

Being and Becoming

by
The Reverend Brian K. Ballard
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

January 2, 2022

John 1:10-18

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ (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.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ 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.

In the beginning of 2022 the ball dropped, the confetti fell, embraces were exchanged, and the calendar started afresh. Around the globe and I presume in this sanctuary, people celebrated the changing of the year with the hope that this new year will be better than the last. Resolutions and goals were penned promising increased learning, or better health, or new opportunities. Goals that, today on January 2, are filled with energy, excitement, and eagerness. Beginnings are a time to reset, plan, and start fresh again. Research shows that people are more likely to pursue new achievements based on big moments on the calendar. The phenomenon has been termed “the fresh-start effect,” and it results in a huge spike in internet searches for goal-related buzzwords at this time of the year. As Annie Dillard famously wrote, “How we spend our days is of course how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing.”¹ There is perhaps no better moment to reconsider how we are devoting each moment of our lives than at the turn of a new calendar year.

We all know, of course, that January 1st is just an arbitrary date. It is a day set apart as the start of the new year, but there is nothing innately exceptional about it. You could just as easily set out to learn a new language or pay off debt on March 19 or August 6. Yet “the fresh-start effect” of a new year reassures us that beginnings are possible. While it may literally be just another day, the pomp and pageantry of January 1st gives us the belief that this is truly a new beginning.

John’s gospel is also not the actual beginning of things, but it’s written to give us the belief that it is. Overall, the gospel of John actually falls about three quarters of the way through the bible, it is not even the first of the gospels, and yet its opening words tell us that all of a sudden we are back at the beginning.

The gospel opens, “in the beginning...” - three words that in today’s vernacular might be rendered, “A long, long time ago..” or “once upon a time.” The phrase refers to a time before time, a space before history began. This short phrase appears notably twice in scripture: once here at

¹ Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*, 14.

the start of John's gospel. The other time, the first time, is at the very beginning of the bible itself in the opening words of creation in Genesis. "In the beginning..." signals the very start of things.

"In the beginning," John opens, "was the Word," which he will later enlighten is Jesus Christ. The Word was pure being, it was not created or made, it was there before beginnings began, before anything yet to be made was made. Prior to the start of all starts: the Word **was**.

From this place of being, the Word creates. John continues, "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." The Word who is Being makes it possible for all other things to become. All of creation – you and me, neighbors and enemies – becomes from the Word. While God always is and was and will be, we come forth for a time, possessing a beginning and an end. Our transience separates us from God: we become, God is.

What comes next in John's gospel is the mystery and hope of our faith. The Word – the one who creates, who is – *became* flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, a living, breathing first century Palestinian Jew. Nine nights ago on Christmas Eve we gathered here to remember and celebrate this unbelievable, incomprehensible moment. For if it made sense in ordinary language, John would not have used such intangible and dense language to explain it. In his sermon on this scriptural text, Frederick Buechner said, "John asks us to believe that the Word that became flesh, that became flesh like our flesh...was not a last-minute word and not just one word among many words, but was The Word, the primal, cosmic Word in which was life and light. All that God had from the beginning meant was here in this flesh. The secret of life and death was here."²

This is the mystery of the incarnation: that which "is" actually "becomes." In doing this God tell us two things: first that our material existence matters, and second that God wants to be close to us. Minister Stephen Bauman put it this way "our lives matter in an absolute sense by virtue of

² Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (HarperSanFrancisco: New York, 2006), 119.

God's blessing it, but it also matters to God relationally...God is not far away."³ God, in all God's fullness and being, "became" to be close, to know you and me, to bless our lives here on earth.

All of this is to say that because we matter to God and God is close to us, all of us have within us *a* Word, a touch of the divine that God wants us to bring to life. In becoming flesh, God showed us how the Word can live on earth, and enabled us to do likewise. John wrote, "all who accept the Word, who believe in the Word, have the power to become children of God." The gift of Christmas is that God became like us, blessing our existence, forming a relationship with us, and now invites us to bring to life the God-given elements present in our very being.

The question is, what will you do with this Word that resides in you? Reflecting on this text and the power it possesses for each person, author and Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor wrote that "almost everyone has a word that he or she has a gift for bringing to life. For one person the word is "compassion." For another it is "justice." For someone else the word is "generosity." For another it is "patience." Until someone acts upon these words, they remain abstract concepts – very good ideas that few people have ever seen. The moment someone acts on them, the words become flesh. They live among us, so we can see their glory."⁴

I wonder if there is a Word in you that can be brought to life this year. A Word that is unique to who God made you to be that perhaps has emerged intermittently over the years but has struggled to be a lasting presence. Perhaps other words have taken its place, words not from God but from the harshness of life: words like "judgment" or "busy" or "useless." I can promise you that your life will always be directed by some word; today is a great day to choose which word that will be. It is never too late to bring one of God's life-giving words to life.

³ Stephen Bauman, "John 1:1-18: Pastoral Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2009), 192.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, "John 1:1-18: Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting*, 191.

You can begin by seeing how others have brought their Word to life. In his book *Domestic Monastery*, Father Ronald Rolheiser unearths wisdom from our Christian ancestors, the Desert fathers and mothers, many of whom lived monastic lives in cells and silence. These teachers had a rule, which was, “Go to your cell, and your cell will teach you everything you need to know.” Building on their rule and practices, Fr. Rolheiser teaches, “for us a cell is a metaphor...it refers to duty, vocation, and commitment...In essence go to your cell and your cell will teach you everything you need to know: stay inside your vocation, inside your commitments, inside your legitimate conscriptive duties, inside your church, inside your family, and they will teach you where life is found and what love means. Be faithful to your commitments, and what you are ultimately looking for will be found there.” Thomas a Kempis, the 15th century priest and author, said that “every time you leave your cell you come back less a person.” Rolheiser reflects, “this is telling us that every time we step outside our commitments, every time we are unfaithful, every time we walk away from what we should legitimately be doing, we become less a person for that betrayal...stay inside your commitments, be faithful; your place of work is a seminary, your work is a sacrament, your family is a monastery, your home is a sanctuary. Stay inside them, don’t betray them, learn what they are teaching you without constantly looking for life elsewhere and without constantly believing that God is elsewhere.”⁵

Wherever you are today, God is present there with you. God has already given you a Word that you can bring to life. You need not search for it elsewhere, or have to lose weight or save money or change your diet before you find it. The Word is already part of you because you came into being through the Word. Of course, a final distinction is worth making: you are not *the Word*. Rather, you are endowed with *a Word*. You may have one or two or maybe even three Words you can bring to life, but you do not possess every Word. You merely point to Jesus, to *the Word* in your unique ways. That’s why you’re here, in this church, with your family, surrounded by others who also have a Word that they can bring to life.

⁵ Father Ronald Rolheiser, *Domestic Monastery* (Paraclete Press: Brewster, MA, 2019), 35-37.

All of us were created by the Word and have within us pieces of that divine spark. When those pieces touch the real world, we see God at work. What better time than the beginning of the new year to ask, what is it that God has called me to? What are my gifts? What are my commitments? How can I stay within those in a way that is faithful and leads you to life? And how can those gifts and commitments impact this congregation, community, and creation?

In the beginning of this year and in the years ahead I pray you can embody your Word and make it alive in this world. And if you get lost along the way, if by January 3 or 10th or 20th you have wandered off track, know that you need not wait until next year to begin again. We have the opportunity to bear witness to God each and every day, to live out and live into the word made flesh. May we do this in our own unique way and as a family of faith, today, tomorrow, and in all the days to come.

Thanks be to God. Amen.