



the empty bell

On the Prologue to the Gospel of John

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John 1-5: *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.*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things came into being through him. . . . In Christ's name. Amen.

We have just heard some of the key stories from the great sweep of our salvation history. As we celebrate in this Christmas season, we go back to the beginnings--the story of Adam and Eve, the prophecies of the coming of our Savior, the birth of Jesus.

Our last reading is the first eighteen verses of John, often called the Prologue. It is like an overture to a grand symphony. Here the author takes us to the very beginning.

“In the beginning was the Word. . .” draws our attention to the opening words of Genesis, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The Gospel writer knows how important the creation story is. He knows that we humans long for reality. What is the first thing that happened, and where did the universe come from, and why? We want to go back to the source to find out, “Why are we here?” and “Who was I meant to be?”

Here in the 21st century we Christians have two ways of addressing this question. On the one hand, we have faith that this Bible story of creation in Genesis and in John, expresses a deep truth. And on the other hand, we also trust the scientific story of how our universe came to be. We know that our cosmos--with all its billions of galaxies--was not always here. It has a beginning, about 13 billion years ago. According to the prevailing scientific theory, the cosmos has expanded from the Big Bang. Actually, somebody just made up that phrase. We don't know that it was a bang. We don't know if there was a sound. I prefer the term, “Great Flaring Forth”. [see Brian Swimme's term, “Primordial Flaring Forth” in *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era: A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*. (NY: HarperCollins, 1992.)]

As far as we can tell, in the instant of creation, both time and space appeared. Before this instant there was no space, no things, and no time. First there was nothing, and then there was something, and we are part of that something, along with the galaxies, solar systems, stars and moons now circulating in the darkness.

If we can allow ourselves the liberty of integrating a bit of the scientific story with our Christian story, we would say that God is the ultimate source of time, matter, and space, and that the Divine Mystery breathes forth creation for a purpose, for love. We would also say that God intended for Christ to be born and that Christ somehow existed in God even before the Great Flaring Forth. Further, today's Prologue tells us that Christ has been secretly present within creation and within the evolution of life

itself. For us humans, Christ is an implicit, inward archetype for the integration of creation in the form of mutual regard, respect, compassion, love and justice.

Where we read “Word” in this text, John, the Gospel writer, used the Greek word “Logos”. Speaking to Greek Jews, John knew that Logos would resonate with the Hebrew “Sophia”, both names designating an intermediary form between the divine and the human. Sophia, or Wisdom in Hebrew scripture, was a feminine name. So, in the Prologue of John, when we read that “All things came into being through him,” we are right to understand creation as a kind of birthing in and through Wisdom. For a time, then, the names Logos, Sophia and Christ were somewhat interchangeable, until the very particular characteristics of the life and mission of Jesus Christ made their indelible mark on the Christian psyche. Today, one would almost never hear Christians use the names Logos or Sophia.

The Prologue tells us that “All things came into being through him”, through this expression of God, Christ. All things that we hear, see, taste or know, bear the mark of God. We are all birthed through Christ who is both outside of time and within it, with us. And, the Prologue tells us that Christ both is God and is with God. This with suggests a distinction and a relationship, and we know that that relationship is suffused with love. Inspired by John’s Gospel, St. Augustine (354-430 AD) would later write that the inner life of God, the Trinity, is a mutual knowing and loving. Augustine names the Trinity “The Lover, the Beloved, and the Love that flows between”. We are each created in this Trinitarian image of God, and each of us is marked by the Great Pouring Forth of creation 13 billion years ago.

If we haven’t fully realized the image of God that we are, it is because God’s creation pours forth in freedom. We are free to embody who we most deeply are, or not. Together, we can co-create an economic and politically interconnected world that is nourished by a mutuality of knowing and loving others, or not.

On a personal level, who would we be if we realized the vision of John’s Prologue in our own lives? For us Christians, the Word appears in time, space, flesh, and human consciousness as Jesus Christ, someone who stands both in eternity and in history. He is our inspiration, our model of a fully realized human being, and our hope. As I ponder the Jesus who John describes in his Gospel, I see the very archetype of generosity: Jesus knows how deeply he is loved by God and freely wants to share that love with us. He wants to share everything: his peace, his joy, his belovedness. “My peace I give you” he says. “My joy is yours”.

My spiritual mentor, the late Roman Catholic priest and writer Henri Nouwen, would always say, “What is said of Jesus is said of you.” If God names Jesus as the Beloved, then in Christ you and I are the Beloved, as well. Jesus is passing it on.

I think it’s hard for us to claim this identity, isn’t it? We often get confused about, who we really are. So often, we identify with our accomplishments or our failures, or with the things we own or don’t own, or with our dreams or worries, or with what other people say about us. We get stuck in the

shallows of time and space, and too many of us founder there, in resentment, anxiety, worry, or despair. But the Gospel of John is telling us that we are created through the Word that existed before the Great Flaring Forth, before our mothers gave birth to us, before all the human relationships--good and not so good--that we've experienced; a Word that comes from the bosom of the Trinity. In the great Christian councils of the 4th and 5th centuries, the inner life of God was described as a dance. The Greek word they used is perichoresis, peri for around and choresis for dance, a dance-around of love. For Christians, that is who God is, and that is who we most deeply are. So, with Christ, we participate in the original belovedness. We are loved before we were born and we are loved into eternity, and that is the identity that we need to continually claim.

That's why, in the stillness of prayer we can choose what inner voices to listen to. We can trust that Jesus shares with us the same, ultimate voice of love to which he clung, even as he faced his own death. What does that voice sound like? Perhaps we've glimpsed it in the face of a newborn or our loved one, or at sundown when the orange light filters through the trees, or across the snow. Maybe we've felt something eternal in a song or hymn that has touched us. Or maybe we can hear the voice of God as a whisper in our solitude that says, "I see you, I know you, and I love you. Trust me," . . . "I see you, I know everything about you, and I love you. Trust me." We might, in our silence, repeat these words and let ourselves receive them in our minds, in our bodies, and in the deepest places of our soul. Then we might gradually, almost without knowing it, radiate the Godly image in which we're created, and we might then also receive that peace and that joy that Jesus is always sharing with us.

In the beginning is the Word that is God and with God, and that Word is our true home, our identity, our hope and our salvation. Amen.

