

John 1:1-18
Jesus: Light and Life
4th Advent Sunday

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December 23, 2018

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This Advent season, we have been spending our time in the beginning of the gospel of John. The first eighteen verses in this book are sometimes referred to as an introduction or a prologue – the word before the word. Yet some theologians and scholars more rightly describe this text as an overture. An overture is the orchestral piece that comes at the beginning of the opera and contains all the main themes of the opera. Similarly, in this text, we hear the disciple John introduce all the main themes that will be explored throughout the rest of his gospel – themes like Word, light, life, grace, truth, glory, revelation, and witness. This overture is stunning, dense, and rich. It is written in what is called staircase parallelism. It means that one word in a line is connected to the next line. In doing so, the hearers are brought into the text, brought into the movement and themes of the text. For example, verses 4 and 5: *The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* So this text is appropriately read like a poem, or perhaps even sung as a hymn or song.

On the first Sunday of Advent, we considered the theme of glory that John introduces in the overture and is embedded throughout the entire gospel of John. Verse 14 is the central verse of this entire text. John writes: *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.* When John announces the incarnation, the coming of the Logos in flesh, the Creator of all things becoming human, the Son of God who makes his home in the midst of our brokenness and sin, John chooses to write about glory. In the overture, he does not write about our being reconciled to God. Or about Jesus saving us from our sins. Or sin and death being defeated. Or about the

coming of God's Kingdom to earth. These are all true and part of what happens in the incarnation but John instead chooses to focus on glory.

Glory – to manifest the essence of God; to reveal the essential nature of God; to honour who God is.

Using Jesus' prayer in John 17, we considered how the glory to which John refers in his overture is precisely about the glory of the cross. So in the overture we are introduced to the life and death of Jesus. The glory we behold is the glory on the cross where Jesus is manifesting, Jesus is honouring, Jesus is revealing the very essence of God the Father to the world. On the cross, we see Jesus first and foremost showing the world who God the Father truly is. The cross isn't first about me or you. It's not first about our salvation. It's not first about bringing God's Kingdom to earth. The first concern of Jesus on the cross is to reveal the very essence of God to the world. And then, of course the cross is about God's Kingdom and our salvation because that is what God is all about! But the cross is first about the revelation of God to the world, not about my personal salvation. After all, all of Jesus' words and actions on earth, as recorded by the disciple John, are for the fundamental purpose of glorifying God. Thus the fundamental purpose of the church, God's people, is to glorify God. *And the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Last week, we considered how John begins his gospel account of the good news of Jesus. We looked at when the story of Christmas, the story of Jesus began. Unlike the other gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus, John does not tell us about the angel's annunciation to Mary or the angel's instruction to Joseph or the angels' proclamation to the shepherds. He doesn't tell us about the journey to the little town of Bethlehem or the birth of baby Jesus in a manger because there was no room in the inn. Instead, John chooses to start his gospel – an account of the good news of Jesus Christ – by going back all the way to the beginning of the beginning. John tells us that the origin of Jesus Christ is before the creation of the world itself. It means that Jesus Christ – who is at the same time God and also distinct from God the Father – has always existed. In the very beginning, before the beginning of time or before the beginning of creation, Jesus Christ – who is the Logos – existed. And in the very beginning, Jesus was face to face with God the Father, Jesus was towards the Father. In fact, everything Jesus said and did on earth he did with God, he did towards God.

John tells us that Jesus Christ is the logos. Logos: which means word or reason. Logos: from which we get our English words logic, logical, logistics. So the logical way to live is in line with the Logos. The logical way to live our lives is with God, face to face with God, towards God.

This week, we will consider the themes of life and light and children of God in the overture. John tells us that Jesus is the source of all life: *in him was life*. There are two Greek words for life. The first is the Greek word bios, from which we get biology or biological. Bios refers to biological life, to physical life. Bios is life which is created. Thus bios life has a beginning and a definite

ending. Bios life is life that is finite, there is birth and there is death. We are all very familiar with bios life.

The second Greek word for life is zoe. This is very different from bios. Zoe refers to the very principle of life, to the life principle or the power which maintains life. Thus, zoe life is not created life and has no beginning and no ending. It is infinite and does not die because it cannot die.

In his overture, John writes that in Jesus was zoe life and that zoe life was the light of all people. In the Logos – in Jesus – there is zoe life. Consider two other verses in the book of John which speak of zoe life: John 3:16 – *“For God so loved the world that whoever believes in him should not perish but have zoe life.”* Or John 8:12 Jesus said *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of zoe life.”* Jesus is the source of life eternal, of zoe life which cannot die, of zoe life that has no beginning and no ending. He is that zoe life.

And he is the light. In verse 5, we read *“The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it”*. The Greek word we translate “understand” or “comprehend” is katalambano which has a more nuanced meaning than understand or comprehend. It contains the idea of laying hold of something to make it one’s own; to seize or capture or overtake. So another way to translate this verse is: The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not overcome it; the darkness has not taken hold of it and made it its own, the darkness has not seized the light.

For the past four weeks of Advent, we have been in a season of waiting. Waiting is hard and it is something that many people do not know how to do, especially in our culture where everything is instant and immediate: instant food and coffee, instant entertainment, instant communication, instant gratification. When something is wrong, we are apt to want an immediate fix. When there is injustice we are prone to reacting immediately rather than responding thoughtfully. But around the world and in our community, people are forced to wait. Wait for peace. Wait for food. Wait for a home. Wait for employment. Wait to be reunited with family. Wait for hope. Wait for weeping to be turned to joy. During this Advent season, we must learn to wait, knowing that though there is darkness, though there is injustice, though there is grief, though there is hunger, the darkness does not overcome the light, the darkness does not seize the light. This is what it means to wait in Advent: to acknowledge the darkness, to see the darkness, but to wait with certainty that the darkness does not and will not have the final word. Light has overcome the darkness!

The contrast between light and darkness has echoes of the story in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. John pointed us to Genesis in verse 1 where John writes “in the beginning”. The opening words of Genesis 1 are also “in the beginning”. From the opening words of John’s book, the reader is reminded of the book of Genesis. We are drawn back to the story of creation. Here again, in verse 5 where John speaks of light and darkness, we are brought back to the book of Genesis. In Genesis 1:2 we read: “now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was upon the face of the deep” Then in the next verse, in Genesis 1:3, the very first thing God creates is light. God said, “Let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.” There was darkness but light overcame the dark.

The parallelism between Genesis and John's overture is clear. Indeed, the whole of John's book reminds us of Genesis. Genesis is about creation, the old creation. John is also about creation, but about the new creation in Jesus Christ. In John's gospel, he is showing us that in Logos – in Jesus Christ – there is a new creation happening. The Logos is creating something new.

So we understand that the Logos – Jesus – is the light and the life. Darkness cannot overtake the light. Light will always have the final word. But if the light has come – if the Logos has come, then why is the world still dark? Why is there still war and violence? Why is there still hunger and homelessness? Why is there still sickness and addiction? Why are families torn apart? After all, it's not as though everyone in the world chooses darkness. There remains darkness because the world has not received the light. By not receiving the light, the natural consequence is darkness. If light has come, the world is still dark because we have not all received him. Darkness remains because the light is not yet received everywhere. Yet because light has come and continues to come, darkness will never have the last word.

Verse 10: *“He came into the very world he created, but the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him”*.

To receive – what does this mean? John writes that his own did not receive him. It is the same verb we find in Matthew 1:20 when the angel tells Joseph: *“do not be afraid to receive Mary as your wife.”* Then later in Matthew 1:24: *“When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and received Mary as his wife”*. John is writing in the first century, in a Greco-Roman culture. This verb to receive contains an image of hospitality, which is like the middle

eastern view of hospitality or the African understanding of hospitality. To receive is about receiving a visitor into one's home as an honoured guest, a close friend. The picture is that of welcoming a stranger into your home and doing everything possible to make that person feel completely at home.

This was my own experience when I lived in Uganda. I often visited my Ugandan colleagues' families in rural villages and distant towns. Wherever I went, I was welcomed into the home, asked to sit in the most comfortable chair, and then the women and children from the home scattered to gather chickens and a pig and fruits and potatoes to cook. A feast was always prepared and I was not allowed to leave until I had eaten more than my fill. With the arrival of a guest, a stranger, their entire plan for the day stopped. Instead, they rearranged their schedule, their affairs, their duties to attend to the guest and make the guest feel honoured, like a close friend. To receive in this sense means to receive someone as an honoured guest, a close and intimate friend, to rearrange one's life around to make sure the guest feels at home.

He came to his own but his own did not receive him. His own did not welcome him. His own did not take Jesus in as an intimate friend and honoured guest. His own did not reorient their lives around Jesus. His own did not do everything they could to make Jesus feel welcome.

Do you notice the sad and pitiful irony here? John has told us that the Logos came into the world he created and his own creatures did not receive him. Jesus created everything. That means that there is not one square inch of the whole universe which Jesus did not create, which does not belong to Jesus. Every land and every human being is his. Every created thing owes its existence

to Jesus. Every person owes their existence to Jesus. Everyone is his own. He came to his own but his own did not receive him. The creator came to his created but the created did not receive him. It is not simply a matter of receiving a guest or a stranger. It is a matter of receiving the Creator Himself. A matter of receiving the one who created us.

Imagine that some electronic device has broken. The person who designed and made the device knocks at your door and offers to come and fix it. But you say “I don’t need you, go away”. Or imagine you are quite sick. The doctor comes along and tells you that she has just developed a new medicine, a new procedure, a new surgery that can cure you. You say “go away, I don’t want you”. He came to his own but his own did not receive him.

The land, the people, the religion that was most prepared to receive the coming of the Logos, the coming of the Word made flesh, did not welcome him. God’s people – the Israelites, the Jews – did not receive him. This is a warning to us about how religion can blind us to the light. We all know the story of the magi well. They came from the eastern lands wondering where the King of the Jews had been born. They had seen his star and wanted to worship the King. The religious leaders of the day – the scribes and priests and teachers of the law told the magi that according to their holy book the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. So then who goes to welcome the King? Is it the religious leaders, the scribes and priests who go to worship their King? No. It is the magi who go to worship, to welcome Jesus. The Jewish scribes, priests, and religious leaders do not go to see their King, they do not go to welcome the Messiah. They are too busy with religious duties and affairs that they cannot welcome their King. All throughout the gospel accounts we read that

the greatest resistance to Jesus comes from religion. It is the religious leaders, the religious community who fail to receive him. May we not be too busy being religious to receive our King.

Here is the Logos – the one who created all things, the one in whom there is life and light, the one who gives zoe life – and the Logos is rejected. The logical thing to do is to live in sync with the logos. The most illogical thing to do is to refuse to live in sync with logos. He came to his own and his own did not receive him. This is counter logos. This is against logic. This is the opposite of what is logical. When the logos – the one who created you, the one who gives light and life, knocks at the door, the only logical thing to do is open the door, and rearrange our lives so we can do what he calls us to do.

“Yet to all who did receive 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.”

All those who do receive Jesus become children of God. To help us understand what John means when he speaks about being born of God, we turn to the word begotten. There is a difference between the word begotten and the word creation. There is a difference between to beget and to create. To create is to bring into being something other than yourself. To beget is to bring into existence the same thing as yourself. Humans can both create and beget. For example, humans create machines and houses and artwork and poetry. We create something different than ourselves. Humans also beget. Humans beget the same thing. Humans beget little humans. Bears beget little bears. Moose beget little moose.

The same is true of the Triune God. God creates and God begets. God creates that which is different than God. God created the sun, moon and stars. God created mountains and valleys and land and water. God created animals and fish and birds. God created human beings. And God begets. God begets the same as God. God begets God. The Logos is the only begotten God. We – human beings – are created by God but we are not begotten by God. The Logos is the only begotten God.

To those who did receive him, he gave the right to become. Here we see the Logos doing a new creative work. Remember, John's gospel shows us how in Jesus Christ, we are a new creation. John's gospel is about the new creation, compared to the old creation in Genesis. Those who receive the Logos, those who welcome the Logos, those who invite the Logos into their lives and rearrange their lives around the Logos, become something new. We become the children of God. Now, when we are born, are we not children of God? No. We are all creatures of God at birth, we are all made in his image, we are his creation, but we are not all children of God.

We become children of God, born of God. Verse 13 contains the Greek word for begotten, which we translate as reborn or born of God. The person who receives Jesus is begotten. Remember – what we create is different from ourself. What we beget is the same as ourself. It means that as children of God, we have new desires, new motives, new peace, new hope, a new way to love just as God the Father gives to us.

All human beings are created by the Logos. When human beings who are created by the Logos receive the Logos, then God begets children of God. This is a marvelous mystery. The Logos

becomes like us – human, flesh and blood, so we can become like him, sons and daughters of the Living God. You and I can't make this happen. We cannot make ourselves into children of God. We become children of God when we receive the Logos. We are reborn. We are made into new creations.

When we receive Jesus, he gives us the right to become what we cannot make ourselves become. Every person is his own. Every person at CGC right now is his own. Every person in the coffee shop is his own. Every one at home watching Christmas movies is his own. If his own would just receive him, this would be a different world.

So the Logos – Jesus Christ – has always existed. He is the source of zoe life and light. The darkness cannot and will not overcome the light. He came into the world but his own did not receive him. But all who welcome him, who invite him in and rearrange their lives around the one who gives life and light, become children of God; are begotten children of God. Amen.