

**Immersed in the Word**  
**John 1:1-13, Baptism of our Lord, Year B**  
**8 January 2012**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

I did my undergraduate work at Hendrix College, a good liberal arts school in central Arkansas very like Roanoke College or Sewanee. For two years after graduation, I was privileged to work in the admission office at Hendrix, and my particular area of responsibility was coordinating the campus visitation program for high school students and their parents. The Dean was John Churchill, a Yale PhD and a Rhodes Scholar, who now serves as the Executive Director of *Phi Beta Kappa* in Washington.

Now, neither Dean Churchill nor I were born into august circumstances. John is from tiny Hector, Arkansas, and, as you know, I was born in Paragould, a Northeast Arkansas delta town known for its quirks. I was raised hiking up and down Eight Mile Creek, visiting friends whose spacious homes were actually double-wide trailers, and passing through nearby towns with names like Possum Grape, Toad Suck, and—this is true—Goobertown. My father is an attorney and a very good one, but Andy Griffith’s Mayberry may be a better depiction of my hometown than Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

All that is to say, Hendrix College was Eden to me. There, *I was immersed in words*. I relished my exposure to philosophy and the arts, and over time the patterns of my speech modulated (a bit, at least) and the topics of my conversation expanded.

And so, one fine Arkansas spring day in 1996 I stood as a Hendrix College admissions counselor before the assembled banquet hall of visiting prospective families to ask whether everyone had finished a delicious meal and was ready for the campus tour. I stood in navy blue suit and crisp Oxford shirt, with my hair parted neatly and my tie on straight.

My mouth opened, but instead of eloquence I uttered, to my own surprise really, “Y’all done eatin’ yet?”

Dean Churchill took the microphone from me and without missing a beat said, “You can take the boy out of Paragould but you can’t take Paragould out of the boy!”

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*“In the beginning was the Word...All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him is life...to all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gives power to become children of God...”*

In 1879, a Scottish teacher named James Murray launched the largest lexicographical project in human history. It was as audacious as it was bold: Murray, with the backing of the

Oxford University Press, would compile a dictionary that included every single word in the English language, along with a definitive history of each word's usage, sometimes going back centuries. The end result would be the Oxford English Dictionary or OED.<sup>i</sup> Ultimately, it would span twelve volumes and require forty years to complete.

At the same time Professor Murray was coming of age in Scotland, a different man, an American army surgeon named William Minor, was slipping into madness. Minor had seen horror at the Battle of the Wilderness in the Civil War, and he had been forced by his superiors to brand a fellow soldier on the cheek with a hot iron "D" for the man's attempt to desert. These experiences unhinged him. After spending a year and a half in a military asylum, William Minor was allowed to resign his commission and retire.

For reasons unknown, Dr. Minor then moved across the ocean to the slums of South London, and there, late one night, he aimed and fired a pistol at a man (who was on his way home from work to his wife and six children), killing him. In his delusion, Dr. Minor had believed the man was about to attack him.

Dr. Minor was committed to an asylum an hour south of London where he devolved further into madness, until one day he read in a magazine a plea from Professor James Murray for educated men to assist with the compiling of the proposed Oxford English Dictionary. The one thing to which William Minor had free access in the asylum was books, and with some faint glimmer of lucidity—call it convenient grace—he plunged himself into the work. *He immersed himself in words.*

When he did, an amazing thing happened. Somehow, the words served as a life preserver. They pulled him up from the abyss of madness, and William Minor became the single largest contributor to the OED. He began a correspondence with Professor Murray that carried on for years. His definitions and quotations were lyrical, his research profound. Dr. Minor *found life* in the words, and when Professor Murray finally traveled to meet him in person, years after they'd met via the Queen's post, Murray was shocked to discover Dr. Minor's dark past. The William Minor with whom he had corresponded for years was not a product of madness, but of light and life.<sup>ii</sup>

Well, what has all this to do with us? This is no lexicography study. But one more story first:

After years spent in stifling boarding schools, C.S. Lewis tells of coming under the tutelage of a beloved old teacher he calls "The Great Knock." The Great Knock insisted that young Lewis *learn* Greek. Lewis was required to read Greek, translate Greek, and even speak

Greek. In another language, C.S. Lewis was *immersed in words*. At first the exercise was laborious and boring, but eventually, Lewis says this:

“I became able to understand a great deal without (even mentally) translating it; I was beginning to *think in Greek*. That is the great Rubicon to cross in learning any language. Those in whom the Greek word lives *only* while they are hunting for it in the lexicon, and who then substitute the English word for it, are not reading the Greek at all; they are only solving a puzzle.”<sup>iii</sup>

You see, Lewis had truly learned a new language when he began to *think* in it. And note how he describes this: In him, he says, *the word lived*.

And *that* is what these tales have to do with us and our faith! You see, our faith is not an undifferentiated acknowledgement of some mystical divinity. Our faith is not primarily a moral code that will keep us virtuous and our communities clean. Our faith is not merely a longing for the joys of heaven in the great hereafter.

Our faith is in a living Word and a Word that lives in us, *the* Word—the Christ—through whom all things are made.

*“In the beginning was the Word...All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him is life...to all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gives power to become children of God...”*

Too often, our approach to faith is like the study habits of the student who only superficially learns a new language. We approach life as a series of puzzles to be solved and religion as the dictionary or guidebook. When we want a quick, good answer to make sense of a chaotic world, we consult the resources of faith. At all other times, we leave that faith safely put away, like a book on the shelf.

And that, friends, is an exercise that will always fail to satisfy. Faith is *not* a dictionary to solve life’s puzzles. Borrowing C.S. Lewis’ phrase, faith is a Rubicon to cross. Faith is a new language to be learned so fully and intimately that we think and dream in it. Faith is immersion in the Word.

C.S. Lewis believed the world to be full of signposts that point us toward the truth of our faith, and the story with which I began does that very thing. For William Minor, the terror of the world left him grasping at sanity by his fingertips. And yet, when he focused the whole of his being on learning and serving words, light broke through his darkness.

For us, too, when we commit the all of us to knowing and serving the Word, we find ourselves lifted up and pulled free from the madness that licks from the darkness around *us*.

What I'm saying is, of course, about Holy Scripture, about studying and knowing the Word as incarnate in the words of the Bible. But please don't mistake that it is all, or even primarily, about that. The words of Holy Scripture are but windows to *the Word*, the Christ through whom we and this world are made, whose desire it is that we know him as he knows us.

That kind of relationship, that kind of knowledge, that kind of language only comes when we are immersed in the Word Jesus Christ. Our waking must be in conversation with the Word; our eyes must be attuned to see the Word incarnate in those we meet; our cries must be to the Word who shines light in the darkness; and our rest must be in anticipation that the Word will be in our slumbering dreams.

When we receive Christ in this way, when he sinks into the marrow of us and meets the Word already incarnate there, then through his power *we indeed become children of God*, finding health and sanity in a maddened world and knowing the new language so well that it becomes our primary one.

The Rubicon awaits. The only question is whether we'll cross it. *Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> This information and the story that follows are found in Simon Winchester's book *The Professor and the Madman*.

<sup>ii</sup> Alas, for William Minor, the light eventually dimmed and went out. When his immersion in the words ceased, madness settled upon him again, this time even worse than before.

<sup>iii</sup> Lewis, C.S. *Surprised by Joy*, 141.