the wonderful scenes that God would have us see with our 'spiritual eyes,' and which can never be seen through our mortal and deteriorating human eyes."

This makes me wonder—what do we miss by only seeing things with our human eyes? From our human perspective? More to the point, who are we not seeing? As we begin a New Year, let's begin again at

the beginning with the Word of God. That Word is the Light of God's Word, and the Light of God, and it is by that Light that we are given spiritual eyes to see how deeply we are loved by God. Moreover, by the Light of God's Word, we are given eyes to truly see, and therefore to truly love one another. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Thomas F. Torrance, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God, Part 1, vol. 2* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 274.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), Jn 1:14.