

“The Light-Bearers”

John 1:1-18

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Raymond Brown, in his Commentary on the Fourth Gospel, said, “If John has been described as ‘the pearl of great price’ among all the New Testament writings, then one may say that the Prologue is the pearl within the pearl.”

St. Augustine wrote in The City of God that the beginning of the Prologue “ought to be copied in letters of gold, and placed in the most conspicuous place in every church.”

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.”

Here we find set forth in sublime simplicity the very center of our faith, that Jesus Christ is God the only Son, who is “close to the Father’s heart,” the One who makes God known. The transcendent beauty of this text has a lyricism all its own that defies our human limitations, rising above this world’s darkness and confusion like the full moon rising above Lake Michigan. The words of 5th century hymnist Aurelius Clemons Prudentius, translated from Latin into English by John Mason Neale and set into elegant Plainsong, truly captures its essence:

By his Word was all created; he commanded; it was done: Heaven and earth and depths of ocean, universe of three in one. All that sees the moon’s soft shining, all that breathes beneath the sun, Evermore and evermore!

I

John’s Gospel begins “In the beginning”—not with the birth of Jesus, but with language meant to take us back to the birth of Creation, to the opening verses of Genesis, where we read: *“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a mighty wind swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light; and God saw that the light was good...”*

We can learn from these first verses of the Bible that we live in a moral universe, filled with goodness, beauty and truth. We also learn that God didn’t “mold” the universe into being like a Potter with a wheel of clay; God didn’t “chisel” the universe into being like a sculptor with a block of marble; God didn’t “orchestrate” the universe into being like a Master-Conductor with baton upraised (although J.R.R. Tolkien has a delightful description of just that in his book The Silmarillion). No—God “spoke” the universe into existence. Which is why the “Word,” the Word that was “with” God from the very beginning, the Word that cannot be separated or subordinated from God, becomes the astounding place where John chooses to begin the story of Jesus.

Christ is “the Logos,” the “Voice of the Lord,” that “is over the waters,” as the Psalmist writes in Psalm 29. The Logos is the creative power of God acting to bring life into being in all its goodness, beauty and joy. I love the text from the Book of Job, when God asks Job, *“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth...when the morning stars sang together and all the children of God sang for joy?”* Well, God the Son was there, John is telling us in his Prologue, the Word through whom all things came into being. This is the truth that is captured in Thomas’ heartfelt confession at the end of this Gospel, when beholding the Risen Christ, he whispers *“My Lord and my God.”*

John wants us to believe and understand what the Nicene Creed affirmed three centuries later: that the Lord Jesus Christ is *“God of God, Light of Light, very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made...”*

*Over the years, this central tenet of our Christian faith has become richer and more glorious to me as I have gloried in the beauty of Nature: in walking through a grove of yellow Aspen in September in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of New Mexico, or snorkeling among sea-turtles in Hawaii, or just sitting quietly atop our beloved Bluffs beside Lake Michigan with my canine friend Remy, listening to the waves breaking on the shore... Now I’m seeing the face of Christ in all these things, and I’m hearing his words, *“Don’t let your hearts be troubled”* in the same Voice that said, *“Let there be light.”* And that fills me with wonder, comfort and joy.

II

What we are told about the Word in John’s Prologue is that this Word is the Word of Life—abundant and unending. And that this life is the “light of all people.” As Dale Brunner addressed this in his commentary, *“The Word is not only divine, but it is the agent of both the world’s creation and the world’s salvation. This Word holds the saving life and light of the world, the light that ‘shines in the darkness,’ that the darkness could not put out.”* Dr. Brunner sees in verse 5 an allusion to the darkness of the Crucifixion itself—in light of the Resurrection which follows. And *“The Light shines on,”* he says, in the faithful witness to Jesus Christ by people like you and me, the members of his Body, the people of his Church.

III

Truly, we don’t need to go all the way back to Good Friday to experience the darkness that John refers to in verse 5 of his Prologue. There has been more darkness than we ever imagined or were prepared for in Washington, D.C. last week, and possibly more yet to come as our wounded Republic limps toward the inauguration of a new President just ten days away.

As a young boy, I walked across the Great Rotunda and through the Statuary Hall into the House of Representatives, filled with childlike reverence and awe. Ten years ago, I did so again—and I felt exactly the same way, despite a lifetime that covered the Vietnam years, Watergate, the Hostage crisis, and 9/11. Despite all these experiences, despite our ongoing struggle for racial equality, I continue to cherish this nation with faith, hope and love. And I believe that you do, too.

This is what makes the events of last Wednesday so difficult for us to accept and so hard for us to condone. The incitement to march on the Capitol devolved into a riot which carried within it elements of insurrection. People died as a result. And our nation is reeling. Like the nation of Judah in Isaiah’s time, we too are a people *“walking in darkness,”* a spiritual darkness brought about by entrenched political warfare, by demagoguery, and by the dereliction of the truth.

“You shall know the truth,” said Jesus, *“and the truth will make you free.”* Yet in our digitized, fragmented, and media-driven culture, we are losing sight of the truth. And for some, the love of truth as well.

Back in the Garden of Eden, it was a lie that caused humanity’s loss of innocence. *“You will not die,”* said the serpent, *“you will be like God.”* Believing that lie and driven by unholy desire, the human race fell from truth into error. What was true then is true now. Friends, there is a clear and compelling reason why Jesus names Satan “the father of lies,” in stark contrast to his naming God “Abba,” our Father in heaven. When standing before Pontius Pilate, torn, dirty and bleeding, Jesus said, *“For this I was born into the world, to bear witness to the truth.”* “What is truth?” replied Pilate—and that is precisely our problem and spiritual dilemma today. Was there a free and fair election last November, despite this pandemic, with a clear and corroborated outcome? Or was this election “rigged,” was it “stolen” by conspiracy and fraud? What do you believe? Whatever your answer, I pray that you believe this: *“A house divided against itself cannot stand,”* said

Abraham Lincoln two years before his inauguration—and the commencement of the Civil War. What was true then is true now.

*Let me show you what I'm holding in my hand. It's called a Plumb-line, an ancient building tool that's been around as long as the Pyramids. You use it to build a house that is upright: that's not sagging either left or right. A plumb-line doesn't lie, you see, and if you read the Book of Amos, you'll learn that God has a Plumb-line, too.

*Let me show you this: it's a compass, designed for small watercraft like my kayak, in case I get overtaken by a fast-moving fogbank far offshore. When I cannot see a thing, this compass will point the way home. And so does this...(holding the Bible)

*The last thing I want to show you is this: it's a lantern. I honestly don't know whether it's a Republican or a Democrat lantern. I don't think it truly matters. What matters is what's inside: which is light.

In his Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, John said the Word was "*the light of all people.*" He said "*The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.*" He said the world didn't know or accept the Word, but to those who believed, to those who opened their heart to receive him, he gave power to become children of God—a second birth into the life that is truly life. When Jesus said "*I am the light of the world,*" that is precisely what he meant: he is the revelation of God as well as our gracious means of receiving God. Without grace, the truth can only condemn us. Because of the grace of Jesus, the truth will set us free. That's the Light we all need right now, and we can bring that light when we bear that light within us. Like John the Baptist—we aren't the Light. But we can become Light-Bearers, we can bear witness to the Light, when we honor the truth and when we practice the ways of grace.

Truly, this is the only way forward. We need leadership that will seek the truth, embrace the truth, uphold the truth and defend the truth. We need leadership that will do that graciously, with a justice tempered by love, with humility, and in service above self.

Friends, it was only a few days ago that we were joyfully singing, "*He rules the world with truth and grace.*" Let us ask Christ now to rule our hearts as well, that we may be his light-bearers, when it's getting dark outside, when it's hard to find our way back home.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.