

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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We hear this reading from John's breath-taking Prologue every year on this Sunday halfway through the 12 days of the Christmas season. It is an intentional pattern. At the Christ Mass, we hear Luke's beautiful and intimate story about the birth of a child and the experience of his faithful family.

On the Feast of Epiphany, we hear Matthew's story of people from other lands, other cultures, other religions, coming to see the Christ child. And in between the two comes this story from John's Gospel. John's Christmas story doesn't start with an angel asking for Mary's permission to give birth or a messenger coming to explain the pregnancy to Joseph. Instead, John's entire Gospel begins with the conception of the Kosmos.

Between last week's birth story focused on one family and next week's reading about the larger world coming to recognize the significance of that birth, comes a poetic reminder of *why* this particular birth matters.

No angels, no shepherds, no political intrigue – nothing to distract us from the essential point: God, the source of all being, manifested

perfectly in a human being to give light to all people. For Episcopalians, it is a cherished reminder of the incarnational reality that saturates our whole life.

John has to use poetic imagery to evoke the Kosmic mystical experience of that light and life, or “*fos*” and “*zoi*” in Greek, two three-letter words with the letter “*omega*” in the middle. For many Christians, the Greek letter “*omega*” symbolizes the last, the best or final nature of something.

John’s poem goes on to set light and life, the best and final nature of God’s creation, against darkness and death. And the Gospel will continue to present the same twin paths to us that Moses laid before the Israelites: “See, I have set before you today life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life.”

That’s not coincidental. John’s Gospel echoes with a form of Judaism that was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. In the mix of Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes of the first two centuries of the Common Era was a group of folks we refer to as “Hellenistic Jews.”

Not long after John’s Gospel was written, they disappeared or were absorbed into Christianity. Hellenistic Jews left behind various artifacts with the dual roots of Jewish theology and Greek philosophy. Among them was a notion of a two-dimensional reality.

One dimension of existence was the realm of God – a dimension of truth, grace, spirit – in short, the realm of light and life. The other dimension of existence was the realm of creation – the dimension of falsehood, action, embodiment – the realm of death and darkness.

Now, despite John’s use of words like “up” for heaven and “down” for creation as if referring to separate locations, these are not two physically different places. The relationship between the realm of God and the realm of creation is more like two interacting spheres of influence sharing the same space. One is not *other* than the other; heaven and earth are distinct yet one; emptiness and form or subject and object are “not one/not two.”

Heaven interpenetrates and influences creation; creation interpenetrates influences heaven. Each is both.

Like the opening of Matthew, John’s Gospel gives us a careful description of the Christ-child’s heritage; “In the beginning was the

Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” It is a cosmic genealogy that makes a stunning claim. This lineage identifies the Word as God and yet also describes the Word as *with* God and therefore, in some sense, *not* God. The Word is God’s self-expression, God’s mind, God’s *awareness*.

Before all matter existed, there was “the Word.” Beyond all time and space, there is “Awareness.” The Awareness is God’s and the Awareness is God.

That is to say, the originating Awareness was distinct from the *source* of all being that Paul Tillich called “Beingness-itself.” We can also say that the originating Awareness was distinct from the animating Energy of God, Love-itself. The Awareness was with God and the Awareness is God.

If you find that difficult to follow, you are not alone.

John’s Gospel mixes insights from Greek philosophy and Jewish theology. The Greek sensibility saw the Awareness, the logos, of God as a go-between – a mediator – between God and creation that provided order and structure, making it easier to unlock and understand the mysteries of creation. Jewish theology presented the Word as a Divine challenge that a person could either accept or reject; a call from God inviting a response to the encounter.

In the style of Hellenistic Judaism, John’s Gospel presents Christ as the One who is *both* the mediating link and the compelling call. In other words, Jesus Christ is the *representative* of God and also the *representation* of God. By merging philosophies and theologies, the Gospel can speak to Gentiles and Jews, even as it challenges and honors them both.

Like Luke’s nativity story, John’s tells us about the incarnation of the Awareness, the Word of God: “And the Word became flesh and,” as the more literal translation of the Greek has it: “...and the Word became flesh and pitched its tent among us...” And in the life and teaching of Jesus, God’s glory shines with grace and truth and love.

God’s Awareness, the consciousness of the Creator, became more than a spiritual reality that we can begin to apprehend, more than an idea that we can start to comprehend. God’s Awareness became embodied.

And so, every time we come to God's table in the Eucharist, we take into our own bodies the body and the life of Christ. God's being, God's awareness, God's energy permeates us so that our own bodies, minds and souls begin to shine with God's own radiance and once again, through moral bodies, the immortal God is revealed for all.

Parts of the church have historically overemphasized the spiritual dimension at the expense of the created dimension, as if they were utterly separated and opposites: one good, the other evil. Church elders have taught that this earthly realm, especially the human body is somehow trivial or troublesome.

And yet, this passage and the remainder of John's Gospel present a radically different and contradicting perspective. God chose to manifest in a living human body and to experience a human life as one of us. The body of Jesus Christ was a source of holy revelation and the life of Christ *still* is.

God's Awareness infusing this created realm makes it possible for all of us to become God's children who embody God's word. Through Christ, our ordinary human lives can become places where God's glory shines.

"Jesus, the word made human flesh and blood," writes former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, "has given us the freedom, the authority, to become God's children by our trust in him, and so to have a fuller and fuller share in God's own joy."

That freedom, that authority, is not a privilege, it is a responsibility. There are people sleepwalking through creation, groping and stumbling as though they were locked in a windowless basement, unable to see any redemptive possibilities for this life. They are not yet awake to the light of God's life in creation, with and within the created beings of this realm.

And that's why God fills this relative, created realm with "grace upon grace": So that we can live and act and speak so that all people can wake up to their invitation to become a living temple of the Holy One. That's the way we co-create a fuller and fuller share in God's joy.

God's light already shines in the darkness. And that light becomes stronger and more visible as we pass it along to person after person so

that they, too, can wake up and walk as the child of God that they are and that they were created to be.

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