

"In the Beginning – Transformation of History"

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First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 6, 2011

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON - GENESIS 1:1-5 **NEW TESTAMENT LESSON – JOHN 1:1-14**

John 1:1-14 is the prologue to this gospel account. And I have a prologue to the prologue. Before you read today's lesson, consider this. There are words that describe. There are words that question. There are words that motivate, that amuse, that call for attention. We all use words like these every day. Yet there's another use for words, a less common use — in some sense, a holy use. Rather than merely describing action, sometimes words can be used to accomplish something themselves. A word itself becomes the action.

Typically, we reserve such words for solemn and holy – even life-changing – occasions: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." "With this ring I thee wed." "This is my body, broken for you"; "this is the cup of the new covenant."

There was a time when God uttered a Word in just such an instrumental way. The prologue to John's gospel describes it.

John 1:1-14:

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.

"In the Beginning – Transformation of History"

Don Henley of the Eagles rock group was contacted by Joe Levy of Rolling Stone magazine who was working on a Top 100 list of the greatest pop songs in history. "I don't like to participate in these *list things*, because they're arbitrary in nature. As they talked about the song "Hotel California," Henley said, "My first response (to Top 100 lists) is always, 'Who says?'"

Levy agrees. "Lists are an arbitrary way of sorting out history – why stop at 100? ... Pop songs are universal, that's the "popular" part," says Levy, "but the way we feel about them is highly idiosyncratic (personal), which is why God invented so many radio stations. Your list, no doubt, is different from ours," he says; "of that we can be sure."

In our New Testament lesson today, John describes another Top 100 event: the creation of the world. "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." That tops John's list of ways the world could have been created. But as Christians, how can we be sure? What about the theory of evolution (which is one of the issues being discussed in adult and youth Sunday School here at First Church – creation vs. evolution)? If all things came into being through Christ, what about evolution? Adam Hamilton author of our Sunday School book study, which is titled "Confronting the Controversies: Biblical Perspectives on Tough Issues," says, "The Christian gospel teaches that before the big bang, God was. All creation is the handiwork of God – a reflection of God's beauty, power, and majesty," says Hamilton.

So where did evil come from? Hamilton says "God worked through processes and experimentation, experiencing the joy of designing and creating the myriads of life forms that have existed on earth during its history." But couldn't God have just created everything as it should be without any process or experimentation? Why do we have to have things that don't seem right? In our insatiable, dogged attempts to get to the root of things, we seek to definitely answer such questions; know about things that are often beyond our knowledge or understanding. Our God-given capacity to think drives us crazy as we seek to know the purpose of every animal, every rock formation, every natural occurrence, every ... thing. And this is fine, to a certain extent. But in the end – and *in the beginning* – there are just certain things that are unknowable intellectually, certain trains of thought that jump the track.

For instance, in a restroom at IBM's Watson Center, a supervisor placed a sign directly above the sink with a single word on it – "THINK!" The next day he noticed right below his sign over the sink, someone put up a sign over the soap dispenser that read "THOAP!" I guess at IBM, they wash in the "think" after using the "thoap" – not exactly where the supervisor was headed, I suspect.

John teaches us that our best thinking doesn't always lead to the truth, that sometimes to get to the truth, to go from wrong to right, from evil to good we have to have faith.

John leads us to the truth about our faith by beginning his gospel account with these words: “in the beginning.” By doing so, John invites us to recall Genesis and the very first words of the Bible, which you heard today in our Old Testament reading. “In the beginning when God created ... God said.” God’s act of creating is vocal, communicative, based in Word giving rise to substance. “In the beginning when God created ... *God said*,” says Genesis, to which John echoes, “In the beginning was *the Word*.”

Well what did God say *in the beginning*, in Genesis? In Genesis, God took the formless void and darkness and “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light... And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.”

Day and night. That is what is at the source of all creation, that is what is at the root of history. Day and night, good and evil. Regardless of what else you may believe about creation, or evolution, or your family history, or your spiritual history, it all leads back to day and night, good and evil.

In the Gospel According to John, we find no less than 17 examples of day vs. night, light vs. darkness:

John 3:19 – This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light, because their deeds were evil. (Darkness and evil)

John 3:20-21 – Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light ... (truth and light)

John 8:12 – When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

And finally, from today’s gospel lesson, John 1:5 – The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (You can get the entire list of day and night, good and evil, light and darkness references from John's gospel in the appendix of my printed sermon, which will be available after Wednesday on the credenza in the Parlour.)

What is common to all these passages is this: light, good; darkness, evil. In the beginning, God created, saying, “Let there be light,” and there was light and there was darkness.

Why not just light, why not just goodness? If we believe anything about God it is that God is good. In other words, to believe that God is not good is to not know God, or to not believe in God at all, but rather in something wholly other than God. And what do we know and love best that is other than God? Ourselves.

The disciple John tells us, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John (the baptizer)... He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.” We, like John the baptizer, are not the light, not Christ, not God. God is God, Christ is God, true God from true God.

So if God is good, and we are not God, does that make us bad? Not in the end. For we are those who have been made in the image of God, and as such, we have been given a special gift – the gift of knowing God as goodness incarnate and choosing God over evil. God loves us so much that God wants to us to share in him the experience of supreme love that one gets when one freely chooses God, just as God freely chose us. And to do that, for us to freely choose God, to love God, God had to allow for hate, allow for the possibility that we would freely choose to reject God. Rejection of God is the highest form of evil. But if God had not allowed for this evil, for this darkness, how we could we freely step into the light of Jesus Christ, the light of God’s goodness? In God, history is not the chronicling of events through time – God is eternal. Rather history, in relation to God, is the pathway to God.

It is the light that shines in the darkness such that the darkness can not overcome it. In God, history is transformed into a trail of bread crumbs leading us back to the beginning, when “in the beginning, was the Word” – Jesus Christ – who is the form and substance of God’s love for humanity. That's what we find at the beginning of history; God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

“Winston Churchill before he died had planned his funeral, which took place in Saint Paul’s Cathedral. He included many of the great hymns of the church and used the eloquent Anglican liturgy. (Following) his direction(s), a bugler, positioned high in the dome of Saint Paul’s, intoned, after the benediction, the sound of ‘Taps,’ the universal signal that says *the day is over*. “But then came the most dramatic turn: As Churchill had instructed, as soon as ‘Taps’ was finished, another bugler, placed on the other side of the great dome, played the notes of ‘Reveille’ ‘It’s time to get up. It’s time to get up. It’s time to get up in the morning.’ That was Churchill's testimony that at the end of history, the last note will not be ‘Taps;’ it will be ‘Reveille.’¹ On that first day in history, there was light and there was darkness. But in the end, in the fullness of God, there will be only light. That is our assurance, no matter what darkness we – you – may be going through right now.

For us, at this point in history, things can sometimes seem rather dark and bleak. But John points to a way for us to help turn things around; turn things toward the light. Or at least understand why things aren't perfect right now, even as we have confidence in a better tomorrow. John says that Jesus Christ, as God incarnate, "came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." Our rejection of God is the beginning of human history whether that rejection came in the bite of an apple, the forming of a Golden calf, the crucifixion of goodness personified, or however it is that we may have turned away from God, even this day. Rejection of God is where our divine history begins, *but* in the middle of that history – where we find ourselves today – we *also* find God, God still reaching out to us in love.

“To all who received (Christ),” says John, to all “who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” That is the fullness of our history; that is our destiny – if we choose to accept it. Do we? Do we accept that we are, as John says, “born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God?” And if so, what does

¹ --John R. Claypool, "The Worst and the Last," St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Birmingham, Alabama.

that say about us. Are we willing as God's beloved children, to bear witness to God; to testify with our words, our deeds and our very lives that God is transformational, a divine being through which the final chapter of history has already been written, a divine being through which all things come into being – good and evil, light and darkness, life and death – a divine being that is nonetheless good, a divine being that shines light in the darkness in such a way that the darkness can not overcome it. Do we accept this as our spiritual history, our spiritual genealogy? And if so, do our lives, our fears, our hopes, our dreams, reflect our faith in God's supreme and eternal goodness? Amen

Appendix:

- I. John 3:2 – He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”
- II. John 3:19 – This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.
- III. John 3:20-21 – Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light
- IV. John 5:35 -- John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light.
- V. John 8:12 – When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”
- VI. John 9:4 – As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.
John 9:3-5 (in Context) John 9 (Whole Chapter)
- VII. John 11:9 – Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light.
- VIII. John 11:10 – It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.”
- IX. John 12:36 – Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.” When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them.
- X. John 12:35 – Then Jesus told them, “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going.
- XI. John 12:46 – I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.
- XII. John 13:30 – As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.
- XIII. John 19:39 – He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.
- XIV. John 21:3 – “I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Gracious God, how amazing is your love for us that you would send your only Son to save us? Thank you for demonstrating who you are and what it means that we are created in your divine image.

Our understanding is still partial and imperfect, and our expressions of divine purpose and grace are far from fully authentic and whole. Yet, Christ's presence among us is an example that continues to inspire us, compel us, and move us to be manifestations of your love and mercy.

We continue to glimpse the magnitude of your love as again and again we encounter Jesus in our lives: as our shepherd — the one who calls us by name, transforms our heart and soul, and guides us on the paths of righteousness.

Because you direct us outward in service to others, we no longer have to be a people who walk in darkness, competing with one another for what you so freely give to all.

We hunger no more, for we are nourished by Jesus who is the Bread of Life. In your power, O God, you turn our greatest needs and cruelest limitations to your glory, that we might find strength in the cross of Jesus Christ, our savior crucified, and risen.

We live in confidence knowing that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, warming the darkness with the light of his glory. And still, we pray. We pray for all those who cannot see the light because they are afraid, or are in too much pain – physically, spiritually, or emotionally.

We pray that the power of your light would shine through the cracks of our broken world so that all people might know the power of your grace and truth.

By your Spirit, empower us to be children of the light, radiant with the spirit of Christ shining through us. And join us together in the name of your precious son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray together, saying ...

Our Father, who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy name.
 Thy kingdom come,
 thy will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
 and forgive us our debts,
 as we forgive our debtors;
 and lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.