

First Things First

[John 1:6-9, 1:19-28](#)

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Sunday, September 12, 2004

Let us begin with first things first. We often think of our children when we think of beginnings. The first day of school, the excitement, and the apprehension that leads to the sleepless night before. The expectation tied to the anxiety, the first day. Who will be in the class, what will the teacher be like, how much homework will there be? I share some of that apprehension and expectation today. For I had a sleepless night last night, just like my first day at school. The first day of Sunday school with children and youth and adults. The first Sunday in twelve years that Joe Gibbs is going to be the head coach of the Redskins. Just like children, we look forward to special days.

In the beginning God spoke a clear word. As I drove in the parking lot a week and a half ago I received a clear word from God. There ahead of me in my parking space was a sign, "Parking for Redskins fans only." As I got out of my car and went into my office, there was another sign, "Do not enter, Redskins players only." And when I entered the office, there were signs all around me: goal posts, footballs, Joe Gibbs books, Redskins note cubes, Redskins schedules. I'm getting the message. A Redskins helmet insignia and plaques, posters signed by the staff of Redskins. A Redskins hat, shirt, and a stadium seat pass. But the most important and clearest word I received was from the incarnate Redskin himself, a letter, under the letterhead of the Washington Redskins. "Dear Pastor Icenogle, I want to extend to you and your family a warm welcome to your new home in Washington, D.C. I'm delighted to hear that you accepted the call to pastor the National Presbyterian Church. May the Lord bless and inspire your ministry in this historic church in our nation's capitol. Signed, Joe Gibbs. P.S. I heard through the grapevine that you are a Cowboys fan. It is good to know that in the Lord there is always forgiveness and hope for the lost." Now, I am suspicious that the staff had a minor contribution to that letter, but I received a clear word from the Lord, I think. I don't think I am ready to convert but I think I might be willing to consider dual citizenship.

In John 1, John is setting the gospel in the ancient original pattern of the purposes of God. The introductory themes are cosmos; the ultimate meaning and purpose of why the word is made flesh; the coming of Messiah; the prophetic speaking of the people who speak on behalf of God; salvation and redemption; what God wants to do with the world that is caught in darkness; the meaning of God's family, particularly the calling of children; the themes of a loving creator; the presence of darkness and what the loving creator can do to redeem creation; the creatures from darkness. The prologue is a clear statement that God speaks in real ways to the world, to real human beings. The question: who is the logos, why does the logos shine in darkness, where did the darkness come from, who will accept the logos, and what happens to them when they accept the logos when he speaks.

John takes this wonderful word logos, a Greek term which has to do with intellect and reason and meaning and, as so often happens with Christians throughout history, people who follow the pattern of God, take cultural words that make sense in a particular place and time and they bring meaning to them in light of the ancient pattern of the people of God and nature of God. So John takes this wonderful word, logos, and says it is not a thing, it is not an idea, it is personal. Logos speaks. And logos speaks to human beings with meaning. It is presence, it is will, it is purpose, it is life, it is light, it is intelligence, it is creativity. The message of God is spoken so we can understand it, and we realize that it is coming from a person who cares about who we are, lost in a dark world.

A few years back there was a movie with the title "Contact." It's about a young girl who lost her mother to death and within a few years lost her father to a heart attack. As a twelve-year-old girl, she was trying to make sense of the loss of her parents and she wondered if her parents were in outer space someplace. With that hunger she began to look to the skies with a telescope. She studied astrophysics to be able to listen to whether there were messages from other parts of the universe that might tell her about her parents. A hunger that is deep within her heart to hear a message from someone out there, that there is a God who cares, that there is a place where people exist when they die. A hunger for personal meaning. A hunger for personal presence in the midst of the darkness.

I heard a story recently of a top executive who was asked the question, "What do you really want in your business and work," and he said, "I want to know that I am loved." That's not something we would all admit, but it's something that cuts to the heart and depth of each one of us. Then when it is all said and done we want to know that there is someone who cares and loves us.

In Reformed tradition we are people of the Word. The Word that is spoken in the Bible from ancient times; the Word that speaks in sacraments, baptism, and the Lord's supper; the Word that is read like we have it read today. The Word that is visual in stained glass windows; the Word that is sung by the congregation and the choir; the Word that is heard; the biblical Word, but most of all the incarnate Word. A word that resides in a real person who wants to speak to us out of ancient times into present times; a word of love and forgiveness; a word that penetrates the darkest place, the darkest recesses of our beings. Words can create and words can destroy; words can encourage; words can deplete; words can rouse, and words can pacify; words can affirm, words can attack; they can blame us all, abandon or love -- just in a word.

It is not true what the old ditty says, sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. Words can heal or words can hurt. In 1983 I was picking up my four-year-old daughter, Tamara, from the Methodist church preschool. There was a yard full of children, and I came in with another father. He saw his son across the play yard. The son saw him and said, Dad, and came running across the play yard. As soon as he started running, the father started counting: one, two, three, four, five, he got up to fifteen. When the son ran into his arms at that moment, the first words out of the father's mouth were "Tomorrow you can do it in fourteen." What we say has an immediate impact, lifetime impact, eternal impact. We can heal or we can hurt.

God speaks a healing word to us in this Word from John 1. The word that we speak can reflect light or darkness, and John is

explaining the contrast between light and darkness. He doesn't tell us where the darkness comes from, he simply announces that there is darkness and the light shines in the darkness. He assumes we know and understand that darkness exists on earth. And where does that darkness come from? Earl Palmer and his reflection of this text says that God creates the world in such a way that freedom allows us to choose between light or darkness. It is a human choice that brings darkness into the world. And God sets it all up so that there is freedom and the possibility that we will choose light and not darkness. But we often choose darkness. John 1 clearly says that the Word entered into the world but the world did not know him: darkness. Some did not receive him: darkness. God speaks to us in the Word but because of darkness we do not hear, we do not receive, we do not listen, we do not tune in. We have our own agenda: darkness. Evil is not created by God, evil exists because humans can choose darkness over light, and John assumes that the world has been choosing darkness when Jesus enters into it. We choose to reject God. We choose to ignore the Son. We choose to live in darkness. We choose to reject the light.

In the Reformed tradition we affirm that all are sinners and evil comes from the accumulation and the compounding of sin. Individuals over a period of time add and add to the existence of evil. So we see the evil in the world. We see the genocide in Sudan, we remember 9/11 -- that horrendous day. A child who saw the second plane going over her play yard made a comment to her father after realizing what had happened: "Daddy, they are doing it on purpose." People choose to live in darkness rather than light. People choose to do destructive, rather than helpful, things. How many times yesterday did I hear sirens in the city? Two children killed suddenly as they were walking across the street by someone who is avoiding police. Darkness. The first day of school September 1 in Beslan, Russia, thirty-two guerillas take over a school of twelve hundred people and the result is darkness. Three hundred and thirty dead and seven hundred and thirty wounded. People can choose to do terrible things and John is saying that the Word is made flesh so that the flesh of the Word can confront the evil of the world. Human freedom to choose to do darkness. But the last word is not darkness. The last word is that logos has a purpose for coming into the world, logos wants to create children of God, logos wants to receive those children and give them power. To those who listen to God and receive God's message through Jesus Christ in the world they are given the power to become children of God. Not because they have the right connection to the right blood lines, not because some human being made a decision of status for them, not because someone has willed them to be a child of God but only because God has chosen to send the logos into the world to speak clearly.

Steven Covey, in his book "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People," says the first habit is to begin with the end in mind -- the logos began with the end in mind. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God for the purpose, it says, of making us children of God. Jesus has come into the world to make us all children of God, to speak to us of God's love, to attract us to a God who would reach out and touch our lives personally. The logos came to make children for God. Children know the voice of their parents.

When my second daughter Tanya was born, she came out loud and long. She was crying, and they could not silence her. They did not know what to do with her, and they turned to me and said Dad, can you do something. I did the only thing I could think of doing, I took her in my arms and sang to her the simple song "Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so." And she quieted right down. To this day if she is anxious or upset, if I speak with her, she typically quiets right down. If I ignore her, well, that is not a good thing. God is not ignoring us, God is speaking to us, God is singing to us, God is taking us up and holding us in such a way that we know that we are loved by God. The logos has come to make a statement to us as clear as possible, that we are children of God, if we would listen, if we would attend to what the logos is saying in Jesus Christ, that we have the power to practice being the children of God. We have the inheritance of the kingdom of God. When God speaks, God is speaking to you and to me. God speaks in scripture, God speaks in nature, God speaks in our conscience, God speaks in Jesus Christ most clearly. God is speaking. The real question today at the beginning is, are we listening? I encourage you to take time out in the intensity and busyness of the beginning of the fall to put first things first and to listen to the clear message of Jesus Christ who speaks to you and wants you to be a child of God.

Amen.