



I speak to you this morning as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

"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... For the law indeed came from Moses but grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ."

That's the continuation of today's gospel. And I want to begin today by just unpacking with you a little bit about this whole idea of word. Today's gospel is often read on Christmas Day, and it's the mystical gospel of John. It begins with all of this meditation on God's Word and Jesus as God's Word. And it's in this that John deviates from other gospel writers, from Matthew and Luke. For Matthew and Luke, it was important to recreate the architecture and symbolic structure of the nativity. And so they went and they pulled from all of the early Christian stories, and they built this memory of Jesus as being born in a manger, as being worshiped by shepherds and visited by kings and magi, as having all of these angels and stars and all of those things.

When Matthew and Luke talk about Jesus, they talk about all of that history. But John goes in a different direction. John goes philosophical, we might say, and says that this Jesus, who we know is the Word who was with God from the beginning. And we tend to lose what's at stake in that incredible promise given to us today in John. And all I want to do on this Christmas morning is to talk a little bit about what it means when John says "word," because just as the Inuit have many different names for snow, so in ancient Greek there are many different ways of saying word. And when you would find in that context the name word, the word being said through Greek, it would call to mind everybody who had been part of that same milieu you what Hebrew is for word.

So let me begin with the Hebrew just for fun. In Hebrew, when you say word, the word that comes to mind is name, and that name in Hebrew is *shem*. To have the word, to have the name of God was to have the presence of God, the glory or *kavod* of God. It would all be held together by that word, *shem*. And so you find throughout the scriptures that out of reverence for God's name, the people of Israel would do this or that. And as things continue to develop, when it comes to the Greek, the word that is used for word is *logos*. And that's meant to be the kind of ordering principle of the world.

So when John writes, "In the beginning was the word," he's saying, in Jesus, there is a kind of ordering principle that came from before the beginning of creation that was the order that we find in this world around us that evades us so often. We, by ourselves, fall into chaos. We, by ourselves, fall into suffering. We, by ourselves, fall into confusion. We, by ourselves, fall into loneliness. But the Word of God, who is with God, who is Jesus comes into our midst. And that word is a kind of ordering principle. And when we are in right relationship with God, so that word reigns in our hearts.

But in fact, when John picks *logos*, he picks a different word than merely the idea of God. The Greek word for idea is *idea*. Isn't that fun? Comes right to us. But to have an idea is to merely have an inkling of who God is, and for God to have an inkling of what God is thinking. And so John has made a decision when he says *logos*, which is what he says in today's gospel. He's not just saying that God had this glimmer in His eye and said, wouldn't it be cool to have a son? No. God's creation of the world was said and given through the *logos*. God created this world so that Jesus would be the center of creation. And our lives are unmanageable without being in relationship with Jesus.

Now, in the later years of Christian history, after people began to reflect on the meaning of *logos*, other writers going back to the Hebrew and going back to the Greek, other writers actually came up with different words for word. In Latin, the word that is sometimes used by some of the more beautiful mystics of the 17th century, the word that is used is *sermo*, from which we get the word sermon. And that means more definitely a kind of conversation that someone is having. I know it seems unusual in our context. When I give a sermon, I'm not always inviting conversation, sometimes feedback, which is nice, but it's the strict meaning of it.

So when they describe Jesus as the *sermo* of God, what they are inviting us to see is that Jesus is God's conversation with us. Jesus is inviting us into relationship with God. Jesus is God's sermon even to us. You can also translate it as argument. *Sermo* can mean argument, and that's one way for us to think about Jesus as a kind of argument that God gives about God's self. That who God is at the most core level of God's identity, and we all have a kind of mystery around God, obviously, just like we all have a mystery about each of our persons, that who God is, is seen through that argument and revelation that is Jesus.

Now, John believes when it comes to hearing about the birth of Jesus, the most important thing for you to take away today is not the story of the nativity. It's not the fact that there was a star. It's not the fact that there were angels. It's not the fact that there were shepherds. It was not the fact that there were magi. It's not the fact that the holy family had to run for their lives. It's rather that in the midst of all of that remembered history of challenge and suffering and fleeing for their lives, God was present. God's *shem* was with them in Jesus. God's *idea* was with

them in Jesus. God's *logos* was revealed in Jesus. And God's *sermo* was revealed in Jesus.

And this to me is the ultimate promise of Christmas. Christmas is the assurance that God is with us in Jesus. God, Immanuel is with us in Jesus. And there is something powerful about the fact that today we celebrate a baptism because a baptism is a kind of birth, it's a spiritual birth. It resolves and makes clear that this person, Jordan, is actually going to make a decision for God. And we learn in the midst of all of these promises that God has already made up God's mind about Jordan.

A friend of mine who was an adult being baptized way back when I was living in New York City, she told me this story. She was a potter and she was running a little shop in Greenwich Village where she was selling her pottery. And it was April she was going to be baptized. And of course in April was also tax day and so she's getting ready and trying to confess her sins. And she's also assiduously cheating on her taxes because she's a small business woman in New York City, in Greenwich Village back in the '80s. And she decided that she could do one thing or the other. She could either cheat on her taxes or get baptized. She didn't feel like she could do both.

And so she called the rector of the parish and she said, I'm sorry. I can't do this. I'll try to plan better. I'll wait and maybe save up a little more, or take some different deductions and I'll get baptized when I have sorted out my business. And the rector turned to her and said, Janet, baptism has really nothing to do with what you say about God. Baptism has everything to do with what God says about you. There is never going to be a moment in which you'll fully live into the obligations that God has created for you and baptism, but God has already crossed that distance to be with you in Christ. And that to her came as a kind of birth that signified the birth of baptism, the rising to new life for someone who is experiencing spiritual death. And when I heard this story, she said, and I continue to cheat on my taxes because I'm a small business person. Did my best.

So there is something powerful about a baptism today, happening on Christmas. This is the second time in two years that we've had adults step forward to make that major life decision for God and experience that new birth in Christ. Because the ultimate message of Christmas that John is speaking to today is that when that Word of God is made flesh, when Jesus comes to us, and when Jesus is born of Mary, Jesus creates a new covenant in which we too will have Christ born in us. We too will be bearers of Christ, like Mary. Christ will live in us. This is what Saint Paul says in Galatians. "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me."

This is what we celebrate today. Jordan's baptism is merely one moment of her coming to terms with her life decision, but it's a moment that all of us share in, all

of us are part of. All of us have that opportunity to experience that new birth again, as if for the first time. All of us have that opportunity because Christmas like baptism is not so much about what we say to God, but it's about what God says to us. And it all is connected, so John says, to the word, to the name of God.

As I was thinking about how to close today's sermon, I thought about Caroline Maria Noel. I thought about her because her last name is Noel. Get It? She was born in 1817. She lived 40 years. She was stricken by what we would call some kind of persistent pain syndrome. She experienced pain her entire life. And she decided to live life in such a way that she would compose poetry and hymns to make money for her family to take care of her, and also because she wanted to see through that pain, the promise of God's presence in her life.

And her most famous hymn, which is in our hymnal, has the first words, "At the name of Jesus." I'll only say three verses of it. Hear this hymn in the context of John's promise to you today at Christmas. Hear this hymn, Jordan, in the context of your decision for Christ and Christ's decision for you. And hear this hymn for all of us who are looking for a little bit of power, because God's name for us is not just *shem*, it's not just *idea*, it's not just *logos*, but it's Jesus, which of course means savior, but to us means friend and to us means God.

At the name of Jesus  
Ev'ry knee shall bow,  
Every tongue confess him  
King of glory now;  
'Tis the Father's pleasure  
We should call him Lord,  
Who from the beginning  
Was the mighty Word.

Name him, Christians, name him.  
With love, strong as death,  
Name him with awe and wonder  
And with bated breath;  
He is God the Savior,  
He is Christ the Lord,  
Ever to be worshiped,  
Trusted and adored

Christians, this Lord Jesus  
Shall return again  
With his Father's glory  
O'er the earth to reign;  
For all wreaths of empire

Meet upon his brow,  
And our hearts confess him  
King of glory now.

Amen.