

Christmas 2 C 2022

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

January 2, 2022

John 1:1-18; Sirach 24:1-12; Wisdom of Solomon 10:15-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The first eighteen verses of John's gospel are called the prologue. The prologue of the Gospel According to John. None of the other gospels starts like this. None of the other gospels is like John. Matthew and Luke tell us the story of the birth of Jesus. And some of his background. But instead of any of that, John tells us what Christmas *means*. In other words, John tells us the theology of Christmas. Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin. That's a detail of his birth. What the log cabin *means* is that Abraham Lincoln is a man of the people; Lincoln is authentic, tough, hard-working, unpretentious. What does it mean that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger?

John has an answer to that. His answer, as stated in our gospel reading today, the prologue, is that Jesus is the Word made flesh. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." You might know that the word Immanuel means "God with us." That word is Hebrew, and it comes from the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah. In the gospel of Matthew, the title Emmanuel is applied to the child of Mary and Joseph by an angel. Matthew is eager to show the connection of Jesus with Judaism. Matthew is eager to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, of the law and prophets. Matthew is probably writing a book for people who are Jewish, or formerly Jewish— people who have a lot of knowledge about the Old Testament. People who know stuff like the importance of the word *Emmanuel*. But what if you don't know that stuff? What if you are somebody else in the Mediterranean world who isn't very Jewish in your outlook? Well, John says that the Word lives with God, is part of God, *is* God. And that Word became human. Human flesh. You don't need to worry about Emmanuel, or Bethlehem, or mangers, or shepherds watching their flocks by night, or Herod being king of Judea, or that John the Baptist's father was named Zechariah. Forget about all that. God has a message for you. God has spoken. And what he has spoken is Jesus. Jesus is the Word for you, and for the world. God did not send a letter. God did not send a book. God did not make a podcast. God's Word is Jesus. Jesus is the message.

Now in case you are Jewish, in case you do know the Old Testament, John has something for you, too. He starts his gospel in exactly the same way that Genesis begins. The same words spelled exactly the same (at least where Greek is concerned). *In the beginning*. Very pregnant words. A very bold way to begin. Genesis starts with "*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...*" And it starts with how God made light. The very first words of God, in the very first chapter of the very first book of the Old Testament, are: "*Let there be light.*"

What John seems to be doing in our gospel this morning is saying, *Before that*. Before God created anything. The Word was there with God. John does not want you to think that a boy was born in Bethlehem, by coincidence, and somehow grew up to become a great philosopher. The plan is bigger and older than that. Before Jesus was conceived and born in a woman's womb, before there was anything, Jesus was there with God. Before there was the book of Genesis, before Adam and Eve, before Abraham, much less Moses, before any of those important things: Jesus was with God. Or, as John adds, Jesus *was* God.

In Genesis, God creates light first. God creates day and night. And then God sets about creating life, starting with plant life on the third day. But according to John, God's Word created life, and that life became light. So John asserts that Jesus was part of God before there was a creation, and before there was time. And from that higher plane of existence, Jesus has come into the creation, he has come into the human story. Because Jesus is the Word of God for you, for me, for us.

It's a very lofty view of Jesus. It's putting Jesus higher than and prior to Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels. It's putting Jesus higher than and prior to Genesis itself. But it's also simpler, I think. Jesus was known as "Jesus of Nazareth." In other words, he came from Nazareth in Galilee. But yet he was said to have been born in Bethlehem. So which was it? Nazareth or Bethlehem? Well, Luke has one answer, involving one tyrant, Octavian Caesar Augustus. And Matthew has another answer, involving another tyrant, Herod the Great. Trying to square the circle of Nazareth vs. Bethlehem. And this question comes up way down in chapter seven of John's gospel, and neither Jesus nor John dignify the question with an answer. Because in this fourth gospel, Jesus isn't from Nazareth, or from Bethlehem. Jesus is from God.

This morning we used an alternate first reading and psalmody. The first reading from Sirach and the psalmody from the Wisdom of Solomon. These are from the books of the Old Testament commonly called apocrypha, or more correctly, deuterocanonical. Martin Luther translated these books and included them in his Bible, albeit in a separate section. These texts this morning from Sirach and Wisdom describe God's wisdom as a person, as a female. And this person— this personification of wisdom— keeps company with God, and goes between God and human beings. This is from the Old Testament, the Jewish writings. And Christians have speculated that this Wisdom person who communicates for God, who was with God from the beginning, who illuminates human life— Christians have long speculated that this is another description of Jesus, the Son of God, the Word of God. And some have long speculated that this is actually a description of the Holy Spirit, who was also with God from the beginning, and who illuminates human life.

Now the way these texts are assigned today, to accompany the prologue to John's gospel, we are being nudged to see this kind of Wisdom as Jesus. Now if this seems weird or strange to you, I want to give you two examples of this that have been a part of your life for a very long time. In the Advent carol "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," we utilize seven different Old Testament names for Jesus. I've just mentioned Emmanuel. But then we have this stanza: *O Come, O*

Wisdom from on high. This is addressing Jesus as the Wisdom from on high. *O come, O Wisdom from on high, who ordered all things mightily; to us the path of knowledge show and teach us in its ways to go.* The idea of Wisdom ordering all things is a direct citation from the Wisdom of Solomon chapter eight verse one. So every holiday time, you've been singing to Jesus as the Wisdom that these books are talking about.

That's one example. And then the second example is this magnificent church building in Istanbul. Built in the sixth century. A world cultural heritage site. The greatest example of Byzantine architecture. It's called *Hagia Sophia*. People pronounce it different ways. You've seen pictures of it, even if you didn't know it. But this is the church of *Hagia Sophia*. The church of Holy Wisdom. And it is named for Jesus. The festival day for the church historically was December 25. When Holy Wisdom was born into our midst. This congregation, Dove of Peace, is named for the Holy Spirit. We're not called Holy Spirit Lutheran Church. But we are named for the dove form that the Holy Spirit took. Likewise *Hagia Sophia* is named for Jesus, for Christ, for the Messiah. But under this different name. *Holy Wisdom*. And this is a much more common thing in Eastern Orthodoxy than in the Catholic west, the Latin west, which has shaped most of us. But right in plain sight, all along, we have examples of Jesus as the Wisdom of God. In the holiday carol, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. And in this famous church— the largest church in the world for many centuries, still standing today in Constantinople, now Istanbul: The Church of Holy Wisdom, *Hagia Sophia*.

So these things are all in John's mind as he writes this prologue. He really tips his hand when he says, "all things came into being through him." He's talking about Wisdom, from chapter eight of Proverbs: *The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.* Like John's prologue, the eighth chapter of Proverbs also invokes the first chapter of Genesis, stating that Wisdom was a "master worker," constructing the universe with God, and taking special joy in those weird creatures that God created on the sixth day, the humans.

So naturally, people who read the eighth chapter of Proverbs want to know who Wisdom person is. And some Christians have concluded that this is the Holy Spirit, with reason. And other Christians have concluded that this is Jesus himself, with reason. And John tips his hand today, showing that he thinks Proverbs chapter eight is talking about wisdom, talking about *hagia sophia*, which he, John, will describe with a new term: *Logos*, Greek for "word." The Old Testament literature describes Wisdom as a female. And John describes Jesus as a male. But for John, perhaps those distinctions are as trivial as whether Jesus was really from Nazareth or really from Bethlehem. Those questions miss the point.

This is John's statement of the meaning of Christmas. His statement of the theology of the origins and birth of Jesus. Jesus has existed since the beginning. And Jesus has a particular role. He is the Wisdom of God, the Word of God— or I might stretch it a bit and say that Jesus is the *Language* of God. How God speaks to us. No one has ever seen God, John writes. How could we? God is sort of outside of our plane of existence. *No one has ever seen God. It is God the*

only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. The message isn't a book. The message is a person. The message is made flesh. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. Amen.