

Comprehending the Word

John 1:1-18

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 came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

There are, I am confident, few people on this planet more disconnected from popular culture than I. Fortunately, I have a daughter . . . who occasionally takes it upon herself, amid heaving sighs of disgust and withering looks of pity, to provide the clueless Old Man with, well, a clue once in a while. Over the years I've learned, for example, that the word “sketch” is *not* a noun referring to an artistic production, or even a verb. It is, in fact, an adjective, one applied to someone or something that, for one reason or another,

fails to pass muster. So, for instance (if I understand correctly), a disheveled or suspicious-looking person is “sketch,” especially if he is behaving oddly. “Sketch” can also apply to things – an unruly hairstyle, for instance, or a bad paint job on the side of a house. “Sketch.”

The use of “hot” and “cool” can be a bit confusing, especially when used to describe boys, but stick with me here while I explain. A boy can be either “hot” or “cool,” and these designations apparently have little to do with his bodily temperature at any given time. Moreover, and here I confess it gets even more confusing, he can be *both* “hot” and “cool” at the same – and *even in the same sentence!*

My latest introduction to popular culture, courtesy of my longsuffering daughter, is the word “word.” That’s right, you heard me. “Word” appears to be a one-word – sorry, this gets confusing – a one-word declaration of assent or affirmation or approval. Let me illustrate this with a couple of conversational examples. “Those French fries are good!” “Word.” Or, “That guy playing video games over there is hot!” “Word.”

Now I should probably warn some of the older folks here not to try this at home – at least not without some practice. Not long ago, for example, I learned that “sketch” is now “sketchy” and that “cool” is no longer, well, cool. It’s “chill.” You get the idea. But “word” endures. Let’s take a stab at it. Isn’t this a beautiful worship space we have here at Christ Church? . . . [“Word!”].

Which brings us to our Gospel reading this Christmas: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” By some quirk of the lectionary, this marvelous and enigmatic passage at the opening of John’s Gospel comes to us after Advent, with Christmas itself already in the rear-view mirror. It’s as though the lectionary is calling us up short: “Hey, wait a minute, did you understand what just happened here? Amid all the glitter and the gifts, the jingle-belling and hall-decking, did you really grasp the significance of the fact that the Word was made flesh?”

St. John, the most mystical of the Evangelists, takes us beyond the other Gospels and into a deeper understanding of the Incarnation, the mystery of God become man, the Word made flesh. John frames the Incarnation rather differently from the other Evangelists, who emphasize the Annunciation – how a Jewish peasant girl, a virgin, came to be pregnant. John wants to explore a deeper mystery because, as C. S. Lewis once observed, once you bend your mind around the puzzle that God decided to take human form, the virgin birth itself pales by comparison.

John opens with a wild and crazy man, John the Baptist, who looks like he just stumbled in from Haight-Ashbury. The Jews in first-century Palestine were so eager for a messiah

that many thought John was their man. But John the Baptist demurs. I'm just preparing the way, he says. Jesus of Nazareth is the one you've been waiting for.

Indeed, the arrival of Jesus changes everything. He is the Word made flesh, the light come to disperse the darkness. Different translations offer different verbs. Some say that the light came into the world and that the darkness could not *overcome* it. Some say that the darkness has never *mastered* it or never *extinguished* it.

I guess my favorite translation is the venerable King James rendering of the word *comprehend*. "And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." *Comprehend* in the sense both that the darkness could not understand the light, but also in the sense that the darkness could not envelop or surround the light. The light outshines the darkness and disperses it.

We moderns have little understanding of darkness, especially those of us who live in metropolitan areas. But darkness – real darkness – is pervasive. It envelops us like a shroud, and it is especially noticeable this time of year when the days are short.

John tells us that Jesus, light of the world, defeats the darkness. The darkness cannot surround it, the darkness cannot comprehend it, for nothing – no one – can understand such light.

Some years ago during Advent, during a difficult passage in my life, I was listening to a homily about the Word made flesh when suddenly the sermon faded to black and the words of St. John provided sublime comfort. As someone who had been reared a fundamentalist, I had been trying for years to relate to God the Father, but he seemed distant and aloof, judgmental and uncaring – similar, in fact, to my own experience of my father at the time. Suddenly, amid the darkness, I saw God the Son, the light in the darkness. And as I began to follow the contours of his life, it became utterly clear to me that here was a deity to whom I could relate – the suffering servant, the man of sorrows acquainted with grief. Not some distant and disapproving deity, but God become man. At a time when darkness seemed pervasive and overwhelming and threatened to envelop me, John's Gospel assured me that the Word was made flesh and that light ultimately prevails over darkness.

The Word made flesh. And what is that word? Matthew's parallel account tells us that when news of the arrival of Jesus reached John the Baptist in prison, the crusty prophet

wanted to know more. So he asked his emissaries for a report. Jesus instructed them: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”¹

Good news, indeed.

And for us, the coming of Jesus provides light amid the darkness. Hope in the face of despair. Peace in a world bent on destruction. Companionship in the throes of divorce or in a lonely hospital room or nursing home. Solace for those yearning to join loved ones on that distant shore.

With Advent, and now in this season of Christmas, we once again begin our journey with Jesus. It starts with the wonder of the birth itself, the marvel of the wise men coming to pay their respects, the young boy confounding his elders in the temple and enraging the moralists of his day. We travel with him through the palm-laden streets of Jerusalem and then watch as the crowds turn suddenly against him. We witness the mockery of a trial and then the long, arduous climb up Golgotha, the place of the skull, where darkness appears finally to have its way. But, as John assures us, the Word made flesh ultimately triumphs over darkness.

Make no mistake: All of this is counterintuitive – this notion of God become man, Word made flesh, light dispersing the darkness. And those of us who choose to believe it are no less crazy than crazy ol’ John the Baptist, wandering out there in the wilderness or along the streets of Haight-Ashbury.

John tells us that “the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” But he continues: “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” I’ll leave it to the theologians to parse out the meaning of this passage, to pontificate on whether or not those who do not believe will ultimately face judgment. But the ability to believe, to confess Jesus as lord, to discern light amid the darkness all around us, is the greatest of all earthly gifts.

The Word made flesh. God become man. It makes no sense. It defies all logic.

But that’s the message – the “good news” – of the gospel. Word made flesh. Light dispelling the darkness. And nothing, nothing is the same.

¹ Matthew 11:4-5 (NRSV).

As my daughter would say, “Word.”

First Sunday after Christmas Day

December 26, 201

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut