

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 31:7-9
SECOND LESSON: John 1:1-18
January 3, 2021

“Grace and Truth”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

My niece and her family moved to Amsterdam last year. The adults are slowly and painstakingly learning Dutch. The kids are picking it up so quickly they are now translating for their parents. Knowing the right words to communicate is essential, but there is also a huge context behind words. I don't know about Dutch, but English is one of the worst offenders for not making sense. There is no egg in eggplant or ham in hamburger. Quicksand works slowly. Boxing rings are square. People recite at a play but play at a recital. We ship by truck and send cargo by ship. We have noses that run and feet that smell. A slim chance and a fat chance are the same thing, but a wise man and a wise guy are opposites. A house can burn up as it burns down, we fill in a form by filling it out and an alarm goes off by going on.

If you're going to successfully communicate it is best to use the language and the concepts of the person with whom you are attempting to communicate. There's no use talking English to a person who doesn't know English, and even those who have a basic knowledge of English can be completely thrown off by our idioms. Communicating by using a concept already familiar is exactly what the author of John's gospel did when using the word "logos" which we have simply translated (somewhat inadequately I might add) as "word." I was always very confused when I was a child as to how a person could be a word. But how someone could be the logos is a different matter.

Simply put, the logos is the principle of divine reason and order built into the universe. A Greek philosopher came up with the idea six centuries before Christ. Just like humans have a reasoning power, the cosmos has an underlying logic. It's organized. Everything fits together down to the tiniest detail. Matter isn't just randomly and chaotically thrown everywhere. Later philosophers developed the concept further. The logos was the spiritual principle permeating reality. A first century Jewish philosopher named Philo went so far as to teach that the logos was the intermediary between God and the cosmos, both involved in creation and helping human beings comprehend God. For the author of John's gospel to say that Jesus is the logos, therefore, is HUGE. This isn't just poetry. It's a theological statement of incredible depth and audacity. John was saying that a man, a human being, a condemned criminal, was a pre-existent part of God. Jesus was divine, becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

John then goes on to affirm everything that philosophers believed to be true of the logos to be true of Jesus. Jesus was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. According to John, “the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And here I want to stop for a moment for another subtle but important clarification. Our English translation makes it look as if Jesus and God the Father are the same thing. It says, the word was God. But a better translation of the Greek grammar might be, “the Word was divine.” The structure of the Greek indicates that Jesus shares the same nature as God the Father, which makes more sense than saying Jesus = God the Father.

Additionally, John’s gospel makes another statement that we fail to hear because we don’t speak the same language. The first words are: “In the beginning.” For Jews books of the bible were identified by their first words. Genesis means, “In the beginning.” This a new beginning.

John’s gospel takes great pains to explain that John the Baptist was only a witness to the light, quoting John the Baptist as saying “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” Jesus surpassed John because Jesus pre-existed John. John the Baptist continued to have a strong following long after his death, which may be the reason the author was so explicit. But, continues John’s gospel, despite the fact that the world was made through Jesus, the world did not recognize him. He came to his own people, and they did not receive him. This is staggering. The cosmos in all its pre-fallen perfection was made through the pre-incarnate Jesus, the divine principle of order and creative beauty, but had fallen so far from that perfection that it did not even recognize him. And it’s not as if God had not already been speaking through the law and the prophets. Integrity, truth, grace, mercy and justice should have resonated, but they didn’t. Instead, greed, pride, arrogance and violence held sway. But some did receive Jesus, and to those who recognize him for who he truly is, he gives the right to become children of God.

Finally, there is one more cultural context of which we are ignorant. Words that should shock don’t shock us, because we don’t share the same set of assumptions. The statement “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” was directed to another group that we know little about—Gnostics. Very early in the life of Christianity Greek Gnostic ideas crept in, ideas that said everything physical is evil. The body is inherently bad. Sex is always bad and to be avoided. Physical desires of any kind are to be overcome. To truly follow God it was believed it was necessary to be celibate and live a lifestyle of severe austerity. Family life was second best. Many of these ideas persisted in the Roman Catholic Church, which until recently has had a very negative view of human sexuality. They still have a celibate priesthood. The Gnostics John contended with were extreme and would not acknowledge that Jesus was human at all. It was, they said, impossible because all matter was evil. They taught that Jesus was pure spirit and only appeared to be human. So John very deliberately used a crude and obvious word, *sarx*, or flesh. Jesus became **flesh** and blood like us. Most of the time when the New Testament uses the word *sarx* it refers to immoral and self-indulgent physical sin. But Jesus took

on our nature with all its problems in order to save us from ourselves. In this era of the coronavirus a new image came to my mind—that of God willingly being infected with a virus in order to conquer it, to help us to do the same. Through Christ God gives our spiritual immune system the boost it needs. We are able to fight what before we didn't even recognize as a problem.

We close today with grace and truth. John's gospel states: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Grace is a profound concept. The Greek word, *charis*, from which we get "charity" relates to the Hebrew word *hesed*. It is lovingkindness, mercy and faithfulness. We are often short on grace in our society. We judge people according to things they did 20 years ago. We jump on every misstatement. We shine a spotlight on every flaw, and we never ever give second chances. Grace is the complete opposite of these tactics. Grace forgives. Grace is compassionate. Grace appreciates the struggles another person may be experiencing. Grace is not quick to judge. Grace allows past failures to fall away into oblivion in order that new life and growth can happen. Grace does not judge us on the basis of our worst days and our worst acts. And Jesus came to bring us grace.

Truth brings freedom. To live in truth is to live in reality. We are in dangerous times right now when conspiracy theories fill the internet and the news. People believe things that are absolutely completely false. Who among us could have imagined our fellow citizens falling for an ideology like Q-Anon? But when lies like this take hold, they reap destruction. God brings us truth and clarity. We never need to be afraid of the truth. Truth delivers us from cult like thinking and political spin. Facts are actually facts. There is such a thing as objective reality, even if we are challenged to find it. Jesus brings us a life based on truth.

John's gospel is a radical gospel. It proclaims truly unimaginable things. We find our faith challenged and stretched. It is easier for us to think of Jesus as either purely God and to pray to him that way, or as completely human and look to him as a role model. Holding both together is, in fact, the scandal of Christianity. It is at the very center of our faith. It is what we celebrate every Christmas. In truth, these things are beyond our comprehension. We can only say that God's grace and truth came in human form to intervene miraculously in our world, Jesus the Christ, born of Mary. Amen.

Jeremiah 31:7-9

⁷ This is what the Lord says:

"Sing with joy for Jacob;
shout for the foremost of the nations.
Make your praises heard, and say,
'Lord, save your people,
the remnant of Israel.'

⁸ See, I will bring them from the land of the north
and gather them from the ends of the earth.
Among them will be the blind and the lame,

expectant mothers and women in labor;
a great throng will return.
⁹ They will come with weeping;
they will pray as I bring them back.
I will lead them beside streams of water
on a level path where they will not stumble,
because I am Israel's father,
and Ephraim is my firstborn son.

John 1:1-18

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.
⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.
¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.
¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.
¹⁵ (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.