

Our Gospel reading this Christmas morning from John contains some of the most memorable and powerful verses of Scripture. It fires our imagination on a completely different level than the nativity accounts in Luke and Matthew. In fact, this prologue to John's gospel is so poetically written, it has been described as a *hymn* to the Word.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." As poetic as that is, someone reading or hearing this for the first time might find it a bit hard to understand - - what's all this about the *Word*? Words are just neutral, inert little things we use to communicate with each other, right? What's this have to do *with God*?

Well as it turns out, God actually has *a thing* for words, written, spoken and sung. In the story of creation at the beginning of the Old Testament, God *speaks* and everything is created: light, dark, water, sky, land, animals, plants and human beings. In our first reading this morning, God speaks good news through a prophet of salvation for the Hebrew people: "Listen!" Isaiah shouts. Jerusalem is redeemed! The Lord's favor has returned to Zion, and *the dawning of a new day* is promised for captive Israel. The encouraged response is to *sing* to the Lord a new song.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, the writer acknowledges that God speaks in various ways, notably (as we heard before) through the prophets.

“But in these last days, the writer continues, [God] has spoken to us by a Son.” Through the New Testament we learn that the incarnation, the birth of Jesus celebrated today, is God speaking to us.

In our text from John’s gospel the theme is of **a Word** that isn’t printed, spoken or sung. It is the *embodied* Word: “The Word became flesh and lived among us,” and a new day has dawned. The action of God has been *communicated* and *embodied* by Jesus Emmanuel, God with us.

“Word” is the English translation of an ancient Greek philosophical concept called *Logos*. Generally today, our western culture isn’t really too interested with philosophical concepts. At least for the time being, the love of wisdom and truth seems to have been sidelined by the pursuit of keeping up with the Joneses, or at least keeping up with all our credit card bills! But back in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, when Jesus was born, the concept of *Logos* was well known – and in the region of Ephesus, where John’s gospel was likely written, it was especially common for people to discuss philosophy.

300 years before Christ, Aristotle defined *logos* as the quality of “reason,” and it’s from *logos* that we get the term “logic.” But 200 years before that, an Ephesian philosopher called Heraclitus defined *Logos* as *the fundamental source of the cosmos*. Heraclitus said that the *Logos* is eternal, conceding that humans always prove unable to understand it. That sounds familiar... “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”

John the gospel writer must have been a pretty intellectual guy, using this well-known concept of *Logos* creatively by developing it to express who Jesus is to his readers. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... [And] the Word became flesh and lived among us.” John’s inspired writing *was vital* to the early Church in determining an orthodox view of *the* identity of Christ. The funny thing is, the early Church Fathers wanted to distance Christianity from the term *logos* as defined by Heraclitus because many of his writings were considered to be a heretical. The Church didn’t attempt to address ancient philosophy until much later, even though many of the Church Fathers were converted philosophers.

There were other beliefs also around at the time of the early church, and John's Gospel has answers for these: to the Rabbis who claimed that the Jewish Law, the Torah, existed before creation and was the source of light and life, John's gospel announces that these claims actually apply to the *Logos* – the Christ. To the Gnostics who denied a real incarnation, believing Jesus to be a spiritual being only and not human, John's claim is that "the Word became flesh." And to those who were still following John the Baptist, it's clear from our gospel passage that John the Baptist was **not** the Light but only *a witness* to the Light.

John's Gospel clarifies the human and divine identity of Jesus. The Letter to the Hebrews does the same, confirming Jesus as Creator, Revealer, Sustainer, Redeemer and Exalted one, recognizing both who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. Jesus wasn't just a messenger – he was and is the message, himself.

You might have heard young people today using the term "word" as an affirmation of a truth. In other words, "word" in youth culture is a way of saying "yes"! And that's a pretty good fit with what the Incarnation means: Jesus is God's "yes" to us; Jesus is God's Word to us. The Word made flesh affirms humanity itself *and* God's love for humanity. And that's a word we can pass on to others!

Today, we celebrate the Word made flesh, who came to dwell among us. And we celebrate his presence with us when we gather around his Table. And though we do hold dear the stories of his coming as a baby lying helpless in a manger, it's good to know that God's incarnation means so much more than that. Praise be to God for his Holy Word. Amen.