

The Beginning Before the Birth • John 1:1-5

Today's scripture lesson comes from the Gospel according to John, chapter 1, verses 1-5:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There wouldn't be too many more Christmases for this old man. He was nearly 100 years old and life was running out for him. He lived long before the time of antibiotics and modern medicine and so it was really quite an amazing feat that he had lived almost to the century mark.

He knew the Christmas story very well. He had read it a multitude of times in the Gospel of Matthew and in the Gospel of Luke. In fact, among the people in his town he was considered something of an authority on all of the gospel stories. He knew amazingly well every detail of all of the records of the life of Jesus, and that's the way it should have been — because he had been there. Old John was the last one left of the twelve disciples. All the others had died as martyrs for the cause of Jesus and now he alone was left, either to be the only one of the disciples to die of old age or, better yet, to perhaps live until Jesus Christ's second coming.

John had lived a long time and as a result he knew life well. This year he wanted to tell the Christmas story in a new and different way. He wanted to go beyond the details that had been shared by his colleagues in the ministry, Luke and Matthew, filling in accounts that otherwise had been left out. He wanted to write a new gospel to tell the things the others had not told. His purpose was to go beyond the reporting of historical facts. His specific goal in his new gospel was that people everywhere, Jews and Greeks and anyone that might come after, would believe. He wanted to write it so that people would believe that Jesus is the Christ and come to faith in him.

The old man stretched his mind to think of how he could begin. How could he tell the great story behind the

story? He was born and raised a Jew and words were very important to him because of his Hebrew heritage. The Hebrews made a lot of words. They thought of them as more than vehicles of communication. A word was something powerful and effective and special. The Hebrews were very selective about their words because their entire vocabulary consisted of only ten thousand words, in contrast to the Greeks who had over two hundred thousand words in their vocabulary.

Words had to be very carefully chosen because they believed that they had the power to do things. When God spoke in creation, what he said was done. To the Jewish mind, the difference between what God said and what God did was indistinguishable; they were one in the same thing. Old John remembered well the story he had learned as a boy about how Isaac, nearly blind, had been deceived into giving the birthright blessing to his younger son, Jacob, instead of to his older son, Esau, as he had intended. But once the blessing was spoken, it was done. Not even God himself could bring back the words once spoken. To the Hebrews, the word was very important, even if the word was said in a way that was not fully understood at the time.

But it was not just to the Hebrew mind, it was also to the Greek mind that John wanted to speak. He lived in Ephesus — a key center to all Greek thinking. Five hundred and sixty years before the birth of Christ the Ephesian philosopher Heraclitus changed the face of Greek philosophy. He was one of the most important Greek thinkers of

all times. Heraclitus tried to capture in words the essence of life. He said that everything in life and in the world is in flux; everything is always changing; everything is always different. Heraclitus

said, "You want to understand what life is like? Look at the flame, look at the candle, look at your heart, and see that it is always moving — it is never the same. Step into a river and then step out again and step back in again and it's not the same river. The water has changed, the sand has moved, the temperature is slightly different. You can't step into the same river twice because it's always changing."

***When God spoke in creation,
what he said was done.***

But at the same time Heraclitus recognized that there was a continuity to life that went beyond change — there was something behind it all. He claimed that this was because of the mind and reason of God, which he called the Logos. The Stoics developed the teaching of Heraclitus and wrote, “All things happen according to the Logos. The Logos is the judge of truth. The Logos pervades all things.”

The Greeks had the highest regard for the Logos. The Logos was the mind of God, pure reason. It was the cause behind everything. But it was still an abstract concept. It was still something that the philosophers talked about in the forum and in the schoolhouses.

But to John it was different. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he brought together the thinking of the Greeks and the Hebrews and made a revolutionary statement that touched both the Hebrew mind and the Greek mind. He wrote, “In the beginning was the Logos, and Logos (the Word) was with God and the Logos (the Word), was God.” And if that wasn’t mind-stretching enough, he continued on and said, “The Logos became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

No one had ever even dreamed of something like that before. John grabbed the attention of Jew and Greek alike. The Word of God became flesh and made his dwelling among us so that we could see the Word of God incarnate. The Logos that holds together the universe, that is the standard behind all change, became flesh.

The old apostle then begins the most famous and often quoted of the gospels long before the historic events in Bethlehem’s stable. John tells us that the significance of Christmas comes from who Jesus was before he was born. The reason that all of the universe worships the baby in the cow’s trough was not because of what happened then but because of who that baby was before he was born.

Before the birth, God in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Son of God was before the beginning. When was the beginning? The beginning is somewhere in eternity past before the clock of time started ticking. Push back, back, back into time — before the “in the beginning” of Genesis 1:1, as far back as you can imagine, whenever that beginning was, the Son of God was already there.

There is an important theological distinction in the New Testament between the Son of God and Jesus Christ. The Son of God is the eternal second member of the Godhead of the Trinity. But then, at a point in time, the

Son of God was incarnated. He became a man and took on the name Jesus and the title Messiah, or in Greek, Christ — Jesus Christ.

The point is simple and clear. The child born in Bethlehem lived as a person for an eternity before he was born. No beginning! He was before there was a beginning! This Son of God, who took on the name and the flesh of Jesus Christ, was with God. The Greek preposition that is used here is the word *pros*, and it means more than mere association, it means equality, a colleagueship. It means that the Son of God did more than exist in eternity past, he shared the life and role and responsibilities of God as an absolute equal with God. Wherever God was, he was there, and whatever God did, he — the Son of God — also did. In every detail, at all times and in every way, he was with God.

But that’s not all that is said in the opening lines of John 1. He also “was God.” The Greek grammar that is used here was carefully selected to clearly teach that everything that makes God God was fully true of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. All of the attributes — omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, holiness, eternity, love — everything, whatever you can say about God you can also say about the Son of God. There is nothing you can say about God that is not equally true of His Son. He is absolutely, unquestionably, completely God. It’s amazing — two persons, two personalities, but one God!

Can you see? Can you understand? That was God in Bethlehem’s manger! The eternal, powerful, perfect, holy and infinite God willingly left eternity to step into time. He willingly left heaven to come to earth. He willingly surrendered the expanse of the universe as his domain to be contained in a microscopic grouping of cells in the womb of a teenage virgin in the land of Palestine.

Before the birth there were nine months when God was carried in another human body. Before the birth there were nine months when God could not speak. Before the birth there were nine months when the Son of God could not see and could not touch. The eternal Son of God was self-limited to the incomprehensible sounds of a newborn baby. The eternal Son of God was self-limited to dependency on an inexperienced mother who had never before had a child, much less this kind of a child. The eternal Son of God was self-limited to the dependency of becoming a creature. God became flesh and he did it explicitly for you and for me!

Before the birth, the Son of God was the creator. “He was with God in the beginning. Through him all

things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” The Son of God was the agent for all of creation. Somehow in the mysterious economy and delegation of responsibilities in the Godhead, the Son of God was given the task of creating all that exists, so that the Holy Spirit could inspire the apostle Paul to write to the Colossians in Colossians 1:16, “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.” You name it, he made it — the sun, stars, rocks, seas, mountains, animals and humans. He made everything out of nothing.

The Son of God is the sustaining genius of the universe. It was all his idea. It was his dream. It was his design that became creation. What he thought and spoke became reality. But not only that, he is the glue that holds creation together. Colossians 1:17 says not only that “He is before all things,” but “in him all things hold together.” The Son of God is the sustainer of the very fabric of creation.

Well then, it’s no wonder that when the Son of God became a man that he could walk on the water because he made the water. It’s no wonder that he could change it into wine because he designed it in the first place. It’s no wonder that he could make a lame man walk, or a blind man see. It is also no wonder that the sky became black and the earth shook when he was crucified and died.

Paul Harvey has a syndicated program where he tells the story behind the news. Well, this is the story behind the news of Christmas. This is the story that makes the birth in Bethlehem newsworthy. That was no ordinary baby around whose birth we date our calendars, he was and is the creator and the sustainer of all creation.

Think about it! Mary and Joseph held in their hands the one who created and sustained the universe.

Think about it! King Herod ordered the death of the one upon whom Herod’s own life and destiny depended.

Think about it! The creator who was so entirely different from us became a creature like us and was “tempted in every way, just as we are.”

Think about it! The one who made us became flesh like us so that we could be reborn and become like him!

God became flesh and he did it explicitly for you and for me!

That’s the Christmas story. The creator became a creature and he did it for you and for me!

Before the birth, God. Before the birth, Creator. Before the birth, Life. The Son of God is the essence of life. Before his birth in Bethlehem, he lived — not just existed — he lived. The life of God is vibrant, creative, fulfilled, productive and good.

There is a significant difference between living and existing. Compare the unconscious existence of a seven-year-old child on a respirator in a hospital with the vibrant life of another seven-year-old playing in the park, swinging on the swings and riding a sled down the hill. You understand the difference between existing and living.

Jesus Christ is life. He embodies life. He is the standard of what life is. He is the one who said, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Long before the first Christmas, the Son of God lived life in all of its fullness, joy and satisfaction. That’s why the gospel is so amazing and so supernatural, because it tells how he who is the essence of life died on the cross so that we could live.

The Son of God is the source of eternal life. The Greek noun for “life” is used 36 times in the gospel of John, eleven of those times with the adjective “eternal.” Eternal life means far more than endless in time. In fact, it is not something primarily quantitative, it is primarily qualitative. Eternal life is the life of eternity made available to us mortals! Jesus Christ came so that we could share his fulfilling, purposeful, creative, productive, good life. Jesus

Christ is the one who takes us from mere existence to eternal life!

Your mind needs to stretch to understand the meaning of Christ’s life to the incarnation at Christmas. You see, because of

sin we are doomed to death instead of life. As sinners we are hopelessly unable to remedy our own dilemma. But Jesus Christ, the essence of life and the source of life, took a human body on that first Christmas so that he could die for us.

Do you see? Jesus Christ came to make a trade! That’s really what it boils down to. He would take our death so that we could have his life. That’s what being a Christian is, taking his life in trade for our death. How do you do that? We must put our faith and trust in Him and accept the trade. Or, as William Barclay said, “We must make up our minds about him.”

Before the birth, God. Before the birth, Creator. Before the birth, Life. Before the birth, Light. “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.” The Son of God was our light – it’s a beautiful symbol. Light means new beginnings, fresh starts. The formless chaos of Genesis 1 was changed instantly when God said, “Let there be light.” Our only hope for order out of our chaos is the light of God’s Son.

We understand what light is. Light is that which exposes us as we are. In the darkness we can hide all of our blemishes and all of our wrinkles and leave them undiscovered. But turn on the light and we are exposed as we are. In the brilliant light of Jesus Christ we are exposed as we really are - as sinners.

But light doesn’t just expose us, it also guides us. When you are lost in the darkness of night and a light comes on, you can find your way. In fact using the same concept of “word,” the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 119:105, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” The Son of God is our light that exposes us as we are, heals us and guides us. He is the one that gives us hope and new beginnings. Without his light we are all hopelessly lost, deceived and misguided.

That’s how that first paragraph of John ends. “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.” Darkness is the obvious opposite of light. Darkness is hostile to light. Darkness is the operational sphere of people who do evil and oppose God. If you are going to commit a crime, chances are you are going to do it in the wee hours of the morning in the darkness. Darkness is defeating, destructive and the opposite of light.

But all the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the tiniest candle flame, much less the brilliant blaze of light that is Jesus Christ! No matter how great, no matter how strong our darkness, the light of Jesus Christ will prevail!

How appropriate that the birth of the Light of the World was heralded by a supernatural celestial star that guided the wisemen from the east. How obvious that those who commit themselves to Jesus Christ step from darkness into light. How wonderful that the light of the universe sets aflame our lives to burn for God.

This Christmas look back beyond the centuries into eternity! When you sing “What Child Is This” hear the reply that He is the Son of God and that long before human birth he was God and Creator and Life and Light.

Some years ago a little boy lay on a bed in a county hospital with no present on the empty table next to him even though it was Christmas. He was an orphan — no friends, no family, no one cared. Then a class of young people from Dr. Albert Beaven’s church came and visited the ward and brought him a huge sack wrapped up with a big red bow. They placed it on the table next to him and went on to visit others. They returned later expecting the boy to have gorged himself with candy and fruit. Instead, to their amazement the sack sat untouched on the pillow on his bed. When asked why he didn’t open the bag and eat its contents, the lad replied, “I want to keep it so all the other kids will see that somebody did care for me this Christmas.”

That’s what Christmas means, doesn’t it? Christmas means that someone cares! The message of Christmas is that God cared enough to send his only Son that whoever believes in Him can have eternal life. That’s God’s gift.

Have you received the gift of Jesus Christ and the eternal life that he offers? Is your faith in Jesus Christ, God, Creator, Life, Light? Do you know for sure that you have eternal life this Christmas? If not, then now is the time to receive the gift through faith in Him and if you are in doubt at all, now is the time to make certain. Pray to God and tell him that you are a sinner lost in darkness who wants to receive the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Tell him that your faith is in Jesus Christ alone, that you accept him as Savior and acknowledge him as Lord.

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