

In the New Beginning was the Word

John 1

Good morning, it's a joy to be with you. However, I want to begin with a bit of a sobering question: have you ever wanted to start over? Have you ever wanted a do-over on life, or at least on a season of life? Have you ever wished there was a reset button? Have you ever felt the need for a new beginning?

It seems to me that all humans want this at some point in their lives. Life has a way of exposing our weakness, our foolishness, our failure, and our faults. And when it does, the idea of a redo is pretty attractive.

You can see how this idea enchants us by how it recurs in our culture. Whether it's the Beatles' *Here Comes the Sun*, or Johnny Nash's *I Can See Clearly Now*, we romanticize the idea of a new era in which "gone are the dark clouds" and we have the assurance that what lies ahead is "a bright, bright sun-shiny day". Or how about the dream of time travel offering the chance to change the past that is increasingly used in the popular stories we tell. Or the heart of all marketing which is the fantasy that the next new thing is going to complete your life. Collectively we seem to be infatuated with the idea of a new start or new era.

Unfortunately, this infatuation has had tragic effects. Spouses leaving one another, believing that a new lover will refresh their lives. People hopping from job to job, believing if they can just do what they love they will be content. Others sample religion after religion, trend after trend, or, perhaps within Christianity, church after church, believing if they can just find the place with the right answers and rituals they will have peace. In all these things, we run from something old that has disappointed to something new with the hope that the new person, thing, or experience will deliver what the old could not.

But the first claim of the Gospel is that any quest for renewal is vain, unless it is sought in Jesus. It's audacious, but Christianity claims that our desire for a new beginning can only, truly, and finally be satisfied by Christ. And this is one lens through which to view Jesus' coming: He came to deliver a new beginning; one we desperately needed.

Today we begin our Advent sermon series, in which we will be focusing on John 1, and the idea that Jesus came to inaugurate a new creation; His coming was a new beginning. Specifically, He did this by coming as the Word, the Life, the Light, and the Son.

Each of these themes is prominent in the first chapter of John's Gospel, just as each was prominent in the first chapter of Genesis. John, very intentionally, begins his Gospel with the exact same Greek words that began Genesis in the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was in wide use in the first century. In English they are: "In the beginning..."

So, John sets up a contrast between two beginnings. The first, which ultimately resulted in a world set against the Word of God, dead in sin, lost in the dark, and full of rebels. And the second, which is slowly but surely leading to a world ruled by God's Word, overflowing with God's life, illuminated with the light of God's glory, and full of children with whom God is well-pleased. Jesus came to bring that new beginning.

This Advent season, we're looking to remind ourselves of that awesome reality, beginning today with considering Jesus coming as the Word. Let me pray, and then we'll consider that together.

Let's begin with verse 1 of John 1, "In the beginning was the Word..."

We're going to stop there for now, because we've already bitten off more than we can chew. First, it's important to understand that John was written the latest of all the Gospels. It's hard to be very specific with the date, but church tradition, as well as most scholars put John as the last Gospel to be written. Clement of Alexandria, one of the early

church fathers, said, “Last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain [in the other canonical Gospels]...composed a spiritual gospel.”

From that quote we can see the early church considered John to have been written after the other Gospels. And the lateness of its writing means that John was writing to a church that was fairly well-developed, particularly in its mixed Jew-Gentile makeup. This lends great significance to him referring to Jesus as “the Word”, because this is an incredibly meaningful term to both Jews and Greeks.

Of course, for Jews, as I’ve already mentioned, John is referring back to the creation narrative of Genesis 1. There we read, for example, “And God *said*, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” God spoke to create, so the Word was at the beginning in that sense. So, the presence of the Word at the beginning would not have been a huge shocker for the Jews reading John’s Gospel, but the placement of the Word in the text would have been.

When Jews, who grew up hearing the Genesis creation account, read, “In the beginning...” what would they have expected the next word to be? God. “In the beginning God created...” But John says, “In the beginning the Word...” What point is he making by doing that do you think? The Word is God, right? He’ll actually make that point explicit right after this, but first we need to talk about what “the Word” would have meant to John’s Gentile readers.

The Greek word for “Word” here is “logos”. And “the Logos” had a prominent place in Greek philosophy. “The Logos” was the divine ordering principle of the universe. The Stoics, in particular, believed the universe was organized and unified by this divine principle. “Logos” is often translated “word”, but it also carries with it the idea of reason or, as you might guess, logic. So, “the Logos” was deified reason or logic that gave birth to and organized the created universe. Sound familiar?

Ok, so, now let’s read the beginning of John 1:1 again. “In the beginning was the Word...” Hopefully now you have a greater appreciation for how that would have hit John’s readers. However, all that said, there really aren’t any huge surprises to his readers yet, but that changes with the rest of the verse.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Taken as a whole, this verse gives all of John’s readers something to chew on. The Word, “the Logos” is spoken of as a sort of co-deity. The Word was with God *and* was God. This Word is somehow both separate from God, in some sense, and yet one with God, in another sense. For Jews who grew up praying the Shema from Deuteronomy 6 every day, which starts out, “Here, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is *one*...”, this would have been a lot to take in.

John’s Greek readers may have had less to wrestle with at this point, but then comes verse 2. “*He* was in the beginning with God.” Suddenly, John begins speaking of “the Logos” as a person. To Greeks, the Logos was a force or a principle; something impersonal. But John says, “No, the Logos is a person.”

This idea also changes the Jewish paradigm. Because it meant that the Word that came from God in the beginning was not a Word as we typically understand it but, again, was a person. For us, speaking is not enough to make something happen; we also need an agent to carry out what we’re saying. For instance, when we say, “Let there be light...”, light doesn’t spontaneously burst from non-existence to illuminate our surroundings; rather, we, or someone, or something else must flick a switch, or light a match. In other words, for our words to become reality, we require an agent to make it happen. John is saying that for God, His Word is the agent, which is why all He has to do is speak and things happen. Which leads us to verse 3.

“All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.”

So, God created the world, but He did it through a person, His Word, who is both the expression and the agent of His will. Our words can express our will, but they cannot accomplish our will by themselves. God's Word expresses and accomplishes His will. That's some Word, huh? With that in mind, let's skip down to verse 14.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..."

What?!? How could this be? The Word that God spoke in the beginning, who is co-eternal with God, is God, who was powerful enough to cause the universe to spring into existence from utter non-being became a puny human? The Logos, the divine organizing principle of the universe, condescended to enter the painful, disordered experience of physical existence? This is unthinkable; this is scandalous; this is blasphemous. What deity would ever debase Himself to such a degree? And why?

Well, part of the answer to the question why, is to "pitch his tent among us". This is literally what the Greek words translated "dwelt among us" mean. This too carried a whole lot of meaning for John's Jewish readers, who knew well that God had dwelt in a tent among a group of men before. And now, John says, God's doing it again, but this time the tent is going to be a body. John gets at the rest of the answer to the question why in the second half of verse 14-18, as well as expounding exactly who this God is.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.>") For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."

So, what God would do this? The only God. There's only one, John says, and He is both Father and Son. Obviously, we're dealing with two-thirds of the Trinity here. And why did He come? To make Himself known. He came that we might behold His glory. Which normally would have produced great trepidation in John's Jewish readers, who knew that in the context of the Old Testament, God revealing Himself in His glory was a terrifying and potentially deadly thing.

But John says, the Word came to display God's glory in grace and truth. He came to give "grace upon grace". In direct contrast to the first go around when Moses was given the law, Jesus Christ came to deliver grace and truth. But why do we need those two things, specifically? To answer that, we have to go back to the first beginning.

As I've already mentioned, the Bible opens with God speaking things into existence: "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light...", "God said, 'Let there be an expanse' ...and it was so...", "God said, 'Let there be waters and dry land' ...and it was so." And so on with all of physical creation.

This is the pattern that marks the creation account all the way up to verses 28-30, when we read this, "And God blessed them. And God *said* to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." And God *said*, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." *And it was so.*"

The pattern is the same, "God said...And it was so...", but He's creating something different here. He's not bringing something physical into existence, but something non-physical, something spiritual; specifically, He's bringing a commission into existence. He is installing man as the ordained leader of His world. Of course, this call comes right after

God creates man in His divine image, and so the implication is that man will exercise dominion over the earth in a way reflective of God's rule.

Notice another difference: when God says "Be fruitful and multiply..." Adam does not suddenly multiply into a billion other human beings. But isn't that what we should expect to happen given how God has created so far? God said, "Let there be light," and there was light, right?

So, suddenly, God's Word doesn't *seem* to be the agent of His will. How does God expect mankind to multiply? Well, if you don't know that, I'm going to encourage you to talk to your mom and dad. Needless to say, God made a way for mankind to multiply, *but* it is a way that requires man to *do* something. In other words, it requires man to be an agent of God's Word and will.

This is the massive change that occurs here: man becomes the agent of God's Word. To put it another way: man is given the role of making God's will, as revealed by His Word, reality in God's world. God, in essence, is saying, "It is my will that you fill the earth and rule over it as I would. Now, go and make it happen."

Yet, in creating mankind in His image, He imparted a shadow of His freedom to choose. I say shadow because we do not possess an absolute freedom of choice. For instance, I cannot choose to teleport to Pluto. My freedom to choose is limited by my finitude. God's freedom to choose, on the other hand, is not limited, it is absolute, and so our freedom of choice is only a shadow or reflection of His. And yet, He did impart to us the ability to choose some things, like whether or not to believe and obey His Word. As you likely know, we ended up using that freedom to go against His Word. And how did that decision affect our ability to carry out the commission to fill the earth and rule it? Well, Genesis 3 gives us the answer.

"To the woman [God] said, 'I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.'"

Suddenly, childbearing is painful, and the spousal relationship is full of strife. Notice, those are two things that make fruitfulness, multiplication, and filling the earth a lot more difficult? What about ruling over the earth? Back to Genesis 3.

"And to Adam [God] said, 'Because you listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat of the plants of field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'"

That makes it sound like the earth is going to be a lot harder to subdue, doesn't it? The ground is going to resist us. Additionally, after the Flood, God says to Noah, "Be fruitful and multiply. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered." So, animals too, at least by the time of Noah, become much more difficult to subdue.

Clearly, our decision to reject our call to be agents of God's will in favor of attempting to make our own will a reality broke something in the created order. Yet, throughout the rest of the Old Testament, God continues to speak, continues to try and return us to our call of making His Word reality in His world. He does it by speaking to people like Noah and Abram. He does it by giving the Law to Israel through Moses. He does it by sending prophet after prophet to Israel. All attempts fail.

Of course, the problem wasn't with God's Word, it was the fact that through our sin we had become broken agents who were incapable of carrying out God's will as revealed by His Word, which resulted in a thoroughly fractured world. And this is why Jesus had to come to us full of grace and truth. We had utterly forfeited our standing before God through our disobedience, and so we needed a Savior with the grace to restore us to favorable standing with Him. And we had so thoroughly fractured ourselves and the world we were called to steward that we needed a Savior with the truth to show us how things were supposed to be again.

So, here's our main idea: Jesus came as the Word to deliver grace to cover our failure as agents of God's will, and truth to enable us to reclaim God's purpose for our lives. In other words, Jesus came to give us a new beginning. He came to bring us forgiveness, so that we could start over with our God-given purpose once again. He came in the flesh to be the agent of God's will that we had failed to be and to bear the consequence of our failure. He came to inaugurate a new creation, which in some sense was actually the culmination of the original act of God creating.

Remember how I said there seemed to be a shift in Genesis 1:28, in which God's Word ceased to be the agent of His will, and man took on that role? Well, man did take on that role, which is why Jesus came as a man to fulfill it. But the fact that He came as the Word means the creative pattern of Genesis 1 holds true, it just took a little time. God said, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it...", and a few thousand years later the Word became flesh and dwelt among us to make that will of God's a reality.

So, do you feel a sense of failure? That may be because you know your life was intended to have a great purpose. And perhaps you sense you've failed to achieve that purpose. It's ok, we all have. It's ok because the Word of God is a person full of grace and truth. He is the perfect agent of God's will, and where we failed, He succeeded in our stead. Not only that, but He has grace to offer us to cover our failure. And He has truth to offer us, which can restore God's great purpose to our lives.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And that Word became flesh and dwelt among us, so that we might see His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. A new beginning is possible for any who feel their need of it. If that's you, I pray that this Christmas season, that this very day would be the start of that new beginning.