

ADVENT 2021

"In the Beginning was the Word"

John 1:1-5

Sunday December 5, 2021

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Scripture Reading

"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 were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:1–5, ESV).

BLESSED LORD, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly [receive] them, that by patience and comfort of [your] holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which [you have] given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. *Amen.*¹

Introduction – The Myth of the Cave

I want you to imagine a dark, cavernous cave. Deep within this cave live people who are bound by unbreakable chains. Yet, both the chains and the darkness are normal for these prisoners because this life is the only life they have ever known. This life of bondage was the life they were born into.

For the most part, life for the cave dwellers is gloomy and confused. Most time is spent on merely trying to survive. But there is a faint light emanating from one small fire. The flickering light casts shadows onto the wall of the cave, and these shadows became the subject of conversation among the wisest of prisoners. They debate about the shadowy shapes. They describe the shapes, name them, and talk about the meaning these shadows might possess.

But one day in the deep, dark cave there is a man who escapes his chains so that he may dare to do what no one has ever done—and that is to see what life is like outside of the cave. He climbs past the fire, past the shadows, and toward the mouth of the cave. As he

¹ The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 92.

approaches the exit of the cave, he is startled by something he had never seen before—pure, bright midday sunlight. Courageously he steps outside into the fresh air, and feels an unfamiliar yet sublime joy.

Although, initially, the light blinds his dim eyes, he excitedly stumbles through the new surroundings, determined to know life outside the cave. He feels the texture of the dewy grass, he smells the fragrance of the valley flowers, and he hears the whispering roar of the distant river. His brain strives to even build categories for this barrage of new experience. But at last, he opens his blinking eyes and, for the first time, drinks in the brilliance of the forms, shapes, and colors that surround him. This is the *real* world. This is truth. This is a world beyond the imprisoned darkness, beyond the fleeting shadows.

This parable was first told by one of the world’s most famous philosophers named *Plato*. Recorded within the pages of *The Republic*, it is known commonly as “the Myth of the Cave.”² Essentially, it is a parable about the humanity’s quest for truth. The darkness of the cave represents our ignorance. The chains represent our limitations. The shadows represent conjecture and false knowledge. The world outside the cave represents eternal truth and goodness. And lastly, the man who climbs out of the cave represents the self-made man, the philosopher—who by the virtue of reason, moral integrity, and will power is able to rise above the ignorance of his fellow cave dwellers to seek the true world.

Plato’s story is compelling. It strikes a chord of yearning within all our hearts. Deep within us we know that there is more. We know that we are limited by our ignorance. We know that there is truth outside of us. We know that there such a thing as goodness. We long for the world of light.

But there is also a problem with Plato’s myth of the cave. He tells us that we are bound. He tells us that there is truth and light. But Philosopher never really shows us *how* to become unbound so that we may rise to the light.

Human history has shown us over and over again that we are radically unable to deliver ourselves. Our rationality has led to some very good things and positive advancements in science and technology. However, just as often, that same rationality has led us to simply more efficient means of war, poverty, and injustice. Our morality often leads us to hypocrisy and elitism. Our will-power often turns toward dark self-absorption and ambition. In short, *we race keep trying to climb out of our cave only to find more shadows and more darkness.*

This is the great problem of humanity. We are radically unable to save ourselves. We are not smart enough. We are not good enough. We are not strong enough to attain to the truth. In our darkness, we are unable to rise to the light.

² Plato, *The Republic*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1999), 209–213.

But what if? *What if in our absolute inability and weakness, instead of striving to get to the inaccessible truth, Truth chose to come to us.*

As it turns out, this is the radical and beautiful claim of John 1:1–5.

The Context – John and the Multicultural Church of Ephesus

Now, the *Gospel According to John* is one of the greatest works of literature in the world, written by a very unlikely man. John, the author, was once a simple Jewish fisherman from Galilee. *But then he met Jesus.* And, as is the case when one meets Jesus, Jesus changed everything for John. After witnessing the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, John the fisherman became a key leader in the most important movement history—the rise and spread of Christianity.

Like many other disciples John gave his life to preaching the good news about Jesus and planting faith-communities throughout the ancient world who believed in and worshipped Jesus as Lord and King. And toward the end of his life, John found himself serving the church in the city of Ephesus.

Now, the church of Ephesus was strategically important. Located in modern day Turkey, Ephesus was a port city linked the Middle East and Asia with important European cities like Athens and Rome. Thus, due to this unique geography, the church in Ephesus was multi-cultural family. It was filled with new Christians who were of a Jewish heritage, as well as Christians from a gentile European and Asian heritage. And it was most likely here, in Ephesus, in this multicultural context, that John wrote his account of the gospel.

Now, think of the challenge that he faced as a teacher. How is this simple man going to begin to explain the Christian gospel to people of wildly diverse backgrounds? How will John choose to proclaim a gospel that transcends culture? How will he impart the message that absolute, infinite Truth has broken into human history and been revealed in the world?

The answer is that The Holy Spirit will inspire John to choose simple words, simple phrases that all cultures have used to express their desire for the truth of God, and he is going to then load those simple words and phrases with new and profound meaning in light of Jesus Christ.

Exposition

We will spend the rest of our time looking at three simple phrases from our text: **1.) The Word of God, 2.) The Life of God, and 3.) The Light of God.**

1. The Word of God

Let's look again at the first three verses. ***"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***

were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:1-3).

Now this phrase “*the Word*” is one of the richest terms in the entire Bible. And for the first hearers of John’s gospel, they would have connected to this term in several ways.

The hearers that were from a Greek background would have recognized the deep philosophical history of the term “*ho logos*” (ὁ Λόγος), which is the Greek for “the Word.” The Logos was a word that the philosopher Heraclitus used as *the unifying force that grounded reality*. For the Stoic philosophers, the Logos was *the rationality that organized all knowledge and existence*. And for our old friend Plato, the Logos was connected to *true justified belief*.

Thus, when John uses this term, he was claiming that he has known the Logos. He has encountered the Truth behind all things. This certainly would have created intrigue. However, John’s words did more than create mere interest. They would have also shocked those from a Greek background. Because John is announcing that *this Logos is not just a principle—he is a Person*.

Likewise, the term Logos, or “The Word” would have connected deeply to a Jewish culture, or anyone familiar with Jewish Scripture. By starting with the phrase in the beginning, he is connecting his gospel account with the very first words of Genesis: *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Genesis 1:1-3)*. This connection between John 1 and Genesis 1 is both important and scandalous. John is saying that *the Logos is not only the active agent of creation that is from God – the Logos is God!*

This Logos is God’s ultimate self-disclosure, and this revelation is *the climatic event in God’s story*. Theologian N.T. Wright has this to say, *“In the beginning’ – no Bible reader could see that phrase and not think at once of the start of Genesis, the first book in the Old Testament... Whatever else John is about to tell us, he wants us to see his book as the story of God and the world, not just the story of one character in one place and time. This book is about the creator God acting in a new way within his much-loved creation. It is about the way in which the long story which began in Genesis reached the climax the creator had always intended.”*³

So, in summary who is the Logos that John is proclaiming? *He is the organizing rationality and truth behind all things, but yet he is a Divine Person. He is the Creator who stands outside of space and time, yet is able to reveal himself within his creation. He is the ultimate revelation of God, and yet he is God. He is the God who had engineered the minute machinery of human DNA, and he is the Creator who holds trillions of stars in the palm of his hand. His light is more brilliant than the Sun. He is ultimate reality, the sum of all knowledge, and the cause and purpose of existence. He*

³ N.T. Wright, *John Part 1: For Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 3.

is life outside of the cave. He is the maker of heaven and the earth; of all things visible and invisible. He is climax of the long story of Israel and the Old Testament. He is transcendent and holy, yet he is near. He is the God of glory. And he has made himself known.

They only response we could ever have to the truth of this Word of God is awe-struck wonder and worship. And that leads us to our next point.

2. The Life of God

Look for a moment at verse four: *“In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4)*. It is in him, in the Word, in the Logos, in God that there is *life*. And this life exists for a specific purpose. It is the light of *men*. Or rather, as our text says, it *was* the light of men.

You see, men and women were created in the image of God, and we were created to worship God by bearing and reflecting his image. God is the source of our life and joy. But rather than worshipping God, we chose to worship ourselves. Rather than looking to God as the source of our life, rest, hope, fulfillment, and purpose, we shifted our gaze to lesser, counterfeit gods. We try to find self-worth in romance or personal achievement. We look for rest in substance and entertainment. We are cosmically estranged from God, and consequently we are estranged from one another. We are bound deep within a cave of ignorance, self-absorption, and isolation. And we are unable to free ourselves.

The book of Ecclesiastes tells us that God has placed eternity into the heart of man (Eccl 3:11).

You have in your heart an infinite void that will only be filled by an infinite God. Are you restless? Only God will give you rest. Are you despairing? Only God will give you joy. Are you weak? Only God can give you strength. Are you anxious? Only God will give you hope. Are you bitter and angry? Only God will give you peace.

As the great Saint Augustine of Hippo prayed on the first page of his *Confessions*, *“You awaken us to delight in your praise; for you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until our hearts rest in you.”*⁴

In God—and only in God—is true life. And this life is also the light of men.

3. The Light of God.

This phrase “the light of men” is also crucially important. It is stressing that God’s self-revelation is essential for us to know the truth.

⁴ A modernized rendering of Augustine, *The Confessions*. Trans. Edward Bouverie DePussey (Philadelphia: Franklin Library, 1982), 5.

We are chained within a cave of sin and ignorance. We will never be able to truly know God by our logical reasoning or our scientific investigations. We may be able to see signs that point to his existence. We may discern his fingerprints within creation. After all, Psalm 19 tells us that the very heavens declare the glory of God (Ps 19).

But in order to truly know God, he must choose to make himself known. He must reveal and disclose himself in a way our feeble and finite minds can grasp.

The good news according to John is that he has and he is. Notice the shift to the present tense: *“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).*

God’s revelation and reality is an ever-present. Right now the Spirit of God is at work illuminating our hearts that we might truly know God through Christ. And that revelation is more real and more powerful than the forces of darkness. Just as darkness must flee when the lights are turned on in a dark room, no power of sin, evil, or even death is able to withstand the might of Christ. So, although our darkness is great, the light is greater. Although our sin and our shame are great, our Savior is greater. Although our sadness and suffering are real, he will wipe away every tear and mourning shall be no more!

This image of light shining in the darkness too is an echo of Genesis 1, showing that the God who creates is also a God who recreates and redeems. As the Apostle Paul writes, *“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).*

Whatever is your darkness, whatever your sin is, whatever you are suffering—know that the God revealed by this gospel is able to make creation out of chaos. He delights in making broken things beautiful. He is a God of hope.

The Savior – The One Who Descended into Our Cave of Darkness

But again, we must return to the myth of the cave. How can we be freed so that we may know this truth? How are we able to escape the darkness of our ignorance and sin? Why is it that we are invited to such sure hope?

Well, John has written this entire gospel account to tell us how. But I will summarize it. *When we were unable to save ourselves, there was One who lived in the world of light who in his own grace and mercy chose to descend into our darkness. He came into our cave. He took on our chains. And he spoke words of truth into our confusion and shadows so that we might be free.*

Jesus Christ—who is the Word of God, who is the life of God, who is the light of God and the light to men—endured darkness and death on a cross, so that we might enter into his world of light. And his light has triumphed over all powers of darkness.

This truth is what *Advent* is all about. The word Advent means “dramatic arrival” and “breaking in.” We observe this season because light has dawned into our darkness. The kingdom of God has been inaugurated through the work of Christ. And soon that kingdom will come in fullness and glory. Because of this good news we must respond with eager longing and hope.

If you are a Christian, rejoice that the true light has shone into your darkness! If you are not yet a Christian, I invite you to embrace the light today!

Conclusion & Prayer

As Paul wrote to the Romans, “...you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Rom 13:11–12).

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we worship and wonder at the Infinite God who has revealed himself to us by his Word! May we find our life in him and him alone! May we take hope in Jesus who is the light who shines into our deepest darkness!

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities:

1. Read John 1:1-5 as a group. These few verses are packed with theological truth. What can be known about God from this passage?
2. Why is it significant that the life of God is the light of men? In what ways do we often attempt to find life outside of God?
3. How is John 1:1–5 written as a parallel to Genesis 1:1–3? What is John saying by drawing this parallel?