

## In the Beginning Was the Speaking

Jeremiah 31:7-14

John 1:1-18

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

This is the Sunday closest to Epiphany, a Sunday when we usually sing hymns about Light, tell the story of the wise men coming to Jesus, and wrestle with Herod’s massacre of the innocents. In a perverse way, I am drawn to Matthew’s story of Jesus’ birth more than I am taken with Luke’s because I recognize in Matthew the world I know, the world of Herod’s murderous decree, of wise men circumventing politicians now and again, of a Holy Family fleeing like refugees. In Matthew I recognize the world that is still too much with us as this anything-but-New-Year commences.

There is, however, another text about light appointed for the Second Sunday after Christmas Day, a text that turns us from the crèche to creation and the cosmos, because the whole of created time and space is the only context able to contain the news John has to tell: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*

Compared to Mary and Joseph and shepherds and wise men, John’s words about the Word’s beginning seems to send us into outer space, claiming, as he does, that the Word that became flesh was in the beginning—before time and space--and was with God—before we were--and was God—was totally other than we are. But because John’s context for his words are the words of Scripture, his first sentence really means to send us back to the first sentence of Genesis: In the beginning, when God began creating the heavens and the earth. How did God create? God *said*, “Let there be....” As God’s speech created the cosmos, Jesus is the Word God speaks, according to John, in the fullness of time, to recreate the world.

But John does not choose just any word for Word in his Gospel. Of all the words in Greek that he could have chosen, John chose *logos*. In the sixth century B.C., a philosopher named Heraclitus, writing in Ephesus where John is thought to have written his Gospel, first used *logos* to speak of “the eternal principle of order in the universe.” The Stoics would use the same word to speak of the mind of God. Philo, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher writing during Jesus’ lifetime, spoke of the *logos* as an intermediary between God and God’s creatures. [Raymond Brown] In other words, John chose a loaded word in Greek for what is translated in English as Word!

In the late fourth century, about the time the biblical canon was being closed, Jerome began translating the Greek and eventually the Hebrew Scripture into Latin. He did this in Bethlehem, in a little room that you can visit under the newer sanctuary of the Church of the Nativity. Presbyterian that I am, I was almost more excited to cast my eyes on this little room than on the place that Mary is thought to have dropped Jesus. Jerome’s translation is known as the Vulgate, and in it he rendered *logos* as *verbum* in Latin. Subsequent English translators took their cue from Jerome and translated *logos=verbum=word*.

Something has been lost in translation, it seems, and so a little article by friend and colleague Joseph Small sent me running to John Calvin’s commentary on John’s Prologue. “I wonder what induced the Latins to render *logos* as *verbum*,” John Calvin mused, “for that would rather have been the translation of *hre ma*. But granting that they had some plausible reason, still it cannot be denied,” he goes on “that *sermo* [speech, speaking, discourse] would have been far more appropriate.” That is, “In the beginning was the Speaking and the Speaking was with God and the Speaking was God.” In translating *logos* to *sermo*, Calvin means to follow John’s lead: to evoke the God who, in the beginning, *said* [*dabar*]--a Hebrew word that connotes dynamic action. The God who created the cosmos with a word in the beginning is the God who, in the fullness of time, spoke a new creation into being in the Speaking that became flesh.

What does that mean for your life and mine? John is saying, in the first place, that the Speaking who spoke creation into being is presently speaking you and me, moment by moment, into life, saying in us, with each breath we are given, “Let this one, unrepeatably, precious life be.” *All things come into being through him and without him not one thing comes into being. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.* John says this because, according to Genesis 1, non-being is lurking at the end of our every exhale, vying to say in us what God has not said, to overcome the life that is the light of the world in us. God is speaking us into being over against the deathly inertia of a decaying body and a diminished mind, speaking us into light as opposed to the darkness

that descends every time we read the news, speaking us into hope and not the despair urged upon us by the world as we have ordered it. John is saying God's Word, God's Speaking is creating in you, moment by moment, the life that is life.

In the second place, God's Speaking in the beginning initiated a relationship and God's Speaking become flesh in the fullness of time is redeeming a relationship. According to Genesis 1, God said, "Let us make humankind in our image." In the beginning was the Conversation, and the Conversation was within God, and the Conversation was God. Then God said, Let us make a creature other than ourselves to join the conversation—or not! Without fail—according to Genesis 2—the creatures God made for the conversation chose to talk among themselves, even to speak against the God whose speaking was giving them the breathe to speak at all! Those of you who are parents sort of know how that goes. One way to read the biblical narrative is to read it as a story about God's foiled attempts to sustain the conversation, to deepen the conversation, to expand the conversation, to restart the conversation.

Though here is the rub from our perspective: how can we ever really know the Speaking is God speaking, because God's speaking is always mediated, is always hidden, is always veiled. God speaks through angels entertained unawares and strangers who announce to a woman past the age of bearing children that she is pregnant with the child who will bear God's promise to future generations; through Moses who stutters and through Samuel who thinks it is Eli calling him; through corrupt Saul and pretty David; through fearful and ferocious prophets including John the Baptizer. In sum, God's speaking is hidden in the words on these pages, in the lives of these characters, in the plot of this story. We turn a deaf ear. So, in the fullness of time, when the created world is pregnant with possibility, *God speaks God* into ordinary human flesh, speaks God's dynamic, creating action into the world where we really live and will really die. *Hidden* in ordinary human flesh, God's Speaking was *in the world*, John says, *but the world knew him not*.

The real rub, from God's perspective, is not God's hiddenness but our persistent silence. *He came to his own*, (his own now being us), *and his own people received him not*. In spite of God addressing us in the words of Scripture and the flesh God became in Jesus Christ, we have nothing to say. If I consider the reasons for our silence, from the beginning, there are characters who engage us with arguments against joining the conversation; there are matters of consequence that distract us from the conversation; there is our own, inner, self-important dialogue that takes most of our time and attention; there is, in these latter days, our reasoned unbelief concerning the actuality of a Speaker.

What to do? As a Minister of the Word (the *logos*, the *sermo*) and Sacrament, I only know enough to jumpstart our side of the conversation every week when a few of us gather to listen again to God speaking through the words of Scripture; or on Sunday when all of us are gathered by God's address to try the conversation together. All I know to do myself is to ask and plead and thank and scold God along the way—no hands folded, no eyes closed, at least not when I am driving and walking and studying and working and staring and worrying and waiting and wondering and longing. Mostly I am speaking and listening in the dark. But because God has spoken and is speaking grace and truth into my ordinary life, because the love that God is apparently has not given up on the conversation yet, because the community called out by God's address week in and week out prompts me to haul myself out of bed on Sunday morning to listen again, there is light enough. *The light shines in the darkness*, John writes, *and the darkness has not overcome it*.

Finally, John says of those who receive the God who has come to them in Jesus Christ, who hear God Speaking in him, John says it is as though you have been born into a whole new life: a life defined no longer by blood—not your family whether biological or adopted; a life that ceases to be driven by your own peculiar physical or emotional or psychic needs—not the will of the flesh; a life whose destiny cannot be determined by peers—not the will of man. The source of your being in the world is God, who gives you power to become God's child. And before you can even ask what it looks like in the world to be God's child, in his next breath John says, *"And the word became flesh and dwelt among us."* God becomes God's own child, becomes his father's only son, born not of blood, though he was from David's line, nor of the will of the flesh, though he was born of woman, nor of the will of man, though he entered human history, but born of God.

In the days that lie before you, with each breath that you take, hear God speaking you, moment by moment, into life; dare the conversation with God, along the way, for which you were made; and finally, trust your life and your death into the hands of the God whose child you are. Thanks be to God. Amen.