

I

Beginning today, and through the rest of the winter and into the spring, we're going to be reading and preaching our way straight through the Gospel According to John. We won't cover every verse, or even every chapter, but for the next 17 Sundays, between today and Easter Sunday in April, we will be more or less working our way straight through John's gospel.

And so before we get to the text, it will be helpful to remind ourselves about a few things about the material before us. Remember, the bible isn't really one book, but rather an anthology, a collection of 66 books that were written in different locations at different points of time for different audiences, that have been gathered and preserved and transmitted to us down through the ages, often at great personal risk, so that you and I might come to know who God is, who we are, and what we have to do with each other.

We left off our story two weeks ago, about 600 years before the birth of Jesus. That's when the prophet Ezekiel spoke words of comfort and hope to God's people after the Babylonian army invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and took so many of God's people as slaves to live in exile.

So today, we're jumping far ahead in the biblical timeline, by about 600 years. So let's cover 600 years of geopolitical history in a few minutes.

Between where we left off two weeks ago in the prophet Ezekiel and where we pick up today with John's gospel, the Babylonian Empire was conquered by the Persian Empire, and the Persian king allowed God's people living as exiles in Babylon to return to Jerusalem and to begin rebuilding the city and the Temple.

But even though the Temple was rebuilt, ancient Israel never approached anything like the power and independence they enjoyed under the reigns of kings Saul, David, and Solomon.

The Persians were eventually vanquished by the Greeks under the leadership of a man named Alexander the Great. Alexander realized that in order to effectively rule such a large swath of territory, with so many different languages and customs, it would aid commerce and government if there was one common language across his empire. Given that Alexander's native tongue was Greek, guess which language he chose to be the official written language of commerce and government in his empire? Guess which written language the New Testament writers used when composing their works?

The Greeks eventually gave way to the Romans, and before, during, and after the lifetime of Jesus, the Romans ruled over much of the known world, including the entire Land of Promise.

So that's the geopolitical history. Now a word about religious history.

Jesus was born in roughly the year zero and was crucified in roughly the year 33. Jesus was born and raised as a first-century Jew, as were all of the first disciples. The movement of believers that came together around Jesus did not originally think of themselves as belonging to a religion separate from first-century Judaism, but rather a movement within it. In fact, some of the earliest controversies in the church had to do with how many of the laws and regulations in the Old Testament should be observed by those who were coming to faith in Jesus as the Messiah but were coming from outside of Judaism.

But events began to transpire in the year 66 that would change the relationship between the early Christians and their Jewish brothers and sisters forever. In the year 66, the people of Jerusalem staged an armed rebellion against the Roman occupiers. Four years later, in the year 70, in retribution for their attempt at rebellion, the Roman army destroyed the Temple for the second time.

Once again, God's people were deported out of Jerusalem and the Land of Promise. Once again, the Temple, once believed to be the very dwelling place of God on earth, lay in ruins.

And within the synagogues of first-century Judaism, those Jews who belonged to a movement within Judaism called the Way, that is, those who professed their faith that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the long-promised,

long-awaited Messiah, the one true king, began to be cast out of their synagogues as heretics and troublemakers.

And it's to this group that John sits down to write his gospel. Women and men living in the late first century who have seen their nation ripped apart by violence. Women and men whose connections to their families and their faith communities, to deep and long-standing relationships have been severed. Women and men who are hurting, frightened, and confused.

The word gospel literally means "good news," and John's is one of the four gospels contained in the bible. Within the genres of biblical literature, a gospel is not a biography or a history, although all of the gospels contain biographical details about Jesus and references to historic events. A gospel is not written so that the reader will have more information about Jesus, but rather so that a reader might experience a transformation, as John himself puts it near the end of his gospel, "These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

So all of that background, then, brings us to the story before us today, the beginning of John's gospel. So listen now for a Word from God from the Gospel According to John, beginning at the first chapter and the first verse.

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

God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the

only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

II

It's a different kind of Christmas story, isn't it? There are no shepherds to be found. No heavenly host of angels. No magi, no manger, not even a Joseph or a Mary. Luke and Matthew's gospel accounts are the ones we rely on for our nativity scenes.

But John begins his account differently. To a people whose world seemed to be coming apart all around them, to a people who were enduring the painful heartache of being cut off and cast out of faith communities that had sustained and nurtured them for generations, to a people who were frightened and hurting, John begins his gospel account with very same three words that begin the Hebrew Scriptures, words with which John's audience would have known and heard since they were toddlers.

In the beginning.

In the beginning, was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

There are no shepherds or angels or magi or mangers at the beginning of John's gospel. Instead, John begins with a confession of faith.

For John and his readers, the world they had once known seemed to be coming apart before their very eyes, and they found themselves living through a period of profound upheaval. Everything seemed to be moving all at once – it was as if the whole world was on a roller coaster and everyone was getting dizzy and nauseous.

And so into all of this swirling upheaval, into all of this chaos, John speaks this profound confession – in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

In other words, amid all of the chaos, amid all the upheaval, amid all of the uncertainty and ambiguity, there is a fixed point in the universe. In the beginning there was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being.

III

Maybe for you, my friend, it feels like your whole world is spinning and whirling and twirling. Here we are, just a few days away from another Christmas, and all of the hustle and bustle of another season.

But maybe for you, this year feels especially frenetic. The year has almost come and gone, but the pandemic still rolls clouds of uncertainty over nearly everything. The aftershocks of last year's elections continue to reverberate nearly everywhere.

But maybe for you, your sense of upheaval and swirling is closer to home. Maybe you're sensing that your whole world is coming apart at the seams. Maybe you're feeling like a ship that has been cut loose from its moorings in the middle of a storm, cut off from what has anchored you and sustained you in the past, and you feel as though you are adrift and in danger being smashed to pieces on the rocks.

What you wouldn't give for a little peace. What you wouldn't give for a little stability. What you wouldn't give for a little assurance that there is someone or something in control of it all.

Maybe this year, you need to hear John's gospel confession more than ever.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being.

My friend, there is a fixed anchor point in the grand scheme of things, an anchor point that does not move, an anchor point that was there before all things – an anchor point in which all of human history and all of human destiny come together.

The gospel news is that Jesus is not just an interesting historical figure or a political revolutionary or even a mystic prophet. The gospel news is that the Word became flesh and lived among

us, full of grace and truth – and his name is Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call the Christ.

My friend, no matter how chaotic your life is now or may become, no matter what happens in the world around you, there is nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in call creation, that can separate you from the love of God made known to you in Jesus Christ.

IV

The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory. For those of us who live out our discipleship in the Presbyterian way of being the church, we have, from time to time, been charged with being a wordy bunch. We Presbyterians like to think and talk and write about our faith. And that is not necessarily a bad thing. We should think carefully and communicate clearly about what we believe and why, for our theology informs our ethics, which informs our actions, which is affects our lives and the lives of everyone around us. Getting the words right is important.

But we can't just stop there. We can't get the words just right and then pat ourselves on the back and call it a day. Because John's gospel tells us that the Word became flesh.

So let's commit ourselves this day to taking the actions of Christmas, to putting a little flesh on the Word. Let us

commit ourselves to making room for newcomers, to welcoming refugees, offering food and shelter to vulnerable children, to seeking peace on earth and goodwill toward all people, to reflecting the light of Christ into the darkness.

It doesn't have to be fancy or complex. Maybe for us, putting a little flesh on the Word looks like writing an actual letter, on paper, to someone with whom we've lost touch.

Maybe for us, putting a little flesh on the Word looks like dropping a ridiculously large tip for that server who is working so hard over the holidays, even if the food and service wasn't all that great.

Maybe for us, putting a little flesh on the Word looks like doing something for that neighbor that drives us crazy – you know, the one whose politics we can't stand, who we secretly wish might trip on their face – maybe we could do something kind and generous for them and never let them know that it was us that did it.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.

Thanks be to God. Amen.