

CHRIST MEMORIAL CHURCH, NORTH BROOKFIELD, MA

SERMON

1<sup>st</sup> SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DECEMBER  
31, 2018

JOHN 1:1-18

BUZZELL

JOSEPH

IN THE BEGINNING was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. 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. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 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. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 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. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me, because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 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.

Good morning and Happy New Year! The stroke of midnight tonight officially starts another new year, at the same time bringing to a close this year's "Holiday Season"... When we wake up tomorrow morning, what will be left of the winter season is the long, cold, "non-festive" part of it, during which we endure snow storms, bundle up against frigid temperatures, shovel snow, throw sand and salt on our driveways, walkways and steps, stay inside watching the Patriots make a run at another Super Bowl, and look forward to spring - or maybe to Florida, for those of us who may be planning an escape in a few weeks.

It is in some ways kind of fitting that this morning's passage appears at this time each year. This being the First Sunday after Christmas on the liturgical calendar, it often falls quite close to the start of the New Year, as it does today, so as we find ourselves at the beginning of a New Year, we start it off with the beginning of John's gospel account, which coincidentally starts with the words "In the beginning..."

Additionally, we may find some symbolism in that we are now ten days removed from the winter solstice on December 21st, which is the shortest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. On that day, here in Massachusetts we get about 9 hours of daylight; the other 15 hours are spent in darkness. The good news is that after that, the days slowly start getting longer (although unfortunately not warmer just yet).

So, as we prepare to start a new year, during this rather dark time of year, it is somewhat fitting that we are reading this Sunday about "the beginning" and "the light that shines in the darkness".

These 18 verses make up John's prologue to his gospel account. Undoubtedly, countless sermons have been preached on these verses over the centuries, and countless volumes have been written. There is no way to adequately cover these verses in the short time we have this morning, and I would encourage us all to spend more time with them this week and/or whenever we have a chance to dive into them.

As it is written, it is a rather mystical passage. But in these verses, John sets forth the basic Christian truths that the rest of his gospel message will address over and over again. Ultimately, John the Evangelist is writing this to reach those who do not yet believe - Jews, but also especially at that time Gentiles, and in particular Greeks, especially as he most likely wrote this while at Ephesus - although the message is just as important to those who *do* believe, because at the time, John was confronted with groups who were espousing beliefs that were inconsistent with the beliefs of Christians - groups like the Gnostics, and those who overemphasized the significance of John the Baptist. Even today, make no mistake, there are forces continually at work to disorient us and confuse us as they attack these foundational truths. We may think of John's truths as reflectors on the sides of the highway that help keep us from drifting off the road as we drive through a winter night's snowstorm, when the snow is swirling so thick and heavy that we have a hard time seeing our way without them.

John opens his gospel with a statement about "the Word"... with a capital "W". Generically, a word (with a lowercase "w") is something that, when it is spoken (usually with other words), conveys a thought that someone is thinking, so that another person can know what the first person is thinking. Otherwise, without an exchange of words, the two people could sit right in front of each other, staring at each other for hours, and not have any idea what each other is thinking. Words expressed (in speech or in writing) are the means in which we come to know someone: not just "surface things" about them, but their deeper thoughts, beliefs, how they *feel* about different things... John's point is that Jesus is God's "Word" -- in other words, God sent Jesus to us so that he could reveal what God is thinking, and how he feels about us; so that we can actually *know* God, personally and deeply, not just know *of* Him as some distant, remote, impersonal being.

John goes on to tell us that this Word existed from the beginning - not the beginning of the world, but even before that, in eternity with God. Another way of saying it is that God has always been this way - the way Jesus communicates Him to us - before the creation of the world, before there was even such a thing as *time*. God and His Word have been inseparable through eternity. Jesus - the way God is expressed to us in him - was not some new thing that God decided to come up with for us after the Old Testament period had drawn to a close.

Then John goes even further, telling us that this Word *is* **God**. This is very hard for us to understand, but John wanted to make it clear that Jesus is *God's Word*, in mind, in heart, and in being - not the mind, heart and being of a man; and that it was God's Word who came to the world to take on the flesh of a man - not a man who had some special kind of "divine insight" into some other being that is God. God and His Word are separate entities, yet together with the Holy Spirit, they are one. In Jesus it was God who was born and found lying in a manger, and it was God who was nailed to the cross.

Ascending to the next step, John explains that it was through him that the entire world was created - everything that *is*. We recall in Genesis chapter 1, God spoke, and the world was

created; it was through the words that he spoke - in other words, it was through *His Word* - that all things came into being. And in this Word was *life* - this is not merely the basic “life” of a carbon-based organism that breathes and eats and reproduces and has sensory perception and is conscious of its existence until the day it expires. John is referring to the *life* that is eternal, which we can’t experience apart from Jesus.

John then moves to the association of that eternal life to light, which brings us back around to the idea of darkness we were talking about earlier. The world as it was - and is - is a dark place; dark in the sense that man is by nature sinful, and absent any light, man will continue to fumble around in the darkness, wallowing in his sin even as it makes him miserable. When Jesus came to the world, the life that he brought served as the light that cut through our darkness and showed us what we couldn’t see before, changing the world forever. That light still shines today, and the darkness, which is still in the world, is nevertheless powerless to put that light out.

It is our choice to move toward that light, so that we can see better, or retreat into our darkness, where we may think we will be happier in our sinfulness. [It’s hard for me not to think of the kids’ movie, “A Bug’s Life”, from 1998, when at one point during the movie there are two mosquitos drifting toward a bug zapper light hanging outside of a trailer at night, and the one mosquito warns the other, “no, don’t look into the light!” and the other says, “I can’t help it - it’s so beautiful!” as he continues to be drawn closer... and then he gets zapped... which in the end doesn’t make for a good analogy here, but... !] But last week we celebrated Jesus’ birth into this dark world, which John tells us was to be “the light of all people.” Those who see that light and are drawn to it, who receive it and welcome it, may become children of God, cultivating an ever-deeper relationship with Him, which is ultimately born of God.

At this time I will wrap up by looking back to a hymn we sang or likely heard at some point within the last week or so: “O Holy Night”. Jesus was born at night, in darkness, into a world long in sin; that world was yearning for a light to cut through that darkness, to give it hope that something better will be coming.

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining/It is the night of our dear Savior’s birth  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining/Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth  
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices/For yonder breaks/A new and glorious morn...

Well, that light - and the hope that it brings - has come. Let us pray:  
Almighty God, You have given us Your Word, Your son Jesus, as a light to all people in the world, to give us hope in the darkness that we may be drawn to him, and by receiving and welcoming him, and trusting him, become your children, that we may inherit the life that Jesus showed us. As we are about to start a new year, let us rely on the basic truths contained in John’s prologue as guidance to keep us on that highway we travel when darkness and swirling snow make it hard for us to see. Lead us also to opportunities to point to John’s prologue so that others who have not yet come to believe in Your son might follow. In Jesus’ name we pray,

*Amen.*