

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/25/2016, Christmas Morning  
John 1:1-14

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with  
God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1, RSV)

Some of you will remember Rev. Charles Trexler, of blessed memory. We clergy called him “Father Trexler” to express our high regard and affection for him.

Fr. Trexler loved to preach here at Immanuel on Christmas Morning. He loved to be with us then because he especially loved the appointed Gospel Lesson for this day. Year after year, the Gospel Lesson for Christmas Morning is John 1:1-14. Fr. Trexler was thrilled by that reading. So are other members of our church. They love John 1. I join them in that.

Let me begin this sermon on John 1 by inviting your attention to our beautiful altarpiece here at Immanuel, with its three hand-carved wooden statues. On the left, we have Moses. In the middle we have Jesus. And on the right, we have this morning’s evangelist: St. John. We know it is St. John, rather than Saints Matthew, Mark, or Luke, because of the eagle resting at the foot of our statue. The eagle is John’s symbol. It has always been thought to be an appropriate symbol for St. John’s Gospel because of the elevated, far-seeing nature of that Gospel.

So it is with the Christmas story. St. John hastens right on by the story of the shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. John does not pause to speak of Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus. Instead John hurries on to the divine dimension of things. He takes the beautiful story of the birth of our Lord and places it within the context of eternity. The Christmas story, John says, is the story of God. It is a story that has no true telling until it speaks of God and of the beginning of all that is.

May it be that this Christmas morning sermon will elevate our thoughts concerning our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Let us think nothing small-minded when it comes to Christmas.

The early church fathers were fascinated by the logic of our first verse. They were amazed by how boldly St. John placed side-by-side two words that at first glance do not seem to go well together. These two words are “beginning” and “was.” And so the great verse begins this way:

In the *beginning* / was the Word... (John 1:1, RSV)

This verse is so familiar to us that it seems just right. But I think the church fathers were right to be fascinated by this verse. Do you sense what interested them in this combination of words? St. John invites us to go back in our minds to the “beginning.” And yet, he says, even then the Word already “was.”

Let me lift up a passage from Hilary of Poitiers<sup>1</sup>, from his treatise on *The Trinity*. Hilary lived from about 310-367 AD and was Bishop of Poitiers in west-central France. He was sometimes referred to as the “Hammer of the Arians” because of his powerful defense of the full divinity of the Christ Child, Jesus Christ our Savior. Hilary wrote this:

What does this “in the beginning was” mean? He ranges backward over the spaces of time, centuries are left behind, and ages are cancelled. Fix in your mind what date you will for this “beginning”; you miss the mark, for even then he of whom we are speaking “was.” Survey the universe; note well what is written of it: “In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth.” This word beginning fixes the moment of creation; you can assign its date to an event that is definitely stated to have happened “in the beginning.” But this fisherman of mine, unlettered and unread, is untrammelled by time, undaunted by its immensity; he pierces beyond the beginning. For his “was” has no limit of time and no commencement; the uncreated Word “was in the beginning.” Hilary of Poitiers: *On The Trinity* 2.13.<sup>2</sup>

St. John’s great Christmas claim is that Baby Jesus, born in a stable in Bethlehem of Judea, is old – older than you or me, older than the mountains or the deep, blue sea, older than the stars, older than the Big Bang, older than any ordered sequence physicists or biologists can describe. In fact, Baby Jesus created the order upon which the scientists depend. How can we do science if everything happens by chance, with no regularities to them? But there *are* wonderful regularities to the universe, and Jesus put them there. For he “was” before anything else began “in the beginning.”

The great English Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon has a wonderful passage in one of his Christmas sermons expressing his awe at the thought of the holy incarnation of God. His passage goes this way:

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilary\\_of\\_Poitiers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilary_of_Poitiers)

<sup>2</sup> Joel C. Elowsky; Thomas C. Oden. John 1-10: 4a (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture) (Kindle Locations 1477-1486). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

Oh! what is that I see? Oh! world of wonders, what is that I see? The Eternal of ages, whose hair is white like wool, as white as snow, becomes an infant. Can it be? Ye angels, are ye not astonished?... Oh wonder of wonders! Manger of Bethlehem, thou hast miracles poured into thee. This is a sight that surpasses all others. Talk ye of the sun, moon, and stars; consider ye the heavens, the work of God's fingers, the moon and the stars that he hath ordained; but all the wonders of the universe shrink into nothing, when we come to the mystery of the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Now, I do not know that the Word of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, had hair "white like wool, as white as snow." But I agree with the old preacher that Jesus is ancient.

What we believe is that in the fullness of time, the Word of God, through whom "all things were made...", and without him was not anything made that was made"-- this Word of God became incarnate as an infant, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

For you and me, the thoughts of our hearts can become public and incarnate in the words we speak. But those words dissipate, fall to the ground, and do not last. But the Word of God becomes incarnate as a person. He is a substantial, everliving, revelation of the heart of our Maker. Jesus, the person, reveals the truth about God and so about everything.

Martin Luther loved to lift up the humanity of the Word made flesh. Luther wants us to think of a real human being, except that this real human being is the very Word of God:

The evangelist John says next that the Word -- which was from eternity, coequal with the Father in power and glory, through which all things were made, and which is also the Life and the Light of mankind -- assumed human nature, was born of Mary, came into the world, dwelt among men in this temporal life, became like any other human being in all things, took the physical form of man such as yours or mine, and was cumbered with all the human frailties, as St. Paul says in Phil. 2:7. This means that He ate, drank, slept, awakened, was tired, sad, and happy. He wept and laughed, hungered, thirsted, froze, and perspired. He chatted, worked, and prayed. In brief, He required the

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<sup>3</sup> The Rev. C. H. Spurgeon, *His Name — Wonderful!*, September 19, 1858.

same things for life's sustenance and preservation that any other human being does. He labored and suffered as anyone else does. He experienced both fortune and misfortune. The only difference between Him and all others was that He was sinless... And yet He was the man through whom the whole world was created and made. (Martin Luther, *The Gospel of St. John*, Luther's Works, Vol. 22, page 73.)

This man though whom the whole world was created and made now comes to us in the Holy Communion. Let us think of that and be amazed. St. Augustine helps us with this:

What you can see here, dearly beloved, on the table of the Lord, is bread and wine; but this bread and wine, when the word is applied to it, becomes the body and blood of the Word. That Lord, you see, who "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" was so compassionate that he did not despise what he had created in his own image; and therefore "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," as you know. (St. Augustine)<sup>4</sup>

The old saint is right. Let us think of extraordinary and elevated things when it comes to Christmas and to this Holy Communion to which we now turn. Before us, we see Bread and Wine. But the truth is that before us is the man Jesus -- our Maker and the Maker of all that is. To this Word who became flesh and dwelt among us be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Joel C. Elowsky; Thomas C. Oden. *John 1-10* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture) (Kindle Locations 2867-2871). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.