



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE REVEREND EARL GROUT, DEACON  
THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, DECEMBER 31, 2023  
ISAIAH 61:10-62:3; PSALM 147:13-21; GALATIANS 3:23-25; 4:4-7; JOHN 1:1-18

## MAY YOUR JOY BE COMPLETE

*John 1:1-18 [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.]*

John is really different, right? Each of the Gospels has its own slant, but John is way off by itself. How so? Well, the traditional symbols for the Gospels can tell us a lot. Mark is a lion like our old Saint Mark's logo. A lion is the symbol for royalty, and Mark begins by announcing the arrival of a king. Matthew is a man, because it opens with a genealogy.

Luke is an ox, which represents Jesus's life of service and sacrifice.

John's symbol is an eagle—the bird that flies high and sees deeply and far. John is often called the philosophical Gospel, but it opens with a poem about the creation and how the Christ, the Son, was part of it, and not only that, but how light and life itself came into the world in the man Jesus.

Who was John and why did he write this way? John was a Greek Christian from Ephesus, now part of Turkey. He wrote his Gospel around 100 BCE—the last to be written. By then Christians were overwhelmingly gentile and Hellenistic. Their language and culture were Greek. They had no ties to Judaism, and generally found Jewish ideas and practices alien and often unattractive. The terms Messiah and savior meant nothing to them. As an evangelist, John had to find common ground.

I remember walking up the hill to the Parthenon in Athens, and looking down at the bare, round top of a hill. That was the Areopagus, also known as Mars Hill, where Paul talked with Greek philosophers. He mentions their altar “to an unknown god” and says, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17.23) — “The God who made the world and everything in it” (v.24). He concludes by quoting a Greek philosopher: “In him we live and move and have our being.” Sound familiar? It’s also in our prayer book.

John’s challenge was to proclaim that this “unknown god” has come among them in Jesus. He needed to build a bridge between

Jewish and Greek cultures. The link he found was “the Word.”

For the Jews, as one scholar says, “The spoken word... was fearfully alive.... It was a unit of energy charged with power.” The Word of God is everywhere in the Hebrew scriptures—the prophets, the Psalms, the wisdom books, Genesis: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light and there was light’ (Gen. 1.3). When God speaks, creation happens. “My word... will not return to me empty,” Isaiah writes, “but it will accomplish that which I have purposed.” For the Jews, the Word meant God.

It did for the Greeks too. In their culture, the Word was the Logos, the mind or reason of God. The Logos was the power that created the universe and kept it going. They used Logos much as the Jews used the Word. Here was the link between Jew and Greek that John sought.

But the Greeks had a problem with the Logos. Their Logos was all powerful, but remote and inaccessible. Like people throughout time, they yearned to know first-hand this “unknown god.” The Greeks saw this world and their lives as shadows, mere copies of the real world which lay beyond. Only in death

would they know the unknown god and experience reality.

For John, the Good News was the answer to this problem. For the Greek, the most powerful words in John's Gospel are this stunning proclamation: "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" (1.14). Author Frederick Buechner tells us directly what this means: "When God wanted to say what God is all about and what humankind is all about and what life is all about, it wasn't a sound that emerged, but a man. Jesus was his name. He was dynamite. He was the Word of God." In Jesus, John tells his fellow Greeks, God opened a window in time, to bring the Logos, the mind and reason of God, to earth, to live among you and lead you out of the shadow you live in and into the real world. That is what he means when he says, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (1.9).

"What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (1.4). Real life, not a shadow. Life and light are the twin themes of John's Gospel. Life is mentioned more than 35 times and light 21. Life. Light. "I am the bread of life" (6.35). "I

am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (8.12). Read John and look for these themes—life and light.

John gives us a different Jesus. Missing are key stories like the transfiguration and the last supper. We have healing miracles, but for John they are less about compassion and more about being signs of God's glory breaking into time and human life. The healing of the royal official's son in Capernaum was "the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee" (4.54). The first was at the wedding in Cana, and there were others. Lazarus, the man born blind, and more.

I want to mention one other thing that came to me in studying John's prologue. There is a feminine current that runs throughout scripture but is usually lost in translation. In our reading, "all things came to be through him" (1.3). The original Greek conveys the sense that all things are literally "birthed" through the union of God and Son. Similarly, those who accept the Son receive the power to "become" children of God. Once again, the Greek says they are "birthed" into children of God. This feminine action is hidden in the translation "came to be" and "to become." In

the last verse, the Son is “close to the Father’s heart” (v. 18). The Greek gives the meaning as “at the breast” or “bosom” of the Father. Bosom is unisex, but generally feminine when related to the body.

In our reading today, most significantly, the Word is associated with Wisdom, or Sophia, a female. Wisdom says, speaking in Proverbs: “When he established the heavens, I was there... like a master worker” (8.27, 30). Wisdom is synonymous with Word, so the feminine colors God’s presence in and through creation. Yes, She’s there.

In his first letter, John writes, “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life... We are writing so that our joy may be complete” (1 Jn. 1.1—4).

John’s Jesus is the one he knew in his heart, the one he believed everybody else could know too if they could keep their hearts open and believe.

Believe, so that your joy too may be complete as we leave this year and begin anew.



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