**Logos and Light**
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"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

In Greek the first words of John's Gospel are: Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

I remember the first time I heard and read this passage. It was not in church and it was not at home. It was in my Ancient Greek 101 class where I was enrolled as a 17-year-old college freshman. I was astounded and I was mystified by the words. What on earth did they mean? I had no idea, and it would be many years before I had any clue. After our professor showed us and read us those beautiful words, he promptly burst our bubble and told us that we were not going to be studying the Gospel of John, or any of the Greek New Testament!

The lesson plan, which I later understood made sense from a linguistic and historical perspective, was to spend the first year of ancient Greek much, much earlier, with Homer, who is credited with writing the epic poems the Iliad and the Odyssey some 800 years earlier. We students had no choice but to swallow our disappointment, buckle down, and start to learn the much more difficult grammar and syntax of homeric Greek.

I finished the first year of Ancient Greek, and in the second year, we traveled forward in time to study Classical Greek of the 5th century B.C. We read Plato's Apology of Socrates and his Symposium. We read the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and the comedies of Aristophanes. We even staged a silly version of Aristophanes' The Birds!

Finally, in the third year, we got to the first century A.D. and read the New Testament in its original language, Koine Greek. We read parts of John's Gospel and other books, but I still did not have any idea what any of it meant. I did, however, begin to understand the evolution of the Greek language over the centuries, and I fell in love with the language. I traveled to Greece the summer after my junior year,  and I fell in love with the country as well as the language.

During my senior year, I threw myself into even more esoteric study, including Linear B, the language of the Mycenaean period, which predated Homer. And I studied modern Greek language and literature. Eventually I was able to speak, read, and write both ancient and modern Greek.

This is all very interesting, you might be saying, but what does it have to do with the prologue to John's Gospel. I'll get to that.

In our Friday morning Bible study group with Father Geoff, we spent all of the fall and all of Advent reading and discussing a book called The First Christmas. It was written by two Bible scholars, Marcus Borg--a Lutheran--and John Dominic Crossan--a Roman Catholic priest. The book addresses "what the Gospels really teach about Jesus's birth." These so-called birth narratives appear in the beginning of the Gospels attributed to Matthew and Luke. The two birth stories give very different accounts about Jesus's birth, which reflects the different religions (Matthew was a Jew, Luke was a Gentile), different perspectives, and different audiences of the authors. The First Christmas includes a lot of scholarly speculation about why, when, and how these stories were written. There is even a suggestion that the birth stories were added to the Gospels decades or even centuries later!

The Gospels of Mark and John do not include birth stories. But if we look closely at today's reading, John says: "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."

He mentions John the Baptist as a messenger and a witness to Jesus, and then he goes on to say: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

"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."

The Word is not simply a spoken word, like God's words "in the beginning" of Genesis. The Greek word *Logos* translates as "word," but it was considered the divine principle of reason that gives order to the universe. In Greek philosophy, the *logos* was the ultimate truth and reason.

The Word signifies God's power of creation and redemption. According to John, the *Logos*, the Word of God, became a human being, Jesus. The word was Jesus. The true light was Jesus. Jesus is the word made flesh.

This is not a birth story the way Matthew and Luke told birth stories, but in some ways it functions as a birth story. It tells of the coming of Jesus as the human incarnation of the Word of God.

You could make a case that this is the third birth story. It very different than the ones we are used to—with Herod and Mary and Joseph and the manger and the shepherds and the wise men and the angels. Those are the stories we know and love, and John’s story sounds strange to us.

We don't know that much about John, or whoever it was that wrote the fourth Gospel. It is possible that he had read the earlier gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, and he may have been familiar with the birth stories. But he wasn't interested in the historical details of Jesus's birth.

He was a mystic, someone who wrote about the meaning of Jesus' birth and life, and he wrote from his beliefs, his theology and his imagination.

The prologue to his gospel starts with the words "In the beginning." These are the same words which begin the book of Genesis. For John, this Word or Logos was present from the very beginning of time, from God's creation of the world.

One thing that is common to all three of these stories is the image of Jesus as light. They all talk about light – the light of the star and the light that shone around the shepherds. In the book The First Christmas, light is described as an "ancient archetypal symbol."

For most of history, nighttime and darkness were very scary things. People were afraid of the dark. People were afraid to go out at night. Bad things happened at night. Nighttime and darkness were associated with blindness. We can't see in the dark. We stumble around. We get lost. Danger lurks, spirits roam, evil is afoot.

The symbolism of light in Scripture begins in Genesis, when God said "let there be light." The light that God created was a primordial light;  he created it even before he created the sun, moon, and stars on the 4th day.

The imagery of light and darkness continues throughout the Old Testament. We see it in today's reading from Isaiah: "I will not rest,

until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch." We see it in the writings between the Old and New Testaments. The festival of Hanukkah that was described in those writings is an 8-day celebration of light in the darkest days of the year as the winter solstice approaches.

Light and darkness are central to the New Testament and to the introduction of Jesus. We celebrate the birth of Jesus in the middle of the night during one of the longest nights of the year. Jesus is the light in the darkness.

John says, "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."

The light of Jesus, the Word made flesh, comes among us at Christmas —and we celebrate its coming into the world.

That first Christmas, the light shone with the birth of Jesus – and it continues to shine. By that light we have been given the power to become children of God and to take our places with the light. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. This is the Christmas story. This is our story.

Amen.