

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.

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The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols is a Christmas Eve tradition at the Chapel of King's College, Cambridge. The first festival was held in 1918 and for 99 years, the provost has announced the ninth and final lesson with the phrase: "St. John unfolds the great mystery of the incarnation." And then the provost goes on to read most of the Gospel reading that we just heard.

Now, Matthew's and Luke's Gospels give us nativity stories with different details – one has magi, the other has shepherds; one starts in Bethlehem, the other in Nazareth; in one, the angel announces to Joseph, in the other to Mary. Both give reports of what was seen, heard and done, in part through different angelic messages.

What John offers is a different *kind* of story.

John's story encompasses the birth of the Christ child as well as the beginning of all things and *before* the beginning of all things, not to mention some implications of events long after the incarnation. The sheer span of John's deeply theological story is staggering.

I don't think I can sum it up any better than simply: "St. John *unfolds* the great mystery of the incarnation."

Matthew and Luke provide stories that focus on tangible, observable surfaces: the who, what, when, where and a little of the why of the nativity. John's story emphasizes intangible, experiential interiors: the living *meaning* of the nativity. Together, the three Gospel accounts express a unifying and enveloping story that both describes and inspires.

Here's how it works: If I wanted to tell you about an oak tree that captured my imagination, I could tell you that the tree's Latin name is *quercus garryana*. That might establish some scientific credibility or help you locate the tree's botanical family. Or I might choose to tell you that an English name for the tree is Oregon White Oak. That might give you a sense of its location and its appearance. I could tell you that in Klamath, the local First Nations language, its name is Hu'dshnam, a name that refers to the way the acorns "run and fly."

To make my report more specific, I might refer to the Signature Oak, designated as one of Oregon's "Heritage Trees," that lives in a 25-acre grove in the Oregon Garden just outside Silverdale. I could describe how this tree began life as all white oaks do, as a nut no bigger than my fingernail. And if I wanted to impress you with the features of this one oak, I might tell you that it is now at least 400 years old and more than 100 feet tall. Those are just a few useful details and they are all about observable surfaces.

Now, if I want you to have a more complete encounter with this tree, I need to fill in some of the subjective details. I might point out that the tree's massive branches bend to touch the ground in several places, and what I saw were arms reaching down to brace the trunk, some even bending back toward the sky as though resting on elbows. Or legs with bent knees over feet that stood firm or else stretching out as if tired from standing for 400 years.

Putting my fingers into the deep wrinkles of this old tree, I could sense its life energy as though it were some self-aware creature from Tolkien's Middle Earth. Gratitude for its funky, gnarled beauty arose spontaneously. These interior, interpretive impressions brought me closer to experiencing the fullness of this one, unique manifestation of God's creation. Those are some of the intangible, experiential interior elements that I could unfold and add to surface details. Together, you might get a better sense of my encounter with another word of God – *this* one "made tree."

In much the same way, there's no need for John's Gospel to repeat or revise the stories that Matthew and Luke provide. Where those stories anchor

the incarnation of Christ in creation, John's Gospel provides God's Kosmic context and motivation for the incarnation.

Naturally, John evokes the actions of the Creator in the first lines of Genesis: "In the beginning..." And then John presents us with an unexpected image of the mystery beyond all beginnings. Like the other three Gospels, John's story is explicitly and consistently Jewish.

John's prologue expresses an element of our Jewish roots, which is this: what God does in covenant with Israel reflects what God is doing with all creation.

John intends for the opening words of the prologue to resonate with the first chapter of Genesis where God is speaking creation into being. The author tells us that in the origin of all things, there was the *logos*, which we hear translated as the Word.

But there are implications in the Greek word that are lost in the English.

The non-created *logos* is the agent of creation and the Consciousness that was and is eternally one with God's being. God is never without the Divine Awareness, the Divine Wisdom, in and through whom the world is created, ordered and sustained.

John's prologue moves from echoes of Genesis to another passage in Jewish scripture that is virtually unknown to most Anglicans. John updates a part of the Book of the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira, sometimes called simply the Book of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus. You can find Sirach in bibles that include the Apocrypha.

Sirach is accepted as part of the Christian canon by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, but not by Protestants. The Anglican Church takes a squishier stand by stating in the Articles of Religion, written in 1801, that Sirach is among those books that "the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth not apply them to establish any doctrine."

The author of John's prologue is under no constrictions and so reimagines this passage written nearly 200 years before Christ.

The central figure of the Book of Sirach is a mysterious female figure who appears in several books of Hebrew scripture. She is more than a wise woman; she is Wisdom itself, the personified breath and word of YHWH.

In a hymn in the center of the book, Wisdom "tells of her glory." This glory is the presence of YHWH, the shekinah, that pitches its tent in the Temple of Jerusalem. For John, this is the glory of God, the shekinah, that we see in Christ, "the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

Wisdom tells all the company of heaven that she came “from the mouth of the Most High.” She is a word of the Holy One’s own self-expression. She sings of being with YHWH “before the ages, in the beginning” and tells the heavenly host that YHWH chose “the place for her tent” in Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebecca, the grandson of Abraham and Sarah, and the father of the 12 sons who would form the 12 tribes of Israel.

John gives us the Word made flesh that “pitched its tent among us,” a more accurate and evocative rendering of the Greek than the tepid “and lived among us.”

Wisdom reminds us that YHWH gave Torah to Moses, the covenant that she calls “an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob.” And *because* of that covenant, John implies, grace and truth came through Jesus the Anointed. The light that shines in the darkness has not come to judge the world but to redeem it.

John, you see, is telling a story that mainstream Jewish listeners might expect. The innovation comes as the Gospeler gently and purposefully turns the Jewish wisdom tradition down a slightly different path. Wisdom, he claims, the Awareness that reveals the glory of God, no longer dwells *only* in the Jerusalem Temple and the teachings of Torah. Instead, Wisdom, the very Consciousness of the living God, has become, fully, a human being in Christ Jesus.

And that, *that*, is the incarnational heart of the Christmas story – that the intangible Wisdom of God is not simply a brief visitor, who came once and then returned to heaven to live among the angels. For us, the Consciousness of God came as a baby and even when “his own people did not receive him,” the incarnated, crucified and risen Anointed One still pitches a tent with us, still touches us.

The great incarnational mystery St. John that has unfolded is reanimated and reinvigorated in the Eucharist. The consecrated bread and wine are held high after the words, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Bells ring out in recognition of the mysterious incarnational presence that we take into ourselves – the Being, Consciousness and Life-energy of God.

We see and feel and smell and taste the Presence that liberates us and makes us into the children of God. We walk away from this table carrying within us the Presence, the shekinah, that inspires us to share God’s teaching, grace and truth with all creation.

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