

“In the Beginning Was the Word”

(A revised version of a sermon I gave on November 27, 2016)

John 1:1

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So who is Jesus, *really*? We celebrate his birth every year, with a tremendous amount of festivity and joy. But what is so *special* about him that merits this much celebration? Three vitally important answers to that question can be found in the opening verse of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

The distinguished biblical scholar Raymond Brown called the Gospel of John the “pearl of great price” among the various writings of the New Testament. A. T. Robertson called it “the profoundest book in the world.” It is the most spiritual of the gospels, deeply beloved by many who have carefully worked their way through John’s simple but elegant message. I had the opportunity to spend five weeks at the end of my college years learning how to read the Gospel of John in the original Greek, an immensely enjoyable and spiritually enriching way to bring those years to a close. It is a majestic book, deeply profound, cosmic and grand, filled – like Jesus himself – with grace and truth. Biblical commentator William Barclay says that “of all the New Testament writers, John has the most penetrating gaze into the eternal mysteries and the eternal truths and the very mind of God.” The gospel begins with eighteen verses that comprise one the most beautiful, revelatory, and truly *inspired* poems or hymns anywhere in the Bible; Barclay calls it “one of the greatest adventures of religious thought ever achieved.” Long ago Christian artists created animal symbols for each of the four gospels; for John it was the eagle, “largely determined,” wrote Raymond Brown, “by the celestial flights of the opening lines of the Gospel.” Sixteen centuries ago, St. Augustine 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.”

“In the beginning.” That’s how the Gospel begins. “In the beginning.” Only one other book in the Bible begins with those words, and John repeats them, verbatim. The very first readers of his gospel would have *immediately* recalled those opening words from Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” There was unstructured chaos, formless and empty, dark and deep, until a *Word* from God broke forth into the chaos and called Light into being. “In the beginning,” says John, “was the *Word*.” The divine Word, in Hebrew *dabar*, in Greek *logos*. The Jews knew that God used the Word to create the heavens and the earth, the moon, sun, and stars, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the beasts of the land, and humanity itself. God used the Word to give laws and instruction, the Hebrew

Torah; and to reveal the divine will through a multitude of prophets like Nathan and Isaiah and Zechariah. Greeks knew that their philosophers (like Heraclitus and the Stoics) taught that the Word was the very *reason* of God, the underlying principle that ordered the universe, and the source of all truth, knowledge, and wisdom. The first-century philosopher Philo, Jewish by birth and Greek by training, understood that *all* of this was true, that the Word (*dabar*) that called creation into being and spoke to the Hebrew prophets was the same Word (*logos*) that Greeks understood to be reason, wisdom, principles, knowledge, and truth. And the book of Proverbs declared that wisdom was the “first of God’s works,” predating creation, present at the birth of all things, filled with delight and joy in the very presence of God, “rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind” (Proverbs 8.22-31). Before John was inspired to write his gospel, all the pieces were in place, and both Jews and Greeks had been well prepared: the Hebrew *dabar* that called creation into being and spoke to the prophets, the Greek *logos* that was understood to be the divine reason and, the Hebrew *wisdom* that predated all things and that flowed directly from God himself – *all that* is summed up in one simple word: *Word*. “In the beginning was *the Word*.” A very simple clause, six words in English, only five in Greek, yet the effect is *dramatic*. “In the beginning was the Word!” That Word is *Jesus*. That short little clause spoke *volumes!*

Who is Jesus? What’s so special about him? Here is the first answer: He predates all of creation. He came forth from God before God made anything or anyone. He is the vehicle through which all creation sprang forth, and the embodiment of all of God’s Word to humanity. He is the divine *reason*, the underlying principle behind the whole universe, the source of all knowledge and truth. He is *wisdom* itself. He is filled with delight, and unending joy. He is the eternal *Word* of the Father, uncreated and unending. “In the beginning was the Word.” From that single statement come *all* those truths.

“And the Word was with God.” Separate from God, and yet *with* God, in the beginning. Yet more than just “with.” On that very first day of that Greek course on the Gospel of John, we examined this verse very carefully. We learned the nouns “beginning” and “Word” and “God,” the definite article “the,” the verb “to be,” the conjunction “and,” and the prepositions “in” and “with.” Except what we learned about the preposition “with” surprised us, because it turns out that the preposition used here in the opening verse of John’s gospel (*pros*) doesn’t ordinarily mean “with.” Two other prepositions (*syn* and *meta*) typically carried the meaning of “with.” *Pros* is more commonly used to denote “to” or “toward,” with a sense of *direction*, which has led to endless commentary through the centuries: what did John really mean by choosing *that* preposition rather than one of the other two? Most interpreters believe John made a deliberate, conscious choice. He didn’t just want to say that Jesus was *with* God, as if they were sitting together in the same pew. He wanted to say that the relationship was deeper than that, more profound than that, more special than that. It was an *intimate* relationship, a *fellowship*, a *communion*, unlike any other. Frederick Dale Brunner suggests this translation: “and the Word was *in close fellowship with* God.” He elaborates: “God has always had a deeply personal relationship with his Son. This Son, called ‘the Word’ now, was in close fellowship with the great God from, in, and even before ‘the beginning.’ There is mystery in this sentence. But the mystery will be spelled out, as far as is humanly possible, in multiple ways throughout the Gospel as we learn the unique intimacy that Jesus enjoys with his Father.” It is hard to find the right words to convey the mystic communion that Father and Son have held together since before the beginning of time. John chose one preposition, a preposition that he thought would convey that message better than the mere word “with.” Most English translations don’t come anywhere close to expressing the depth of what John says here.

So who is Jesus? Here's the second answer: He is the one and only being in the entire universe who enjoys a uniquely intimate communion with the everlasting God. No one else even comes *close*!

We're only two-thirds of the way through the opening verse of John's gospel, and we already have two answers to the question "What is so *special* about Jesus?" But John has more to offer us before we come to the end of the sentence. "In the beginning was the Word (the divine *logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word *was God*." In Greek, the order of those last two nouns is reversed: "and *God was the Word*." The eternal *logos*, the divine reason, wisdom herself, this unique being who holds a special and communal relationship with God, is none other than *God himself*. How can this be? How can Jesus be both *separate* from God and yet also *God*? Welcome to the mysteries of the Trinity. It took the best Christian minds about three hundred years before they had developed a satisfactory answer to that question, which is articulately expressed in the Nicene Creed: "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made." Every word in that creed is as carefully chosen as every word in the opening sentences of John's gospel. Jesus is "of one Being" with the Father; they are "one substance." God did not *make* him; he was *begotten*, in the eternal realm, before there was such a thing as time – so there was never a time when Jesus did not exist. He is God, but he is also God *from God*. That does not mean there are two Gods, but one. Is it confusing? *Yes!* Is it profound? *Yes*. Is it *true*? Absolutely, yes. It doesn't get any more true than this! "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." As Paul expressed: "O, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! (Romans 11.33)"

The implications of this third point are *huge*. Jesus was not merely, as many people through the centuries have supposed, merely a *man*. Lots of people think that he was special, and closer to God than the rest of us. Muslims wisely go so far as to say that he was a *prophet*, standing in the great tradition of the prophets of old, but even that falls short of the truth. Jesus was God. Jesus is God. The eternal deity, God Almighty, come to earth in human form. To all those people through the centuries who have insisted that Jesus was "just a man," John comes alongside them and says, "You're wrong. He most certainly was *not* 'just a man.'" He *was* a man, to be sure; he was not a spirit, or an apparition, or a ghost. But he wasn't *just* a man. John makes it clear: Jesus was – and is – none other than Almighty *God*.

A couple generations after Jesus's death and resurrection, as pockets of Christianity were growing in various cities throughout the Roman empire, there was a Roman governor named Pliny who wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan. Pliny asked Trajan for advice on how to handle the people called "Christians." Pliny describes some Christian practices to the best of his ability. He says Christians had the habit of gathering before the break of dawn one day each week and singing a hymn to Christ "as if to God." Pliny obviously didn't think a *man* could be *God*. Pliny, I've got news for you ... Christ *is* God. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow – and *before* the first yesterday, and *after* the last tomorrow. *He is God*.

Who is Jesus? We've just read one verse in John's gospel, a mere 17 words, and we've already got three answers. He is the divine *logos*, the eternal Word of God. He is the one and only being in the entire universe who enjoys a uniquely intimate communion with the everlasting God. And he is also *God*. Why do we celebrate Christmas every year? Because GOD THE WORD came to earth. That's why.

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