

## **A Large family**

A sermon on John 1:1-14  
Presented to Hodges Presbyterian Church  
On 25 December 2011  
By Rev. Joel L. Kelly

*John 1:1-14 (NRSV)*

- <sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
<sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God.  
<sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being  
<sup>4</sup> in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.  
<sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.  
<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.  
<sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.  
<sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.  
<sup>9</sup> The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.  
<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.  
<sup>11</sup> He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.  
<sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,  
<sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.  
<sup>14</sup> 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.

Last Christmas, grandpa was feeling his age, and found that shopping for Christmas gifts had become too difficult. So he decided to send checks to everyone instead.

In each card he wrote, "Buy your own present!" and mailed them early.

He enjoyed the usual flurry of family festivities, and it was only after the holiday that he noticed that he had received very few cards in return. Puzzled over this, he went into his study, intending to write a couple of his relatives and ask what had happened. It was then, as he cleared off his cluttered desk that he got his answer. Under a stack of papers, he was horrified to find the gift checks which he had forgotten to enclose with the cards.

I hate it when that happens!

OK. It's finally here. The waiting is over, and Christmas has finally arrived. How many of you have already unwrapped your Christmas presents? Did you get what you wanted? Did you get what you expected? Are the answers to the two questions the same?

Christmas, in our postmodern, post Christendom world has become something much different from what is portrayed in the New Testament, and the New Testament accounts in each of the gospels are much different from each other. Today, if you want to know what Christmas is all about, you can find out by watching the movies on the Hallmark channel or on Lifetime. Most of those movies tell pretty much the same story. There is someone who is somehow estranged from their family. The reasons may vary, but it is always something that separates the protagonist from their loved ones and threatens to spoil the celebration of Christmas for everyone in the family. Christmas is portrayed as a time of warm feelings and gooey sentiment with snow and tinsel and lights and trees and presents where everyone is supposed to be happy and supposed to love each other and all get along. By the end of the movie, whatever issue was causing the unhappiness is always resolved, and the estranged family member is brought back into the loving fold so that everyone in the family can enjoy the party.

Lots of those movies go two whole hours or more (probably a lot less if you deduct the time spent in commercial breaks) without even once mentioning the name of Jesus or giving a hint at what the Christmas story is really all about. Or ... maybe they *do* give us a hint, possibly without realizing it, at what Christmas is really all about.

Oh, I know we all say we know what Christmas is about. Even when we are scurrying around, trying to get that last minute Christmas gift or to get to the Post Office before the final pickup time so our packages will get there before Christmas, we still run into the

occasional church sign that reminds us that “Jesus is the reason for the season.” But do we really take the time to stop and consider what it really means?

We usually remember the accounts in Luke’s gospel where the shepherds are startled awake from their nighttime slumber out in the fields by the songs of the angels, and they go to find a baby born in a stable and laid in a feeding trough, and we remember Matthew’s account where Wise Men or Magicians or Kings come from the east to bring presents of gold and frankincense and myrrh to the newborn king. But if we had only those accounts, we could still miss the real significance of Christmas.

It is John’s gospel that nails down what the true meaning of Christmas really is, and John’s gospel doesn’t even contain an account of Jesus’ birth at all. Or does it? Let’s look at a few points from this morning’s reading from John’s gospel.

This morning’s reading is from the section known as the prologue to the gospel. You could sort of think of it as the text that scrolls up the screen at the beginning of the Star Wars movie, “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...” What John is doing is giving an introduction into his account of Jesus’ ministry that defines its place in theology and in history. He begins with the statement, “In the beginning was the Word.”

Now, John begins his gospel in exactly the same place that the Old Testament begins: “In the beginning.” That this is an allusion to Genesis 1:1 cannot be missed. Genesis records the creation of humankind. John’s gospel will record the re-creation of humankind. In Genesis 1, the creative act of God comes at his word: “And God said...” In John’s gospel, the Word is identified and personified. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

The idea of the Word was a philosophical idea that was common among the Greek thinkers of John's day and among many of the Jewish mystics. It was used to signify the divine power of function by which the universe is given unity, coherence and meaning. It was seen as a personification of God's expression of himself. It was seen to be the immanent power of God creatively at work in the world. John goes further in the statement that the Word was God.

Now, without delving too deeply into the nuances of Greek, let me just say that there are several different ways in Greek that John could have phrased the statement that would each be given the same English translation, "The Word was God." He could have chosen a way that indicated that the Word was identical to God – indicating that there is one Person, God, and the Word was that one person, but he didn't. He could have written it in such a way that it meant that the Word was a god. The Greeks and most of the surrounding peoples in the ancient world had many different individuals that they worshipped as gods, and John could have written the statement in such a way that the Word would be considered, alongside God, as just another deity to be worshipped, but he didn't. He worded his statement very carefully to indicate that there was an identity between God and the Word without the two being identical. One translator phrased it in English as "what God was, the Word was."

John continues to elaborate on the nature of the Word when he says "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." Genesis describes creation as a series of creative acts in which God says "let there be ..." and what God says becomes fact. In John's gospel, he points out that the creative act is accomplished through the personified Word of God. Where God said it in the Genesis account, John tells us that the Word accomplished it.

Then John goes on to make the identification between this Word and light. “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.” This is John’s way of introducing the idea that the Logos, the Word, entered into the world, but more than that, the world, as a whole, rejected the Word. John’s text here foreshadows the events in the life of Christ that led him to the hill of Calvary and the cross. The light enters the darkness and threatens the darkness – the darkness cannot exist in the presence of the light – so the darkness reacts and attempts to extinguish the light, but the darkness cannot overcome the light. Even on that darkest of days, when it seems that the light of the world had been extinguished on the cross, the light was not really overcome but was waiting only to burst out again from the empty tomb on that Easter morning. And that, too, is part of the real meaning of Christmas. The Christmas story is incomplete without the cross and especially without the empty tomb of Easter.

There was a fellow who complained that the reason he didn’t like coming to church was because they always sang the same hymns every time he was there. Someone asked him which hymns, and he replied “Silent Night and Christ the Lord is Risen Today.” But those two messages are inextricably linked together.

John continues to narrow down the setting for his gospel by referring to recent historical events to specify just what time period he is talking about. He introduces the character of John the Baptist as an anchor point to his account. The Baptist came to testify to the light. He was not the light himself, although he had gained quite a large following among the Jews who thought that he was something special. Of course, he was something special, but he was only the coming attraction and not the main event. John the Baptist’s role was to point to the true light that John has already told us is identified as the Logos, the Word.

The Word was in the world, and even though the Word had created the world, the world as a whole rejected him. John uses the word for world 78 times in his gospel, and for the most part, whenever he uses it, it has a negative connotation. John usually presents the world as the sphere of creation that lives in rebellion against God. When John tells us of God's love for the world, it is not an endorsement of the world but a testimony to the character of God.

In any case, John tells us that the Word came into the world, and although the world came into being through the Word, yet the world did not recognize him. Again, this is a reference to the life of Christ in which he would be rejected, condemned, tried and convicted and ultimately executed. The world is hostile to the light. John tells us that the light enlightens everyone, but only some welcome the enlightenment. The light shines on every person, exposing them for who they are. It divides those on whom it shines. Those whose deeds are good are placed in the spotlight as examples for all to see, while those whose deeds are evil are exposed for what they are.

The Word came to his own people and his own people did not accept him. Whether we read this as meaning the Jews or humanity as a whole, John is again emphasizing the life of Jesus will face. He will be rejected by the people he came to reach out to.

But there is still hope! The rejection will not be universal. As we said, the light divides those on whom it shines, and while many (or maybe even most) reject the light, the Word, there will be some who receive him with joy. And those who do receive him, who believe in his name, he gives the power to become children of God.

That's a significant statement. We often want to believe that all humans are children of God, and in a sense, maybe we are, but this verse implies that it is the people who receive Christ who have the right or the power or the ability to consider themselves truly God's

children, “born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” This refers, of course, not to the physical birth from the mother’s womb, but to the spiritual birth or re-birth that Jesus will elaborate on in his conversation with Nicodemus later in John’s gospel. Those who follow the Word, who believe and obtain divine power, will share in divine birth. This is John’s understanding of conversion: Deliberate faith joined with divine transformation. In other words, there will be a powerful transformation of those who embrace this light, who align themselves with the light instead of the darkness, who cling to the Messiah instead of the world.

That transformation brings about something else that John doesn’t mention directly here in his prologue, but something that is implicit in his entire gospel account. The rejection of the light by the world that causes a separation of the world from God is overcome and in its place there is brought about the reconciliation between God and the World. And that’s the message that we can find in those Christmas movies I talked about at the beginning of this sermon. The reconciliation of the protagonist and his family is symbolic of the reconciliation we find between ourselves and God when we receive Christ and truly become children of God. The movies stress the values of family, and from John’s gospel, we learn that in Christ, we become children of God and part of a large family – the family made up of all God’s children.

And when we’re reconciled to God, when we understand that we are part of God’s family, and everyone around us is potentially a member of God’s family too, two things happen. First, we find reconciliation with all the other children of God as well as with God himself, and second, we find that we are compelled to spread the word to the whole world that everyone can gain the power to become members of God’s family by coming to believe in Christ, the living Word of God.

John tells us, “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.” And here is John’s most important declaration. He puts it in the prologue so that anyone reading his gospel will not miss it. The Word, who was with God and who was God and through whom all things were created became flesh and dwelt among us. It didn’t just appear to be human. It became flesh and lived right here in our midst, and John says, “We have seen.” He’s not repeating a tale told around campfires that happened to someone else – the “friend of a friend” that everyone knows about but that nobody can ever put a name to. He’s telling something that he, the author of the gospel, was an eye witness to. We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

That, my friends is the true message of Christmas. Emmanuel. God is with us.  
Merry Christmas!