

Advent Vespers – December 7, 2011
The National Presbyterian Church

Here Comes the Word

John 1:1-5, 14-18; Genesis 1:1-3a

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In our Advent Vespers, we are following a series in which we're thinking together about the word 'advent', which means 'coming'; thinking of it with the help of the first chapter of John's Gospel, the coming to us of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week, we began with the coming of John the Baptist, who prepared the way for our Lord Jesus. And those of you who were here might remember that Patrick Willson spoke about the fact that when Jesus came, he was unrecognized. Sometimes we think we've got Jesus all together; we place him in a box; we know him well. And what John is telling us is that this Jesus cannot be contained in a box. Our understanding of him must always be challenged and changed, as long as we live. And we must prepare for that possibility of always facing some new sense of who the inescapable-Jesus is, within our lives. John's message was to prepare people and to prepare us for that.

As our series continues, we're still looking at the first chapter of John's Gospel, in terms of the coming, the advent, of God to us in Jesus. Over the next three weeks, I want to focus on three words in the opening chapter of John's gospel which describe Jesus for us; describe this 'unknown one' who is always shaking up our image of who God is.

The words are first, word - 'Here comes the Word.' That's tonight.

Then light: "Here comes the Light."

And then life: "Here comes the Life."

Each of these words is used in the opening chapter of John's Gospel.

In fact, all the way through John's Gospel, John loves to give to us word- images, of who Jesus is and what Jesus wants to do when he does come to us. So you may remember some of these descriptions of Jesus in what we call the "I am" statements. "I am the Way." "I am the Truth." "I am the Life." "I am the true vine." "I am the bread of life." "I am the gate." "I am the good shepherd."

Wonderful words which remind us of who this Jesus is - one dimension of Jesus after another. And Jesus wants to be that person for us within our lives. But if we go right back to the beginning of the Gospel, to John chapter one, this verbal description of Jesus begins with Jesus as *the Word*, Jesus as *the Light*, and Jesus as *the Life*. And that's what we heard in our passage of Scripture.

"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. [Here's a creation theme.] 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 Word, the Life, the Light, the Light of all people. And then verse 14] "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."

We don't know who this Word is yet, we're not told who this Life is, who this Light is. We move down to verse 17, and John in his Gospel tells us,

"The law, indeed, was given through Moses but [there is another person that I have in mind] grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

The Word of God, fully! the Life of God, fully! the Light of God, fully! Coming to us through Jesus Christ. This is John's message about Jesus.

Wait a minute. Do you hear that? Is there a cell phone going off over here? Over here. Oh, this is what I hate. One of the biggest things I'm afraid of is my cell phone going off in the middle of a service. Let me just check it. Actually, I've got to get this one. Hold on a second. Oh, it's one of my daughters. *"Uh, no, this is not a good time to speak. No, I'm not alone. No, there are a few people here. Yeah, I'll talk to you later. Love you. Bye."*

Actually, of course, you know, I just made that up! But . . . but isn't it amazing? I mean, when you think about it, this building where we are, is filled with (electromagnetic) waves that can get to this little thing (my cell phone) right here. And somebody somewhere else can, their words can reach us in this place. In fact, the more you think about it, the more discombobulating this all gets, because if we had a television in here, if we had a radio in here - I mean, all of these waves are going to hit the right receptor. This place is filled, literally filled with waves. And if our eyes could see them or our ears hear them, or if we had cell phones going all at one time, you'd get this picture.

You know the situation where light comes in a window and you think the air is clean, and then the light streams down and you see all these particles? In a sense, that's what this building is like just now. So over in that corner is Fox News; and MSNBC is over here; Rush Limbaugh's over here. There are people trying to sell cars somewhere. And if you have the right receptor, there, up there in the corner, over there, this place is filled, literally filled - the universe - not just this building. It's filled with words which are coming at us.

And if you have the right receiver, the right antenna, those words would be coming to you.

Sometimes, actually, as Christians, we're a little slow to grasp us. But the world around us is not slow to grasp this - the power of words within this amazing atmosphere that God has created.

So they are harnessing all of these possibilities to sell whatever they can sell to us, especially at this time of year, to shape the way that we think, our understanding of life, using words, blasting it at us through all kinds of media - the electronic media and the print media, all around about us, or to share information with us that they think we ought to know.

Whether they want to change our lives by it or not, there is this passion in human beings that 'you need to know this stuff'. So there's information being shared; there's information trying to shape our lives all the way around about us. There are people trying to sell us things. And if we had the right receptors, we would realize, this is actually happening all around us, right now.

This universe created by God is actually filled, literally filled, with words. These are powerful. Sometimes we forget that, though the Scripture, of course, doesn't forget it. The Scripture itself is filled with words about words!!

If you look in the Scripture to learn about words, you might turn to the Book of James (warning people to be slow to teach and preach, because God will judge us for our careless words!). But the biblical book where actually you'll find out more about words than just about any other place, is the Book of Proverbs. And if you open your handout, you will see that I've taken out from the Book of Proverbs, a whole section, selection of verses about words, and the importance of words. And we'll come back to the prevalence of words in just a minute.

But we can sense the importance of it in the selling and the shaping and the sharing of life, which everybody seems to be

harnessing in our world around about us. But this is nothing new. Way back, 2000, 3000 years ago, the Book of Proverbs told people that they have to be careful about words:

Listening to the wrong words:

“Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not find words of knowledge.” God is involved in this. God overthrows the words of the faithless. Words can cause a great deal of damage. What’s the old saying? “Loose lips sink ships.” Just a few loose words, that’s like the Proverbs there; they sink ships. *A harsh word stirs up anger. You are snared by the utterance of your lips.* Do I speak too much? “open mouth, put foot in! *“When the words are many, transgression is not lacking.”*

And then there’s the positive impact of words.

“Pleasant speech increases persuasiveness. Pleasant words are like a honeycomb. A soft word can turn away wrath.”

And then there’s an appropriate word. We all know that time when somebody speaks to us a word. And we just say, “It’s just what I needed to hear. It’s just exactly what I needed to hear.” The right word, at the right time. How amazing is that? A word, just a word, spoken at the right time, and it can change our life? How powerful. How powerful is this concept, this sense of the word, spoken at the right time in the right way, or the wrong time in the wrong way.

And these insights are not only about our word, are they? God’s involved too! God speaks as well! And God is interested in our listening to God, and through prayer, speaking back.

“Those who despise God’s word bring destruction on themselves, but those who respect the Commandment will be rewarded. Every word of God proves true.” What a great verse - Proverbs 35. “Every word of God proves true.”

This sense, in fact, that God is interested in words, the words that fill all of space, everywhere - is as old as the hills. From the very beginning of Scripture, there is a sense that God is interested in words. And the Hebrew people understood this.

When they conceptualized God, when they thought about God, this God of whom we were to make no graven images, this God was a God who spoke, and whose word was powerful and creative and revealing – ‘speaking words’ seemed to them to be fundamental to the very nature of God, almost before any other theology.

So you go back to Genesis chapter one and you think about creation: *“In the beginning, when God created the Heavens and the Earth, the Earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”* God is creative; God is moving. And then God speaks. This is fundamental to the Hebrew, Old Testament view of God. God speaks and speaks and speaks and speaks. And when God speaks, something happens, something powerful happens. Creation happens; life happens when God speaks.

E.F. Hutton used to speak, and when E.F. Hutton spoke people used to listen! Right? But nobody’s speaking for E.F. Hutton any more these days: he’s (and his firm!) been and gone, and done!

But what if God is still speaking with this creative, powerful word, like that - whether it takes a moment or whether it takes eons, it really doesn’t matter – God speaks and something happens!

Or . . . something once unknown is revealed! When the Scripture says that God has made us in his image we get an inkling that what God makes is in some sense a revelation of who God is. It is an image of what God is like. We’re not able to picture God fully, but we are able to get God-given hints of what God is like, through what God has made. The creation is not the same as God, but in some sense it is certainly an extension and reflection of God. And that reflection is seen even in your life and my life.

So God speaks, and life happens; creation happens. God becomes known; bursts, in a sense, out of his shell - if you can even think of God like that. Wants to burst out of the

shell, and burst into the lives of those whom God has made, making himself know, revealing himself in some understandable fashion.

God speaks and his word is powerful and revealing and becomes embodied in the words of Scripture. This is something that the Psalmists tell us – especially in Psalm 19, which speaks about God speaking in and through creation, and then speaking in and through the written word. How passionate God is to speak a creative word, that gives life and changes life and nourishes life, and reveals God’s life to us. Listen again to Psalm 19.

The Heavens are telling the glory of God, and affirm and proclaims his handiwork. Day to day, pours forth speech. And night to night, declares knowledge. But there is no speech, nor are there words. Their voice is not heard. Yet their voice goes out through all the Earth, and their words, to the end of the world.

And then there’s a shift, from the revelation of God, the speaking of God in creation, to the speaking of God in the written word.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right. Rejoicing the heart. The Commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes . . .

And then,

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, oh, Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

The words of my mouth! Think of it! Being shaped and molded by

- the Word of God coming to us in creation,
- and the word of God coming to us in Scripture,
- and the word of God coming to us, above all else, in flesh and blood in the person of Jesus.

This God, passionate to speak, passionate to bring life, passionate to be known, who fills all of this space with all of these waves that can be turned into sight and sound and everything else, is passionate to connect to your life and my life

with his powerful life-giving word, so that we can know and be known by God intimately. *And this is where John brings us to, in the opening chapter of his Gospel, when he says that Jesus is the Word.*

It is no accident that that passage sounds awfully like Genesis chapter one, "In the beginning, and God created the Heavens and the Earth. In the beginning, was the Word." God's passion to speak that Word, coming to you and me in flesh and blood, says John, in the person of Jesus. No infant narratives here. No Christmas story, except the most powerful story of all, that God, the one who spoke, and creation, and you and me, came into being - passionately wants to speak to your life and my life, and was willing to be bound up in flesh and blood so that we, in all of the noisiness of life, might hear his voice as clearly as we possibly could - not with rules and regulations, but in a life, a relationship which can give us life, transform our lives, lead our lives, that can reveal God to us, as no other life can or has. This is the one he sends to us.

Here comes the Word, above all words, that you and I must listen to - not because it's a commandment, but because there is no other word that can bring us that life, which is life, indeed.

May God give us ears, perception, every part of our being, to sense the presence of this Word in us and among us, this night and always. May this Word constantly, constantly, like those cell phones, like the noises of the television, but not noise, come to us. Amen.

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