

LOGOS



“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.”

Merry Christmas! According to the Liturgical Calendar, today is the first Sunday after Christmas. In medieval Christian tradition, today is the 7th of the 12 days of Christmas. It is also New Years Eve Day.

I love John’s Gospel! For a long time I have felt a strong connection with St. John the Evangelist. Several years ago, I participated in an icon writing workshop here. We were offered a choice of two traditional icons to recreate. I was intending to paint an icon of Mary and baby Jesus, but I was called to do something completely unexpected. I was called create an icon of a white-haired St. John, holding a book of his writings, perhaps even this very passage. [show icon] In the process, I spent days sitting in these pews, praying to St. John [point], asking for his permission and his guidance. I felt very blessed during those days with our patron saint watching over my shoulder and guiding me as the icon progressed.

Last week, we heard Luke’s story of the birth of Jesus. Other years at Christmas we have heard the other birth story from Matthew’s Gospel.

John’s Gospel tells a very different story. There is no infancy narrative, no story of the birth of Jesus. No angel Gabriel visiting Mary with the shocking news that she will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. No Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem for the census. No baby Jesus born in a stable because there was no room at the inn. No swaddling clothes. No shepherds. No wise men. No star of Bethlehem.

The beginning, according to John, is heavenly perspective. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The Word existed before the beginning of time. The Word became flesh and lived among us. The Word was what eventually became Jesus. Jesus was The Word of God.

Jesus became incarnate and was made man in order to reveal God’s presence, to make God known to us, the people on earth, so that we might become liberated and transformed by that revelation. John’s Gospel talks repeatedly about God “sending Jesus into the world,” like an emissary sent by a political leader. Jesus is the messenger, but—since he is the Word of God made flesh—he is also the message. He comes to reveal God, and he does so by revealing himself.

I always found this passage from John’s Gospel fascinating, even if I didn’t understand it. I still don’t fully understand it.

When I was a 17-year-old college freshman, I signed up for the first of 3 years of ancient Greek. All of us in our small class were eager to read Bible passages in Greek. But no...our professor insisted that we start at the beginning of Greek written literature, with Homer, who lived some 800 years earlier. That was followed by a year of Classical Greek that included Socrates, Plato, and some of the comedies and tragedies. It wasn’t until our 3rd year that we were finally allowed to study the New Testament, and we read parts of John’s Gospel.

The words “In the beginning...” clearly echo the first words of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The writer of John’s Gospel is describing the beginning of the cosmos in terms no less grandiose than the writers of the Old Testament.

The Greek word that has been translated as “The Word” is Logos. Yes, Logos can be translated as “The Word” but it can mean many more things than that.

“Logos” refers to the whole structure of knowledge. We use it in the names of our sciences: geology the study of the earth, cosmology the study of the universe, theology the study of God.

Logos can also mean the Speaking of God. It can mean the Will of God. Or the Reason of God or the Reason of the Universe. It can mean a Divine Revelation or Divine Wisdom. According to Isaac Asimov’s Study Guide to the Bible, “the Word,” in its capitalized sense, is an aspect of God not found anywhere in the Old or New Testaments except in John’s Gospel.

The concept of “logos” was found as far back as the 6th century BCE in the writings of Greek philosophers, around the same time the Kingdom of Judah was coming to an end and the Jews were being carried off into Babylonian Exile.

Over those early centuries, the concept of “logos” took on more and more significance, not only as an abstract principal but a personified entity. Logos came to be considered a kind of god in its own right, a rational creative god. The center of this philosophic tradition took place in Ephesus, on the coast of Asia Minor, now Turkey, and where it is believed that the John’s Gospel was written.

There were some ancient philosophers—who later became known as Gnostics—who tried to separate the concepts of God and Logos. But for John they were one and the same. His Gospel sets itself firmly against the Gnostic perspective. Not only did Logos exist from the very beginning so that Logos was **with** God but Logos **was** God.

When John began to write his account of the life of Jesus, he began with a hymn to Logos. The Word of God existed from the beginning of time. At one point the Word became flesh and became the man we call Jesus. This is what is called incarnation theology.

I love the images of the infancy narratives! The angel Gabriel visiting Mary. Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem. Baby Jesus born in a stable, surrounded by farm animals. The shepherds. The wise men.. The star. We all love these stories and images, which is very probably why they have become so iconic in our view of the Christmas story.

But what if we didn't have the other Gospels? What if there were no birth narratives? What would we believe? Would we still believe in Jesus?

St. John guided me to write his icon, and his wisdom has guided me in many ways. But he did not share all his wisdom. Much of it still eludes me. I'm not sure I understand incarnation theology and I'm even less sure whether I believe it. It sounds simple yet it is **so** complex, and it's really hard for me to wrap my head around.

And so, I will leave you with a Christmas Poem by the German theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart:

Why do we assume
that God became
human only once,
in the Incarnation?
Not so.
God becomes human

here and now just
as he did then.
Why is this? So
that he might give
birth to you, too,
as his only
begotten son.

Amen.