

Our Gifts. Our Stories: Word and World

John 1:1-18

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When I was a kid—as in kindergarten or first grade, so a child indeed—I had a secret plan. It wasn't to learn how to fly like some of my peers, and it wasn't to steal all my brother's toys since that plan was hardly a secret; I had a secret plan that I was going to learn every language there was.

Of course, once I grew up a bit and started actually learning languages, I discovered that they are *very difficult* and have their own idioms and grammatical systems and some of them don't use sound-based letters but meaning-based characters, which is to say nothing of sign language. I have, to date, studied some ten different languages, and I remain terrible at every one except English. My secret plan has not fared well.

Studying all these languages, however, has taught me a great deal about the power of language. It's true that much of our communication is nonverbal and wrapped up in body-based cues, but the way we explain things to each other has a great deal of impact. This shows up in the ways we have different speaking and writing styles for different settings: I *could* have written this sermon in the style of my texts to my friends, but I don't think that's what you're expecting or what I am called to deliver. The importance of our language is also in the ways we try to find just the right words for a conversation, wanting the person who reads our writings or listens to our statements to truly understand what we wish to convey. "I like you" means quite a few different things in English, which either results in the middle school creation of "*like like*" or pulls the need for "attraction," "affection," "I am enamored of you." How we say what we want to say helps us figure out how to relate to each other, how to help each other, and how to hear the stories we are trying to tell. Words carry a great deal of power.

"In the beginning was the Word," says John, our fourth and final gospel writer in our Advent series on the ways the four evangelists speak of Jesus' birth. We began with Mark, who skips Jesus' birth and childhood in favor of diving right into the need for this Messiah as announced by John the Baptist and the immediacy of active ministry. In Luke, we listened to Mary's song of how God is more powerful than greed and how inequity stands no chance against the wonder of God's mercy and justice. With Matthew, we walked through Jesus' family graveyard to understand that this holy Child was born into a story that had carried through generations upon generations.

These three are called the "synoptic" gospels, a Greek loan word roughly meaning "similar sight."¹ Matthew, Mark, and Luke use similar sources to tell similar stories for their different audiences, using different tactics and different styles but offering a measurably shared collection of Jesus' life. John, on the other hand, goes off on his own, offering not a tailored biography but "a unique vision of Jesus Christ for the life of the believing community...a theological reflection on the meaning of [Jesus' life] from the perspective of believing. It is

¹ [Synoptic Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#)

written, in other words, ‘from faith to faith,’” as Dorothy Ann Lee of Trinity College Theological School writes.²

John is the symbolic gospel, building his picture of Jesus around the language of “signs” that point to Jesus’ divine status. John is less interested in *how* Jesus came to be than *why*; this is God coming to humanity in a tangible way. Professor Karoline Lewis writes, “‘The Word became flesh’ states most clearly the theological promise of John. This primordial Word, which was in the beginning with God, a partner in creation, in relationship with God and who is God, has now become human. While the NRSV translates the verse, ‘and lived among us’ the verb here is *skenoō*, ‘to tent’ or ‘to tabernacle.’ Most readers of the Gospel of John will be familiar with the translation ‘and dwelt among us.’ The verb can also be translated, ‘took up residence’ and thus Peterson’s *The Message*, ‘moved into the neighborhood.’”³ John, writing to a semi-established faith system that had been around long enough to see the Jewish Temple fall and the letters of Paul raise up an entirely new generation or two of Gentiles and Jews alike as Christ-followers, knew that the story of Jesus as such didn’t need a fourth telling.⁴ The story of *God in Jesus* did. The story of the divine come to pitch a tent among the dwellings of creation did.

If Mark began with the immediacy of ministry, and Luke went back before that to the story of Jesus’ parents, and Matthew went back *before* that to the very first people, then John reaches even further. “In the beginning,” he writes, very deliberately echoing the first words of the Hebrew Bible and the first story of creation in Genesis, the story in which God spoke creation into being, in which words mattered so much that everything came from them. But before the words themselves, says John, there was the Word.

In English Bibles, “Word” is capitalized in these opening verses, which is a purposeful nod to the fact that languages do different things. Words, in English, are the sense units of meaning, but “word” in Greek has several different meanings. What English thinks of as “word” with a lowercase “w” is usually *lexi*, like our collections of words called “lexicons.” What English makes into Word with a capital W is *logos*, a sort of ultra-word.⁵ *Logos*, in John’s world, was used to describe a Greek philosophy of that which ordered the universe, the sort of guiding principle of creation.⁶ “The author of The Gospel According to John used this philosophical expression, which easily would be recognizable to readers in the Hellenistic (Greek cultural) world, to emphasize the redemptive character of the person of Christ, whom the author describes as ‘the way, and the truth, and the life.’”⁷ John is taking a philosophical concept of the time, a bodiless word, and giving it a name, a face, an anchor in the Person of Christ. John’s choice of *logos* rather than *lexi* says that the God Who could speak creation into being can do even more than that; “This, this is Who is present with you, this is Who loves you, this is Who calls you by name—the One Who is bigger, older, more complex than the universe itself.” Words are important, and for John the Word that was so much more than words was paramount, because there is so much to be had from it. “What came into being through the Word was life,” John writes, “and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light.”

² “John,” Dorothy Ann Lee, in *New Interpreters’ Bible One Volume Commentary* (Abingdon: Nashville, 2010), 709.

³ [Commentary on John 1:\[1-9\], 10-18 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2015

⁴ Lee, 711, posits a writing date of 95-100 CE.

⁵ λέξι vs. λόγος

⁶ [Logos | Definition, History, & Facts | Britannica](#)

⁷ Ibid.

John almost interrupts himself at this point for clarification; yes, there was a man named John—the Baptist, here, not the writer—but he wasn’t the Word, the *logos*, just in case you were confused. And then the gospel returns to its poetry almost as if to say *but wait, there’s more!* Not only is God in the beginning of all things, the bones of the very universe; not only is there an inextinguishable light so that we need never fear being lost in the unknown darkness; not only is the light and the Word given to all, but *all are authorized to become God’s children*.

“The audience arrives,” writes Professor Sherri Brown of Creighton University, “at the pivot of the prologue and the hinges upon which the pivot turns (verse 12). The force of the entire prologue is poised on the axis of the mission of the Word: ‘he gave power to become children of God’... This central assertion, the giving of power to those who receive the Word to become children of God, is the crux of the prologue’s message to its audiences. This familial language is often used across the Gospel to describe relationship with God. Establishing childhood of God through the Son is the culmination of all God’s dealings with the world, the goal of the Creator and creation. This expressed aim affects every statement that follows... Jesus, the Word of God made human as Christ and Son, will make God known through his life and ministry. The Gospel will narrate the how of the covenantal claim that the Prologue introduces.”⁸

The synoptic gospels want us to know Who Jesus was—His teachings, His humanity, His community, His place in history. John wants us to know who we can become in Jesus; how the Word remakes us, restores us, carves space for every single person regardless of lineage or nationality. This John who speaks of the children of God is the same John who wrote one of the most oft-quoted and truncated pieces of Scripture: John 3:16. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son”—God so loved *the world*, the entirety of it, everybody, every thing, that not only were we given the Son but invited to become children ourselves. It doesn’t matter what your race is, or your gender, or your marital status, or your bank account balance, or your ability to learn new languages; none of that can disqualify you from the love of a God Who asks only that we be in deliberate relationship with this Word Who binds everything together.

Language matters, and the language here of that relationship offer being a “child” of God may not be particularly appealing to those of us with less than stellar parental models. But in the beginning was the Word, and in the Word was life, and in the life was light, and in the light was hope, and in the hope was God’s immortal gift of love without condition, love without limitation, love without sin, love that has been since the beginning and will be past the end. Being a child of God is a technicolor extravaganza of welcome, an entirely new grammatical style unlike anything we can create with each other, and John insists that the cosmic vastness of *logos* offers to each of us the deep truth of belonging to a family.

In the Methodist tradition, our language for this is “prevenient grace”—God exists, and therefore there is grace for everyone. It is ours to reach out and accept it, this “grace upon grace,” this love larger than the stars spoken into existence when there was only chaos in the darkness.

It is the last day of Advent; this year, it is also Christmas Eve, so there are more services tonight. For now, we light one more candle in the wreath and speak the power of love; for now, we wait a few more hours for the birth of the Christ child, a displaced baby of a poor family of an oppressed people yanked about by the power of empire. For now, we look to the as-yet-unlit

⁸ [Commentary on John 1:\[1-9\], 10-18 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2020

Christ candle and know that we have spent the year since we last gathered around this wreath speaking words that were helpful and words that were tremendously hurtful. We have made promises and broken them, offered lies instead of truths, and refused to speak against injustice. We have soothed pain with whispered assurances, called the outsiders in to restore wholeness, and challenged complacency. We have used and misused the power of language, and still, always, ever, God calls to us as beloved children. “The Word became flesh / and made his home among us. / We have seen his glory, / glory like that of a father’s only son, / full of grace and truth.”

Rev. Dr. Cheryl Anderson of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary says of this text, “What we need to do is see that this is a text that is time-bound, that is determined by the culture in which it was written, but that our sense of God, our sense of the Holy Spirit, isn’t time-bound. We have to ask ourselves again, what’s the word of God for this time and this place?”⁹

What word do you bring to the world as we enter the Christmas season, Church? What language do you use to bring peace, hope, joy, and love to yourself and to the people looking to see the light in you? How do you listen for God’s grace, freely given, and become God’s child in all the wild weirdness that that means?

Merry almost Christmas, family. May our words be gentle enough to heal, sharp enough to inspire change, and loving enough to reflect the light that shines, and the darkness will not overcome. Amen.

⁹ “1946: The Mistranslation that Shifted Culture,” dir. Sharon Roggio (Acowsay Film Company, 2022), beginning 1:16.