

John 1 video (scripture): 1.5 min

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. 9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

The apostle John begins his version of the Christmas story with the words I've just recited: his words are bursting with life, vitality, and urgency. Some stories bore us to tears, other entertain us, but we all need stories that are big enough to encompass our lives--stories that give us hope.

Have you all heard the story that came out of Newtown, Connecticut on Friday morning? A young man walked into Sandy Hook Elementary School and opened fired: 20 children and 6 adults were killed before he turned the gun on himself. Both of my children are in Elementary School--can imagine hearing the news and racing to your child's school, hating yourself for hoping that someone else's child is dead instead of your own?

If you've followed the news, you've heard all kinds of adjectives being used to describe these killings--tragic, unfortunate, horrific, and inhumane. The Governor of Connecticut was quoted as saying, "Evil visited this community today."

Evil is a 4-letter-word in our culture; few dare to speak it aloud. I'm not sure what the hesitation is...has our sense of right and wrong, and good and evil, really become so muddled that we can no longer tell the difference?

I was listening to the news and I heard one reporter say, "Something needs to be done!" Agreed, but what? Typically, in the face of "tragedy," the standard solution is better education. As North Americans, we are among the most educated people, not only on the planet but also in the history of the world: will more education make the difference?

Others have suggested more accessible mental health care, or tighter gun laws, all of which are possibilities to consider. But I'm not sure they go far enough--addressing symptoms rarely deal with the root cause. There is a deep darkness, a pervasive brokenness that cannot be addressed by better education, tighter gun laws, or more accessible health care. Something needs to be done.

In the face of this atrocity, this evil, I can only imagine the shock, the disbelief, the anger, the helplessness that many people are feeling in Newtown. It's not that a darkness descended on Newtown on Friday, it's that darkness was exposed. And as I think about about what kind of story will bring comfort and hope to these parents, siblings, teachers, and townspeople, I can't help but think that talking about Santa, elves, and flying reindeer would be useless and out of place.

We've got it all wrong if we think that the Christian story is about rules and regulations to ensure that we stay off God's naughty list.

John doesn't tell us a fairy tale, he tells a true story; he talks about new beginnings, about life, about light and darkness. *In Jesus we find life, and His life is the light of all mankind. His light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot not overcome it. The true light that gives light to everyone has come into the world.*

It does us no good to wish darkness away, or to pretend that it does not exist. In John's telling of the Christmas Story, we come face to face with a message that is core to Christian Spirituality: God became one of us, God came to be with us, God is for us. Because of Jesus, we have light (hope) in the midst of darkness. These are the truths that we cling to and confess. This morning, next Sunday, and Christmas Eve, we will be inviting you to live in this story that John tells.

Before I say any more this morning, I'd like to pause and pray for the community of Newtown. **Pray.**

This morning I'm going to walk through John's words, verse by verse, but before I do, I'd like to talk both about John's starting place, and the purpose behind his written, eye-witness, account.

1. First, John's starting place. If you've ever read through Matthew, Mark, and Luke, you will notice that John's Gospel is of a different sort. To begin with, he begins with a different beginning. Matthew and Luke begin with Jesus' birth, Mark's Gospel begins with Jesus' baptism, but John has a different starting place in mind--his beginning targets the time before time.

The first words in the Bible are found in Genesis 1:1, and they recount God's first recorded activity: "*In the beginning, God created*

the heavens and the earth." "*In the beginning God;*" John picks up on these four words and expands them. Before time, space, and matter--before there was anything--there was God. John writes, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" There's much more to be said here, but I'll return to these thoughts later.

2. The purpose for John's account: Matthew and Luke begin by telling the story of Jesus' birth, and then move on to talk about His three years of itinerant work. As you read their written, eye-witness accounts, they read like a puzzle that comes together piece by piece: Jesus' true identity becomes clearer as we go along. Perhaps John is more impatient as an author, but he is certainly less subtle--he gets right to the point--he has written his eye-witness account so that all who hear might believe in Jesus.

We do the Christmas story, and ourselves, a great disservice when we over-sentimentalize it. The fact is that Mary was a scared teenager, giving birth for the first time, and had no choice but to go through labour in a barn-like atmosphere. Have any of you been in a barn recently? Ask a farmer, there's nothing sentimental or romantic about a barn--they're loud, dirty, and smelly.

And I can't imagine, Joseph and Mary felt particularly proud about laying Jesus to rest in a feeding trough...how many slobbering sheep or goats had just eaten out of that thing? I wonder, for the rest of her life, every time she saw a feeding trough did Mary cringe, and say to herself, "*Oh Jesus, I wish I could have given you more*"?

illus: If you ever seen the movie *Talledega Nights*, then you've seen Will Ferrell take sentimentality over the top when it comes to the

Christmas story. If you haven't seen it, don't bother, save your money. At one point, Ferrell prays around the dinner table and he prays to baby Jesus. His father-in-law interrupts him saying, "You know that Jesus grew up don't you?"

Ferrell responds, "I like the Christmas Jesus best and I'm saying grace. When you say grace you can say it to grownup Jesus, or teenage Jesus, or bearded Jesus or whoever you want." Ferrell returns to his prayer, praying, "Dear tiny Jesus, in your golden-fleece diapers, with your tiny, little, fat, balled-up fists...Dear 8 pound, 6 ounce, newborn, infant Jesus, don't even know a word yet, just a little infant and so cuddly, but still omnipotent".

John wouldn't have had any time for that kind of nonsense; the Christmas Story is incomplete without the Easter Story: Jesus was born, He died, and He rose again to life. John doesn't waste any time, he gets right to the heart of the matter: God didn't sit on the sidelines, watching a world in darkness--He became one of us, so that He could be with us, so that He could light a way in the darkness, and rescue us.

Right at the end of John's Gospel, he summarizes what he has been saying all the way through. John 20:30-31 says, "**30** Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. **31** But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

In essence, John says, *I want to tell you about Jesus, about His identity, His purpose for coming, and here's why: I want you to place your life in His hands.* And to be clear, this is my purpose as well. My reason for telling you about Jesus isn't to educate or entertain, it's to evoke a response--I'm asking you to place your life in Jesus' hands.

The question is, *will you? Will you place your life in His hands?* This is John's question--every other question in life pales by comparison. *How will you answer?* I want to invite you to think on that question, and I'll come back to it before I wrap up.

Vs. 1-3: Now let me encourage you to turn your attention to vs. 1-3. John writes, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*"

We might have expected John to say that "*in the beginning was God,*" but he introduces the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, referring to Him as "**the Word.**" And what does John tell us about this "**Word**"?

- a) First, the Word is pre-existent. In other words, God the Son, the Word, has always been: there was never a time when He was not.¹
- b) Second, John tell us that this Word was *with* God. If we wanted to be more literal in the translation from the original Greek into

¹ Colossians 1:15-20, and Hebrews 1:1-4 also speaks about His identity (preexistence) and His work.

English, we might say, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was towards God,*” or, “*and the Word was face to face with God.*”

It’s not that the Word was with God, like you and I might be with 50 strangers in a crowded coffee shop: the Word was *towards* God, the Father and the Son were *face to face*. It’s a description of the closest possible relationship: no competition, no friction, nothing to separate them.²

Take a moment to look at vs. 3; notice that John doesn’t say that the Word created everything--he says that all things were created *through* Him. The work of God is inherently relational, not individual. The Father creates *through* the Son, and though John does not mention it here, the act of creation was equally *by* the Holy Spirit. The Father, Son, and Spirit have the closest possible relationship; each member of the Trinity participates in the essential being and work of the other.

1 John 1:1-3, “*That which was from the beginning, which we have **heard**, which we have **seen** with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have **touched**—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. 2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. 3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard,*

so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

Darrell Johnson writes, “At the centre of the universe is a relationship”.³ And throughout the rest of John’s account, he makes plain the fact that we have been made for this relationship; this is why Jesus came.

c) Vs. 1 concludes with five simple words: *and the Word was God*. I told you, John gets right to the heart of the matter. Who is Jesus? He was with God in the beginning, as God.

There has been all kinds of scholarly debate as to the meaning of term John uses for Jesus, “the Word”. But one scholar offers a source of common ground: our words are a means by which we reveal ourselves, what we are thinking, what we are like.⁴ Jesus is God’s Divine Word, the clearest possible revelation of what God is like.

And while this Word did not become God (He has always been), there was a moment in history when He did become flesh and blood: Jesus was heard, seen, and touched.⁵ God became one of us. God the Son came to be with us. He came to reveal God to us. Through Jesus, we see that God is for us.

Let’s take a look at vs. 4-5.

² Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According To John (Revised)*, 67.

³ Darrell Johnson, *Experiencing The Trinity*, 37.

⁴ Morris, 66.

⁵ God the Son shares in our *becoming* (flesh and blood, that is), but He is unique in His *begotten-ness* (as God He is uncreated).

Vs. 4-5: John writes, “*In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*”

While John doesn't say it like this, he's trying to tell us that Jesus is **larger** than life. Through Jesus, everyone and everything has been given life. In Jesus we see the life **of** God, we see God's life **for** us, God's life **with** us, and for all who receive Him--we experience God's life **in** us. Jesus is the life-bringer. If you are in need of a second chance at life, look no further than Jesus; He is, He has, what you need.

But John also describes Jesus as light, and in doing so he awakens a world of meaning. What does it mean to say that Jesus is *the light of all mankind*? The light that *shines in the darkness*? The *inextinguishable light*? The *true light that gives light to everyone*?

Metaphors, by definition, are imprecise, but this imprecision is what gives metaphors such rhetorical power. Metaphors evoke our imagination, they summon our participation in the meaning. What does light do? Light does so many things, it shines, brightens, illuminates, warms, and attracts attention. Jesus is like this, it's isn't He? Light can have a gravitational force--if you've ever been seated around a campfire, likely you've ended up mesmerized.

But light can also push back darkness, it can reveal and expose. A room that looks clean when the lights are off, rarely passes the test when the switch is flipped. Have you ever noticed that Jesus can be like that? In the light of His perfection, His holiness, darkness is exposed, it's revealed. The light shines in the darkness.

This week, as I was meditating on this metaphor, it struck me that our experience of light is very different than the experience Jesus would have had. We can turn on a light with the flip of a switch, but for Jesus, apart from the light of the sun and moon, light was always accompanied by flame--light and heat were intimately linked. The one exposes, the other purifies.

illus: When I grew up, I loved playing with fire. I loved using a magnifying glass to focus a ray of light until it produced fire. I loved mixing gasoline and fire. But my favourite by far was using an aerosol can (hair spray, WD-40) and a lighter to produce a flame thrower (**demonstrate**).

One afternoon when I was 15, a friend and I gathered all the flammable liquid we could find and dumped it down an overflow drain at the back of my house. Our plan was to drop a lit match down the drain and see if we could coax a 3-4 foot flame out of the drain. And being the good friend that I am, I allowed my friend to have the first crack at dropping the match down the hole.

Rob lit the first match and dropped it, and we stood back--nothing happened. I encouraged Rob to drop another--I've always been good at sharing--he dropped a second lit match, we stood back, but nothing happened. Puzzled, we wondered aloud whether we needed to add a bit more flammable liquid. Rob bent over the hole with a quizzical look on his face...I remember the look because it was soon illuminated by a 4-foot-flame. I guess we didn't need anymore flammable liquid.

I don't want to make too much of John's metaphor, but there is something very powerful about the combination of light and heat.

Jesus is the light--He exposes the darkness, the brokenness, the sinfulness of our hearts. But He does a lot more than expose, if we let Him. As light He exposes, but as heat He purifies. Jesus' light is an invitation into repentance--repentance is the doorway that leads to life with God.

John says, "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*" Jesus has not extinguished all darkness, not yet, but notice that the darkness is not an equal power. The darkness, though present, cannot bully, overwhelm, or quench His light; darkness cannot drown out His truth, or barricade His way.

Nietzsche once wrote, "God is dead"--the truth is that Nietzsche is now dead, and Jesus is still very much alive. Jesus' light will never be extinguished, for darkness cannot swallow light. Time hasn't extinguished the light of Jesus, and neither has philosophy, science, war, or oppressive regimes--each have failed miserably. Time marches on and Jesus still shines.

The Good News is that God loved the world so much that He became one of us, God has come to be with us, God is for us. Colossians 1:13-14 says, "*For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.*"

Jesus said "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*" (John 8:12)"

⁶ Morris, 80.

⁷ Morris, 75.

Vs. 6-8: In vs. 6-8, we discover that Jesus was not alone in his work. Jesus was doing all the shining, but John the Baptist was directing traffic towards Jesus: *look at Him, listen to Him, turn to Him.* God sent John as a witness, to testify concerning Jesus so that through his testimony all might believe. God is still sending people, people just like us, to testify about what we have heard, what we have seen, what we have experienced concerning Jesus.

If you have been forgiven, set free, or transformed in any way--if you have experienced Jesus' love, His healing, His purpose, meaning, and direction--if He has given you hope, joy, or peace in the midst of darkness...then you can be His witness.

One author writes, "Witness establishes the truth. It does more. It commits. If I take my stand in the witness box and testify that such-and-such is the truth of the matter, I am no longer neutral. I have committed myself."⁶

Vs. 9: Vs. 9 concludes with the following words, "*The true light that gives light to everyone has come into the world.*" John's telling of the Christmas story tells us that something definitive happened in history, something irrevocable: God took on our flesh and blood, He became one of us, He came to be with us.

Conclusion: Leon Morris writes, "All the light we have, whether we walk in it or turn our backs on it, we owe to [Jesus] the Word."⁷ *I wonder, do you know Him today? Have you placed your life in His*

hands? This is John's question and every other question in life pales by comparison.

If you've never invited Jesus to shine His searching light into your life, make today the day--He will do more than expose, He will purify. Jesus' light is an invitation into life, and repentance is the doorway to life with God.

If you placed your life in Jesus hands a long time ago, let me ask you, *is there anything you are holding back from Him?* Let His light illuminate whatever darkness remains, don't hide in the shadows, He means to set you free, to bless, to heal, to restore. God is for you, not against you.

Just before team comes to lead us in a final song or two, I'd like to pray and ask God's blessing over us.

Concluding song (Hans)