

What God Said

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

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Isaiah 25:6-10

John 1:1-18

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

In this season when all eyes are on a manger in Bethlehem, we turn the page to John’s gospel, a gospel that seems to know nothing of this part of the story. John begins with what God said: with the Word which was in the beginning and was with God and was God. What was that Word? In a sense you could say that we are without words and in the dark concerning what God said until the Word became flesh, became human, became Jesus, though even then we must be careful. “...the Word” writes Robert Jenson, “is not what *Jesus* says but Jesus is what the *Father* says.” In the fullness of time, God said Jesus. Or as John put the matter, “The Word became flesh and pitched a tent among us, full of grace and truth.”

But what of the Word before the fullness of time came? What did John mean that the Word was in the beginning and with God and was God? If we were to read John’s prologue in Greek [which I am no more capable of doing than you are], we would notice that the word John uses for Word (capital W) is Logos, a word that once was taken to mean God’s Rationality. In these latter days and according to Robert Jenson, the Logos of God is more rightly understood to be God’s speech, God’s address, what God said. Had John been writing his gospel in Hebrew, the Word would have been *dabar*, meaning Yahweh’s personal manifestation and revelation.

Because John begins his gospel with the Word of God that was in the beginning, perhaps he means to identify what God said in the beginning, in the first chapter of Genesis, with what God is about to say in Jesus. Over and over again, God said “Let there be...,” calling and commanding creation into being out of chaos. If the same Word were to be spoken in the fullness of time and were to become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, what would we hear? How would we know God’s speech amid all the chaotic chatter in the universe?

John is cluing us to listen for God’s Word in him who commanded the waves to be still, commanded the evil spirits to “come out,” commanded the lame to walk, commanded a dead man be unbound. In our present darkness, of course, we think we are listening and waiting for the God who will command these things be done here and now, for us and for those we love. Yet what God said in Jesus was said, I think, in such a way as to give us a glimpse of the eternity that is God’s reign. I think in him the promise is fulfilled and yet is still ahead of us as a promise to be completed.

Long before she lay dying, Elizabeth Edwards said as much in words that are now being repeated and condemned by the religious right. She said, in the days and weeks and months after the death of her son Wade, “The God I wanted was the God who was going to intervene. He was going to turn time back. The God I wanted—I was going to pray for good health and he was going to give it to me. Why in this complicated world, with so much grief and pain around us throughout the world that I still could believe that, I don’t know. But I did. And then I realized that the God I was going to have...was going to promise me understanding....You get the God you

have,” she said quoting from Bill Moyers’ series on the Book of Genesis, “not the God you want.”

In the fullness of time, God said Jesus, said the Word that was in the beginning who now comes to us from out of God’s future and in whom we glimpse God’s promise that order will finally win out over chaos, light over darkness, hope over despair, life over death. The implication of John’s prologue, according to Scottish theologian Alan Torrance, is that in Jesus we hear and glimpse the redemptive Word of God effecting even now the reconciliation of all creation to God.

Let me say this one other way: Incarnation corresponds in the life of God to creation. When God says Jesus, God once more acts and speaks as Creator, “but now” says Karl Barth, “not as the Creator out of nothing; rather God enters the field and creates within creation a new beginning....In the continuity of human history a point becomes visible at which God Himself hastens to the creature's aid and becomes one with us.” Therefore God said, in the beginning, “Let there be...” and spoke us into being; God said, in the fullness of time, Jesus, God with us, and we glimpsed the new heaven and new earth where there will be no more death; neither sorrow nor crying, neither will there be any more pain.

A second way to wrestle with what John is telling us in the beginning is a bit more edgy, especially on the floor of Presbytery! If the Logos of God is God’s speech, God’s address, inquiring minds cannot help but wonder if the Word in the beginning is limited to the Jesus of history. Put another way: was the Word [that was in the beginning] silent until God said Jesus? Or from the beginning has God spoken, manifested himself, made herself known throughout time and in various ways to people utterly unacquainted with Jesus?

A safe answer, on the floor of Presbytery, is to be found in the book some of us are studying this year. At the beginning of the sermon that is the Book of Hebrews, the preacher says, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these latter days [God] has spoken to us by a Son.” Open the Bible to about any page of the Old Testament and you will read, “Thus says the Lord....” From Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, and Samuel through the first historical characters in Scripture ruling Israel and Judah, God spoke words that promised, commanded, rebuked, instructed and comforted. In speech, God made himself known to God’s chosen people. Moreover, the preacher of Hebrews connects the Word God spoke in a Son to the Word God spoke through the prophets when God’s people had quit listening...when Israel believed God had fallen silent.

If the Word was in the beginning and was with God and was God, then the story we have in Scripture mediates to us a God who communicates, who wills to be known, who chooses, over and over again, not to be God without us. “What in eternity precedes the Son’s birth to Mary,” writes Jenson, “...is a pattern...of movement to incarnation [to becoming flesh, to saying Jesus, that is] a pattern” within the life of God. Still in this understanding of the Word from the beginning, God would seem to be silent in relation to all except Israel and now the visible church.

But what if the *Logos* of God that was in the beginning and was with God and was God was spoken in many and even more various ways, ways that communicated God’s real presence, ways that manifested God’s light and life and love to people who may never hear the Word that became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth? For some of the early church fathers as well as a growing number of Christian theologians today, John opens the way to an incredible dialogue about the universal cosmic work of the

Logos of God. To wit, the Jesuit theologian Jacques Dupuis asks, “Did the eternal *Logos* manifest himself to all human beings, or was knowledge of him confined to the Judeo-Christian tradition? Did people before and outside this tradition partake of him, or did only those who received him when he came into the world?” When John said, in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God, was the Word he had in mind identical with but not limited to the Word that became flesh named Jesus?

It was the earliest church fathers who were led by what God said in Jesus to speak themselves about a Cosmic Christ. Taking his cue from John’s gospel where Jesus says, “No one knows the Father save the Son, and those to whom the Son has revealed him,” Irenaeus writes, “The word ‘has revealed’ was not spoken referring only to the future, as though the Word began to make the Father manifest only when he was born of Mary; but he is present at every point in time. For from the beginning the Son, present to the creatures whom he has formed, reveals the Father to all those to whom the Father wills, and at the time and in the way he wills...” For Irenaeus, the Word that became flesh in the fullness of time was not the exclusive Word of God spoken to those who sign on to the visible Christian church or stand within an orthodox Christian confession. Rather Jesus is called the Christ because in him his followers heard the Word God had spoken to all creation from the beginning of time!

Finally, though not exhaustively, there is a third and most mysterious claim about the meaning of the Word that was in the beginning and was with God and was God. The Word, says Jenson, was a Word God spoke to himself. “What the Father says, to generate the conversation that is God’s eternal being, is ‘I am the Father of the one who...’ with the ellipsis filled from what Jesus said and did and underwent.” The implication is that the “the being of God is a conversation” and that the Word spoken in the beginning was determined to be spoken in the fullness of time, spoken in such a way as to include us in conversation!

Words can barely contain this news! God said, within God’s being, in the eternity that is another name for God, at the heart of time and space as they came to be, yet before God began creating, before there was any thing, *before there was any was...* and only God, God said that the end of it all, the meaning of all God’s dealings with this yet to be created creation, would be the promise that in Christ, in the first born of all creation, in the only begotten Son, God would communicate himself to us, would come to us from out of the future God promised us in him to be with us and for us, our only comfort in life and in death. John’s prologue contends that God decided this, God spoke to himself, not on some starry, starry night two thousand years ago; but before the foundation of the world, God chose us and destined us in the Son to be included in the conversation that is God.

What does any of this have to do with our impending celebration of Christmas? According to John, what God said has become hearable in the Word become flesh: a Word spoken, in the first place, from the beginning of creation to the end in the Son who is reconciling of all creation to God; a Word spoken, in the second place, to all at every moment in time and heard at every point in time by those willed to hear what God said not according to a particular religion or creed or system of belief, but willed by the God who chooses to be known; a word spoken, in the third place, by God to God who is in himself the conversation we are invited to join because

...here and now the Word which is implicit in the Beginning and in the End is become immediately explicit, and that which hitherto we could only passively feared as the incomprehensible I AM, henceforth we may actively love with comprehension that THOU ART.

W. H. Auden

Thanks be to God!