

Testify to the Light

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
January 4, 2026
2nd Sunday after Christmas
John 1:1-18



*Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.*

*And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."¹*

These are words from the familiar Mary Oliver poem *When I am Among the Trees*. I haven't always been a fan of poetry, but I have come to appreciate it. Poetry speaks to us in ways prose cannot. Some of us connect with poetry more than others, but our world desperately needs the beauty and the space that poetry provides. Poetry causes us to slow down and ponder. It invites us to embrace the mystery and awe of life.

I didn't like poetry growing up because I didn't understand it. I was the type of child who wanted to make sense of everything. I liked Math which makes my children laugh since their math ability surpassed mine about the time they went to high school. I liked Math because it made sense, $2+2=4$, $3 \times 3=9$. I even liked long division. It took time but there was always a clear answer, and I liked answers. Clear answers made me feel like I was in control and knew what I was doing.

English, on the other hand, was not a subject that brought me joy, and poetry made me cringe. If a teacher asked how a poem made me feel, my honest answer would have been, "confused." Poetry felt so subjective, and I thrived more on things that you approached objectively. If given a choice of what type of poem to write, I would have chosen a haiku since they have a distinct 5,7,5 syllable structure.

¹ *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*, p. 123, Penguin Press, 2017

But after years of personal growth and the great epiphany of realizing I am actually not in control nor do I need to understand everything, I have come to appreciate poetry. I still wouldn't say I understand it, but I now believe poetry isn't written to be understood as much as be experienced.

When asked about the role of poetry in our world, the Irish poet Pádraig Ó Tuama responded, "I always stumble over the word 'role' when it comes to poetry. I think poetry is an event. It isn't a project. It isn't a strategic plan. You don't do it so that you get something else... Poetry is a phenomenon that's at the center of the human project."²

John's prologue is poetry. It isn't meant to play a role as much as it is meant to be experienced. For centuries, people have tried to explain what exactly John was trying to say in the poetic words of his prologue, but there is value in just letting the words wash over us. Poetry is meant to be heard more than read which is how the early church encountered these first words of John's gospel. Through hearing these words, they were experiencing more than examining.

Logos is the Greek word translated here as Word. The Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. Logos would have been a familiar word for the early church. Logos certainly means word, but it also means wisdom, logic, knowledge, reason, and revelation. It's fair to say the Logos is always more than we can grasp.

Not only do I now appreciate poetry, but I also feel it is an important part of life because poetry helps us understand and appreciate the world around us. In the words of Alice Osborn, "Poetry's strength lies in its ability to shed a "sideways" light on the world, so the truth sneaks up on you"³.

Poetry allows us to experience the world from a different perspective, a "sideways" perspective. It opens us up to new possibilities. It reveals the Light of the world in new ways. John's poetry speaks to us even though we are unable to comprehend beyond time and space to grasp the fullness of, "In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God."

² <https://www.nosmallendeavor.com/pdraig-tuama-poetry-and-making-peace-bearing-witness-and-being-human-poetry-against-the-dark>

³ <https://aliceosborn.com/why-is-poetry-important-to-our-world-today/#:~:text=Poetry%20is%20so%20important%20because,truth%20sneaks%20up%20on%20you.>

John's poetry teaches us about God in a subjective way. It reveals the true nature of God. It testifies to the light, the true light which enlightens everyone. Through the Logos, through the incarnation, Jesus makes God known to us. Jesus reveals the intimate relationship between God the Father and God the Son, and John wants us to also experience this intimacy with God.

Our last verse speaks to this intimate relationship, "No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." The word translated heart is the Greek word, *kolpos*, which some say is more accurately translated breast or bosom. The only other place John uses the word *kolpos* is in chapter 13 when Jesus is foretelling his coming betrayal which in the King James Version, says, "Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved."

John is implying an extraordinarily intimate relationship. God is not far away, but rather as close as a loving parent to a newborn child. John is conveying this deeply intimate relationship not only for us to know that God the Son is this close with God the Father, but also to reveal this is the type of relationship God is offering to each of us as God's beloved children. This depth of relationship with God is possible for each of us through Jesus, the true Light.

John's gospel fully embraces the light metaphor as a way of revealing in Jesus, that God is making God's-self known to us, and I love it. As someone who wanted to hide during English class when discussing metaphors, I now appreciate the beauty of John's words to more fully embrace the mystery of the Christ. We don't have to understand the incarnation to trust that God wants to have the same intimate relationship with us as God the Father has with God the Son.

Embracing the Christ has been our theme for Advent and Christmas, but our embrace doesn't release on Epiphany. Embracing the Christ is a way of living. Embracing the Christ is testifying to the light so that all might believe. Embracing the Christ is finding ways to be a mirror and reflect God's light and love on others throughout the year.

Embracing the Christ is believing the Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood. Embracing the Christ is receiving the gift of grace upon grace, receiving the lavish generosity of our God who loves us first.

No one has ever seen God, but the Son, this one-of-a-kind God-Expression, who exists at the very bosom of the Father, has made God known. God sent the Logos to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, fully human and fully divine, to reveal the nature of God to us and to deepen the invitation to be in relationship.

We are in the final days of Christmas with Epiphany just two days away. On Epiphany we remember that God, through the light of a star, led people who lived at the edge of the known world to the Christ child. It is a powerful witness to this grace upon grace of which John speaks. The grace known in Christ isn't limited to some. This overflowing grace is for all. The true light, which enlightens everyone, has come into the world. Epiphany testifies that God's love knows no bounds.

In just a few minutes after we boldly sing *Shine Jesus Shine*, we will affirm our faith using the poetic words of the Nicene Creed which include, "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made."

Poetry abounds. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. Through the Light, the Word made flesh, all things were made. The Light that shines in the darkness has come to us. The Light, full of grace and truth, meets us where we are. What a gift! How do we respond to such a gift?

First, we must experience it. Then, once we experience the overflowing grace, our only response is to testify to the Light in all we do and say. So let us experience again the words of Mary Oliver's poetry.

*Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.
And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."*

Let us continue Embracing the Christ as we experience the Logos and testify to the Light. Friends, we were made to be filled with light and to shine.

May it be so. Amen.