

Isaiah 60: 1-6
Ephesians 3: 1-10
John 1: 1-18

Word, Light, Life, Flesh
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Recently I watched the film called *Now You See Me* – it is a crime/mystery/thriller sort of film. The main characters are illusionists and card tricksters. They invite their audiences to watch their hands closely. They say, “Look closely, because the closer you think you are, the less you will actually see.” In this way, by encouraging us to focus, they are able to maintain the mystery of their craft.

Sometimes when I read this beautiful passage from the first chapter of the Gospel of John, I get all tangled up. I want to look closely. The language is so compelling and poetic, the concepts are so mysterious and cosmic, the promises seem so generous and comforting. But the more I read, the more I study, the more I feel that I am going down a rabbit hole of deep theology. Each word seems to have several meanings; each word is weighted with connections to other parts of John’s Gospel. I start skipping back and forth – in the Gospel, to the Old Testament Wisdom Literature, to Paul’s letters – searching for new insights. And in the end, the sense of mystery remains. Which is perhaps the point after all.

These 18 verses bring us the paradox of ultimate power and eternity and immensity finding expression in a particular limited setting . . . and thereby manifesting an even greater power. The only way to describe this is in those limited terms: words like word, light, life, and flesh. The other Gospels begin with stories about Jesus’ birth or baptism. But this one does not have a description of a baby or a manger or Bethlehem or stars. These are no doves or angel songs. Instead we have been launched from Christmas celebrations into a cosmic drama. This “prologue” to John’s Gospel opens with “In the beginning . . .”, sending us all the way back to the creation story in Genesis, and perhaps before that. It is a daunting task to speak briefly about the enormous scope of these words in a way that makes sense on January 5, 2014. So I will start with just a word or two.

Actually, “In the beginning was the Word,” and how do you understand that? The Word, capitalized here, is that Greek word *logos* – not just any old word. The ancient Greeks and first century Jewish scholars would have said that it was the word in the mind: reason, order, underlying principles. But that Word does not remain in the mind of God. It is revealed. That is where Light comes in. Light is the metaphor for making things plain, making them visible. And this is where Life comes in: living beings who may perceive that Light, who may hear that Word.

Here we learn again that God speaks to creation through creation. Our faith does not claim that there is a divine language that we have to learn if we want to hear God. Instead we find that God can and must be “heard” in human life, and through human words. “ And the Word (the *logos*, the purpose within the mind of God) became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” This was not the first time God “spoke.” There had been centuries and millennia of God’s speech through creation, through the giving of law, through the prophets: God continually revealing Godself. For Christians, though, the life of Jesus was a breakthrough moment, a revolutionary kind of revelation. John affirms here that no one has ever seen God, but that Jesus “reveals” God. This word, reveal, has connotations of translation, of transformation of the word as thought into another language. In some way (we are talking about a mystery here) the *logos* takes on human flesh and form, takes on the human condition, and speaks (in

that translation) to us directly of glory and grace, of enduring love, of God's devotion to our frail, fleshly selves, and our tentative, tender souls.

In the midst of that amazing statement, "And the Word became flesh..." we get an odd image. Our translation says "...and made his dwelling among us," which is a nice picture. But what it really says is that the Word "pitched his tent" among us. This is an even more concrete image, reminding us of the travels of the ancient people of Israel, when they wandered in the wilderness, with the moveable tabernacle of God in their encampments. We could even make it more literal and "down to earth," and imagine Jesus on his knees, pounding down the tent pegs with his hammer, working away at the daily tasks that allow him to travel with us, every day. For me, that image is a bit of an antidote to the artistic, haloed depictions of Jesus who is so divine that he floats above the ground, serene and untouched by our human needs and work.

From that "Word becomes flesh" comes a sense of our own identity and mission. The idea that divinity, in order to be known as fully as possible, enters into human flesh reminds us how precious we are. Christian spirituality is not about the liberation of the spirit from the body, but about fleshing out the spirit: living out the consequences of our faith and trust in real, embodied, ways. Christian spirituality as an individual concern is also rejected here. When the Word came into the world, people were empowered to become God's children. That's plural, not individual, empowerment. And it is only power at all in the sense of adoption into a larger family.

During his lifetime in Galilee and Judah, Jesus spoke many words to many people, and revealed a kind of light and life. But that was still a limited audience, in the scheme of things. In theology, it is called "the scandal of particularity": the idea that such an earth-shattering event could occur in one time and place – in a backwater, actually, a small arena. But, quite quickly, the earliest followers of Jesus understood the mission of sharing the light. And so we get the letters of Paul, and others: a record of travels and translation. In Ephesians, he speaks of the "mystery of Christ." Paul had been commissioned to share Good News far beyond the borders of Judaism or any one religion. He describes this as making "everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things." The word is spreading, and has the opportunity to become flesh in so many ways. Paul also writes of "the wisdom of God in its rich variety." Now that the Word has been let loose, it can find the rich expression, the variety that dwells within the divine, waiting for our hands and feet and beating hearts to make it happen.

Speaking of divine and cosmic translation, I read another metaphor for this mystery from the theologian Michael Higton, who wrote, "The Spirit worked to transcribe God's music for playing on the human instrument of Jesus of Nazareth; the Spirit now works to orchestrate that theme for an ensemble of billions."

Today's Scripture begins to illuminate a mystery for me, one that will never be fully understood, but which calls me forward. One facet of this is the necessity of withholding judgment, so that I can appreciate the variety of ways God continues to speak through human flesh and human endeavor. Since God speaks to creation through creation, we are constantly in the business of translation. Any time one translates, meaning is lost and new meaning is created. And so I believe that any expression of Christianity that seems focused solely and exclusively on preserving past meaning, on conserving old forms, is missing out on "the wisdom of God in its rich variety" that the letter to the Ephesians celebrates. The Word continues to be spoken, and is too powerful not to change and evolve.

Another facet of the mystery is the necessity of embodying some small expression of that Word, that enduring divine love today, here and now, on January 5, 2014...and the 6th and the 7th and the 8th, etc., etc. If we are empowered to become God's children by acceptance of the human logos, Jesus, how do we display that power and that relationship?

Here is the Good News for today: Words are made flesh in a multitude of ways, in "rich variety." How will your light shine, which words will you make flesh? The words of our local church covenant, which we will read together later in this service? The words on our stained glass window about mercy, justice and humility? The words of our open and affirming resolution?

In a little while, we will celebrate another mystery: the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion. We repeat ancient words, knowing that we are hearing an echo, a translation of what was spoken in Aramaic almost 2000 years ago. With Jesus, we ask the Holy Spirit to transcribe a Passover meal into some new expression of God's enduring love. We ask that little pieces of bread and drops of grape juice be translated into both fleshly and spiritual nourishment for us, so that we can embody the enduring love of Christ when we leave this place. The Word will be spoken again, and I trust, lead us forward. In some ways, we will be no less baffled by the mystery. But we will have the reassurance of divine love, the inclusion into a spiritual family, and the commission of those who will, once again, allow light to shine in the darkness.