

Sermon Text for December 3, 2023

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 52:7-10, John 1:1-5, 10-14, 16-18
“And the Word was God”

I guess I come before you today full of gratitude. I am grateful for my blood relatives, all 22 of us who gathered in Florida in potentially the last time that all of us will be gathered as a family. We haven't all been there in years, maybe a decade. Thank you for allowing me that time away, and thank you to Doug Friant for his message and Michael Wilson who is helping us through a still very difficult time in the life of the church.

I am grateful for this church family that has expressed support and unity throughout this time in a way that I haven't seen a church exhibit ever. I mentioned in my enews the crew that gathered Wednesday evening to decorate the church. For me it was a microcosm of the mood and the identify that this church has. We love being together, even, and maybe even especially, in times when it could go either way: we either stick together or we distance ourselves from each other and create our own narratives that don't build up but tear down. We have chosen to build up, to want to restore and to give life. Thank you for being that church, we have a unique culture here and I am grateful for that.

Ultimately, however, as much as I love my family and my church family, I am grateful to be a child of God. Gratitude has to be part of our DNA and a defining feature of how we would identify ourselves and how others would identify us. How would people identify you? Are you someone who can visibly be seen as someone who is grateful? According to John Calvin: gratitude for the grace of God in Jesus Christ is the essence of the Christian life. It is what motivates, drives, and animates the life of the Christian.

Karl Barth writes: Gratitude follows grace like thunder follows lightning. When you and I recognize God's grace in our lives or in this world, we will respond immediately with gratitude. This is what Christians do, we express our gratitude. Barth continues and states: all sin, on the other hand, is ingratitude. It is our refusal of the one but necessary thing which is proper to and is required of the one with whom God has graciously entered into covenant. As far as we are concerned there can be no question of anything but gratitude.

Advent is the season of expectation, but also of gratitude. Our identity, who we are as people of gratitude, finds its root in God who came in the flesh to claim us from the very beginning. You can't leave here today without knowing that there is an answer, we have a solution for our sin, our brokenness, our relationship in tatters, our anxiety and anger, our healing, our whatever else it may be how sin has manifested itself in this world. There is an

answer. We can be the restored children of God who were created for light and life. Let's read about that promise.

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This Scripture in John finds its doppelganger in Genesis 1. John tells us clearly that in the beginning was the Word. As he goes on he makes it clear especially in vs.14 that this Word is the third person of the Trinity who came upon the earth in the flesh as Jesus Christ. This Word is not the Bible. Let's be clear that we do not worship Father, Son, and Holy Bible. We worship Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And there is a real danger of making the Bible into an idol. It is not God. So back to the Word that is referenced here in John 1, this Scripture which is called the prologue because it sets the stage so clearly for the rest of the Gospel as it defines Jesus as the Word who was present from the very beginning.

We read in Genesis 1 that creation takes place how? Turn there if you will: vs.3, 6, 9, 14, 20, 24, 26. We read in each of these verses that God said, God spoke, it was through God's Word, His spoken Word that creation took place. This Word that God speaks is identified by John here in his prologue. Nothing exists without the touch and the will of God. It is God and His Word. Creation according to John, is a group project with God and His Word, this Word who then becomes flesh and walked among us as Jesus Christ. Is there anything more basic or gratitude inducing than that?

So John begins his Gospel in exactly the same way that Genesis begins, even using the same words. Jesus was Word, or life, or light before he stepped on earth in human flesh to dwell among us. But also from the very beginning, John tells us, this light and life and Word do not exclusively exist. It is clear that this Word, from the very beginning, is in a hostile place. In vs.11 we read that the Word came to his own, in the Greek it can also mean his home town, and his own people did not accept him.

You know, most people have home towns. Strasburg may be your home town, our family never really had one, third culture kids never really have one. If you were to ask me where is my home town I would say, do you mean where I was born? Lisbon, Portugal, oh where I first went to primary school? That would be Rome, Italy. You mean where I went to high school, that would be Atlantic City, or Ventnor. Oh, you mean when I was in college where I would go for Christmas break? That would be Tegucigalpa Honduras. My kids can do the same thing, there really is no home town for many of us, for Jesus it could be Nazareth, or Bethlehem, or Capernaum. But basically it means his people did not welcome him, his people of faith. The world was a hostile place for a person of faith, especially among their own people of faith. There

is no place like the church who is able to eat its own. We have to defend against that in all matters, and I think we are doing a pretty good job of that.

One of the most appealing aspects of Advent is the presence of light and life. The lights that we see in the sanctuary the greenery which represents life that is eternal and evergreen. John mentions these but also addresses the darkness that is present and constantly tries to squeeze out the light. We know intellectually and John reminds us that the darkness will never be able to overcome the light simply because the Word was God.

There is an eternal struggle that is seen in this Gospel and also in creation between those who acknowledge Jesus as the revealer of God and those who will not. The struggle will go on till the end of time. Jesus represents for us a new epiphany of the God whom no one has ever seen. The one who brings light and life and has brought life and light since even before creation in the Word made flesh.

But lest we think that the church is the perfect representation of the light, well, we know better, don't we? The darkness will try anything to overcome the light in all setting and in places and in all of our lives. Sin manifests itself not exclusively in a hostile world, but also in a friendly church that has a culture of welcoming all people into the kingdom.

At the end of the day as we read John's Scripture we need to ask that question which we began with. How do we identify ourselves? I began by speaking about gratitude and how we ought to view ourselves principally as people of gratitude. But let's take a step beyond that. John tells us that we have an opportunity to self-identify as children of God. We are a people who have a hope for restoration. It is that same hope that Isaiah describes in our first reading.

Look at Isaiah 52:8 which states: Sing for joy, for they see in plain sight the return of the Lord. We believe in the final restoration even as we work hard to restore God's kingdom here on this earth through righteousness, isn't that right Gospel of righteousness people? As we work to do acts according to the will of God, the darkness, sin, constantly is trying to draw us away to do acts that are our desires, our will, our pleasures, our darkness. But we have a promise that we will be restored. This promise finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. In Jesus the Word was God and in him is the promise that we need.

There is only 1 person in Scripture who was able to identify the completeness of Jesus and we see that in the Gospel of John 20:28 where our friend Thomas, many call him doubting, but I don't see him that way, proclaims to Jesus and all who were present – My Lord and my God. That is our proclamation. That is where we need to end up recognizing that the Word was God was fully manifested in Jesus our Savior.

Our experience of God always precedes our faith of God. What has been your experience of God in your life? In order for us to believe that the Word was God we have to understand that we live in a sordid, sooty, sinful creation who then receives a creative Word from God. It is often the faithful poor, those who have suffered grievous loss and who yet believe, those who have been sorely tried and who still cling to faith, those who are patient endurers of life's injustices. When we live in this mess we are able to receive more clearly the Word of God.

Who we are and what we will be is up to God. But we still get to define it, the future that is. We get to define us as the individual and as the body. This is the story about a new race of humanity. One not of flesh and blood but of God.

Revelation 21:3 states behold the dwelling of God is with men, and he will dwell with them. That is the same thing we read in John 1:14 that the Word dwelt among us. The literal Greek is he pitched a tent. He isn't going anywhere, God chooses to live with us in this world. Or as we say this Advent season, Emmanuel, God is with us, by choice. Amen.