

John 1:1-5 *The Word of Creation*

We are going to start a new series on John's Gospel this morning. The Gospel of John might be my favourite book in the Bible. It is often described as an eagle soaring in the clouds, or a mountain, reaching new heights, bringing us into God's presence like Mt. Sinai. John is high and lofty, concerned with spiritual things. Maybe that's why I like it so much, as I always have my head in the clouds.

John has an ability to be very simple in his language, but very deep in his meaning. This allows all people to come to this book and get something from it. It has been said that it is shallow enough for a baby to wade in, and deep enough for an elephant to swim. I hope in this series to do some of the same, to open up its mysteries to you, and allow God's word to penetrate your hearts.

Let's hear God's Word, John 1:1-5,

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

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The first thing that John says about Jesus, the Word he calls him, is that he is God. The other Gospels start differently. Matthew begins by relating Jesus to Abraham and David, showing him the rightful King and heir to Abraham's promise. Mark begins with a quote from Isaiah, showing how Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, announced by the prophets, among them John the Baptist. After Luke assures his readers that he did his homework, interviewing eye-witnesses and ministers, he tells an extended story about Jesus' miraculous birth. All these are very important, and at the beginning of each Gospel for a good reason unique to these presentations of Jesus' life. But John sees fit to start with a rather mysterious prologue.

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The Church Father John Chrysostom says, “As when our ship is near shore and cities and ports pass in view before us that on the open sea vanish and leave nothing to fix the eye on, so the Evangelist here takes us with him in his flight above the created world leaving the eye to gaze upon emptiness and an unlimited expanse.” If Luke was a filmmaker making a movie about Jesus' life, he would zoom right in to all the details. John takes the opposite approach, he zooms way out, going way back before the creation of the world, into the very nature of God himself.

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John feels that the most important thing we need to know about Jesus is that he is somehow God. While Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus' human nature, John shows that his divine nature has no genealogy. We understand that there is an infinite difference between that which is created, and that which is not. Everything that is uncreated is God, everything that is created is not. Jesus, says John, is on the side of God.

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Why is this so important to John that he starts the story of Jesus' life with this statement? Because, if this is not true, if Jesus is not somehow God, then the rest of what Jesus did and said are blasphemy. They are the words and deeds of someone pretending to be God. If this is so, then we should not simply ignore Jesus' words and life, but rebuke him and join those who put him to death. That is the only just response according to God's word. All idols must be destroyed. But if he is who he says he is, if he is God, then there is nothing more important in this whole world than to listen to every word that comes out of his mouth. To hang on every syllable. These are the words of life, and nobody else has them.

Unlike in the other three Gospels, where Jesus' divinity is stated more subtly, and revealed over time, John comes out at the beginning. If you don't believe Jesus is the only true God, you don't know Jesus. What is more, if you don't see God in Jesus, you don't know God. The things John says about Jesus in his gospel could not be said about any other person who has ever lived.

Even more than this, if you don't believe that Jesus is God, you are separated from God. Jesus says in John that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and there is no way to the Father except through him. He is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." It is only by looking to him that we can be saved.

In his opening statements, John is pushing the limits of language. That is part of the allure of these passages. Simple little words that are like a wormhole to another dimension. In a strange way, these words about the Word, are also the Word himself. John is at the limits of human language as God is beyond our understanding him. That this is confusing is part of the point! John's easy language, small words, short sentences, lures everyone in, but it doesn't allow you to remain on the surface. You start digging and find something more, and more, and more, and eventually you find that people have been doing this for almost two thousand years and are still being formed by these words and growing in the knowledge of God through them.

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So, what is the Word, the Logos, that John is speaking about? How can we get some handle on it?

First, we should recognize that in John's Day the word 'logos' could have a lot of different meanings. It can mean a common written word, or a spoken word, or a method of doing something, or a way to understand something like 'reason', or like how we use it as a suffix for the study of some topic 'bio-logy', or even a book.

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The Stoics, a popular philosophical movement in the ancient world (and even popular up to this day), used the term 'logos' to refer to the organizing principle of the world, in a similar way that we understand God's providence. They looked at the way the universe shows order and purpose, rationality, and they called this 'Logos'. However, the Stoics thought that the order of the universe was indifferent to them.

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One Stoic saw a dog tied to a cart being pulled by a horse. The dog was fighting against the cart, and so would be dragged along against its will. This image reminds the Stoics of human life. They remark that the dog can fight against the cart and be miserable, or accept its fate and suffer less. Either way we're being pulled. The direction of the cart is like the logos, the reason and flow of the universe, it doesn't care about the dog or its well-being.

It is a lot like the materialistic worldview of our culture today. Most materialists today, that is, those who believe all there is the observable material world, there is nothing spiritual, believe that because of the laws of cause and effect every action and decision we make is caused by something preceding it. The laws of nature will guide every event. In both views, a person is not in control, but an impersonal force. There is a flow to events, and you're along for the ride. That force or law is indifferent to you, and all you can do is accept that or not.

Is that the way you feel? Like a dog being pulled by a cart attached to a horse that doesn't care about you? Does the world seem to you organized by impersonal forces that drag you along? There is definitely some wisdom in the Stoic sentiment, being content in one's circumstance yields a lot less anxiety. Even Paul says, contentment is key to a good life (1Tim.6:6). I think this is why Stoicism remains popular. But this isn't exactly a comforting thought. It doesn't give you much hope. It doesn't give you any purpose. In this way of seeing the world there isn't much desire to change the world. Most importantly, it isn't true, even if it may be moving in the right direction.

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The gospel says that Jesus is the Word, the Logos, the organizing principle of the universe. John says to us here that the organizing principle of the world is not indifferent to us. It is not pulling us along whether we like it or not. It is a person. That person is best seen in our Lord Jesus Christ, who loves us, and died for us. He has a purpose for our lives. He is our shepherd, and knows our name, and calls us to be his own.

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While John may have had this Stoic concept in the back of his mind when he wrote this introduction, it is essential to recognize that John is primarily referencing the very beginning of Scripture. The first verses in Genesis say, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.” Notice how our verses mirror Genesis, but show that there is an aspect of God that might be missed, something about his Word, his speech. God created the heavens and earth by his speech, his word. Before anything was created, God had his Word. His wisdom, his organizing principle. His word is eternally united to him.

This is also seen in the way the Psalms speak about God as the creator. Psalm 33:6, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.”

Likewise, in Ps.148:5 says it is, “at his *command* they were created.” God not only creates, but his creation does “his bidding” (Ps.148:8), meaning his creation keeps doing what his word says for it to do. God’s word creates and also sustains that creation, as John says in our passage, “in him was life.”

The Word, the *Logos*, can also mean something like ‘wisdom’. In this way John also seems to be referencing Proverbs 3:19, “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; By understanding He established the heavens...” Psalm 103:24 says something similar, “O LORD, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all.” God’s word and his wisdom are perfectly connected.

God’s Word is not like our words of course. Every analogy has its limits, especially when we’re talking about God! My words that I just spoke made sound and then stopped. But God’s Word makes “all things,” and “without him nothing was made that has been made.” It is important that we understand something about the way we formulate ideas and words if we are going to understand what John is getting at here.

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As I said earlier, in Greek “Logos” can mean both an actually written or spoken word, the meaning of a word, and something like ‘wisdom’ or ‘ideas’. I think John is speaking about the word in a few different senses at once. Think about when you say something, first you have an idea in your mind, and then the speech comes out of your mouth. Sometimes this is more calculated, and sometimes not, like when we put our foot in our mouth. But for God, when he has an idea, because he is eternal and unchangeable, this idea is also eternal and unchangeable.

Augustine says that when John is speaking about the Word, he is talking about Jesus being like the idea of creation in God’s mind. When I build something, I first try and figure out the way it is going to be put together in my mind, and then maybe I’ll make a rudimentary blueprint on some paper. There is an idea of how a table will look before I go about actually crafting it. John is saying that Jesus is like the idea of the table before it is crafted. The table is all creation, and Jesus is the organizing principle, the blueprint. He is the wisdom that God founded the earth on. If we use the Stoic image, he is the direction the cart is being pulled. If you want to know how the world makes sense, you must look to Christ.

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In the Old Testament, God’s voice, his Word, is seen in various ways, not only in creation. The word of the Lord is given in revelation through the prophets (Jer.1:4). His word brings deliverance, Is. 55:11 says, “so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” God is a God who reveals, and this revelation is given by God’s word in the Law and Prophets, best seen by us in Scripture. But John is saying that scriptural word is to be best seen in the person of Jesus. He is the fullest revelation of God. He is the word of God sent from heaven.

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John, without having the benefit of three hundred years of theological disputation, is trying to show how God can be God and Jesus is God at the same time, and how they both are one. This is no easy task. The way that he puts it, “the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” makes the claim that our creeds would eventually state with the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus is in some way God, and God is somehow three in one. “The Word was with God,” they are eternally together, three persons. “The Word was God,” they are totally united, one essence.

This is why it is so important to John to say this right off the bat. John wants us to see the ultimate significance of Jesus’ life. He is not merely the coming king like David, or a new lawgiver like Moses, a new priest like Aaron, or a prophet like Elijah. Jesus claims he is God

himself. Jesus is either God, or he is a damnable blasphemer. If he was a damnable blasphemer, then the Jewish leaders had every right and responsibility to put him to death. But they were not right. Jesus' claims to be God were true. As we celebrated at Easter, death could not hold him because he was no sinner. He did not blaspheme in the things he did and said as recorded in John's Gospel. More than not being able to be held down by death, "in him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind!" as John says.

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John then says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." One of my favourite commentators on John's Gospel says that verse 5 "is a masterpiece of planned ambiguity." The reader, if they don't know who Jesus is about to confront, or why he went to the cross, will immediately ask, what is this darkness?

John sets up this opposition to show the urgency to decide who Jesus is. Darkness is the absence of light. If Jesus is the light, not merely *a* light among many, but *the* light, and he is absent from your life, you are in darkness.

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We remember that John first connects the activity of the Word with the creation of the world. Genesis also says, that in the beginning "the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep..." Into this darkness God said, "let there be light." This might be understood as the very first revelation of who God is. His Spirit is hovering over the formless darkness and into this comes light. That light then brings life.

More than being somehow God, Jesus also reveals to us who God is. He is "the light that shines in the darkness." The darkness is not only our sin, which causes us to not understand God or his ways, but also the darkness of separation between God and what he has created. Jesus is the way to God, those who have seen him have seen the Father, as he tells his disciples.

God not only creates by his Word, but he re-creates by his Word. Remember in Romans 8:30, "Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified." The one who calls us is the one whose Word creates all creation.

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Why does this matter to us? Why is it so important to the story of John's Gospel that he places it right at the beginning? Because knowing who Jesus is helps us recognize the very order of all creation. Knowing this gives us hope, the one who created the heavens and the earth calls us by name. His Word creates life in us. Knowing that the plan of the universe is

seen in our Lord allows us to move past the meaninglessness of the modern world and see beauty, even in suffering.

John here is showing that Jesus is the true reason of all creation. We cannot understand our lives or our purpose if we do not understand who Jesus is. It is not only essential for our understanding of John's gospel that we see Jesus as God, but for every aspect of everything. Reason itself is inextricably linked to Jesus. He is the centre of creation. The alpha and omega. The whole world was created through him. If you want to know how the world works you need to look at his life, his love, his pain, his sacrifice.

Are there forces which try to conceal this? Yes, there is darkness in this life. But the darkness will not overcome. Darkness is a mere absence of light. Look to the light, see our Lord, the Lord, the Word, Jesus Christ the heart of creation, the source of all life.