

“Words for a New Dawn”
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John 1:1-18
Jeremiah 31:7-14

“In the beginning...” These are the words that start the bible. In Genesis, these words set the rhythm for creation’s unfolding: from nothing, then darkness, and light. Evening, and morning. Water, and sky, and then dry land. Plants, fruit, trees. Sun and moon. Swarms of living creatures: swimming and swarming, creeping, crawling, and climbing. Humankind, the image of God, both male and female. God spoke the word, and it was so.

Leonard Bernstein, in his *Mass*, included a section called “The Word of the Lord.”

*For the Word was at the birth of the
Beginning
It made the heavens and the earth and set
Them spinning
And for several million years
It’s endured all our forums and fine ideas
It’s been rough but it appears to be
Winning!
There are people who doubt it and shout
It out loud
Oh they bellow and they bluster ’til they
Muster up a crowd
They can fashion a rebuttal that’s as subtle
As a sword
But they’re never gonna scuttle the Word
Of the Lord*

When John’s gospel repeats these words, “In the beginning,” we as listeners are invited back to the beginning of creation, and at the same time we receive an invitation to be part of a *new* creation. In this word was life, and the life was the light of all people. A light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

In the beginning of this new year, we look back upon what has been, and at the same time God calls us to consider what can be. How will we invite God into our being and becoming? How will this creative word be made flesh in us?

John’s prologue puts us in touch with the larger rhythms of creation– the metaverse, if you will, which includes all things and what is even beyond that. Sorry, Mark Zuckerberg, your Facebook, Instagram, AI, and whatever else you might come up with has got nothing on what

God has dreamed. God's word and wisdom encompasses all of creation: heaven and earth, planets and galaxies and maybe even realms beyond what we can possibly know, an existence that is bigger than time itself.

But it is also as intimate and near as God speaking your name, the breath of the Spirit whispering in your ear, or maybe it is like hearing the person of your desire say "I love you" for the first time, or, even like being held and told— when grief is too big for any explanation, but not too big for someone to help hold it for you, "I know. I know."

In these days when we are once again disembodied in worship, we live the challenge of receiving the word as a promise that God can be born into our flesh— even when that person-to-person presence feels so hard to grasp. I know it is hard, I know...

As we experience one another virtually, we can wonder how the gospel of John gave us words on a page as a promise of flesh dwelling among us and giving us light. Words can be spoken, read, heard, maybe even felt, as one who reads in Braille touches words and understands. But how can a word be made flesh? I don't think these scriptures are telling us to get a great big JESUS tattoo across our bodies, although if that's something you have I am very impressed.

On Wednesday night while I was staying with my sister and her family in Atlanta, a tornado watch flashed across our phone screens. We should have realized that 72 degrees on a day in late December isn't normal, even for Atlanta. Instead we just enjoyed the fact that we could eat together safely on the front screened in porch, including my dad and his wife, who had come for the day, and my brother and his girlfriend, Shea. After the meal and a nice visit, my dad and his wife headed home but my brother and Shea were going to stay over. Since no beds were left unclaimed in my sister's house, my brother and Shea decided they would camp out on the porch— that was just before the tornado announcements. They decided to stay on the porch anyway, with the camping gear they already had in their car. As Chris and I settled in for sleep in our dry air mattress, deeper in the house, we noticed the lightning show igniting the sky through the windows. The shadows of the trees danced each time the sky lit, and I tried to measure how far they were swaying back and forth with the wind: was that one foot? Three feet? Five feet? Were there enough trees to catch a tree unlucky enough to splinter in the wind, before it hit our roof? Most of all, I worried about my brother and Shea, out there on the porch... still, I figured that surely, they had moved inside at that point. As I watched the night flash between light and darkness, light and darkness, all while a rolling thunder drummed beneath, my eyes grew heavy and I slept.

In the morning, as soon as I heard him and Shea stirring, I ran in to check— as it turned out, they DID sleep on the porch, with all its visual and sound effects. Even though they only stayed a night, the house took on a different energy with my little brother in it: his smell, his jokes, the scratch of his beard when we embraced, the fact that with his height and build, he is one of the few people next to whom I can actually feel small. I could taste the biscuits and sausage gravy he cooked. While he was there, he knit my daughter a wool cap, fingers hooking needle and yarn while he unraveled stories; she wore that cap like a crown as she and her cousin chased

each other through the house. What had been so distant during this period of COVID, traversing from where I live in NJ to Asheville, where he lives, experienced through texts and phone calls and the occasional email, had become flesh, and dwelt among us. With my sister Alice there too, the three of us were a sibling trinity, finally brought together again.

John's gospel reports, "And the word was made flesh and lived among us." A closer reading of the Greek says, "The word became flesh and tabernacled among us." The Greek word *eskEnOsen* means TENT or TABERNACLE. To those familiar with the Hebrew scriptures, the Tabernacle evokes the early days of God traveling with the Israelites in the wilderness, where God's glory rested upon the Ark, and the ark was carried in a traveling tent they called the tabernacle. John wants to let us know that through his flesh, Jesus became the tabernacle for God. Like my brother filling out the house with his physical, bodily presence— in ways that no texts or emails during the days of COVID distancing could hold alone, in Jesus' body, we get to hear, and see, and feel, and taste, and smell what God's word is like when it is made flesh and lives among us.

While we were in Georgia, my sister's family and my family went on a zip-line tour through a forest of tall trees. It was peaceful being high in the trees and outside in nature, and since we all enjoy a little bit of thrill, not too scary. When we were done, our guide told us to be sure to check out the swinging bridge. Chris and I took Kai and her cousin there- the bridge stretched from cliff to cliff across a huge ravine, with a river snaking far below. When we got there, the kids almost dashed past a woman with her young child at the foot of the bridge, until Chris held them back, knowing that these two kids were going to make the bridge skip and swing while they gallivanted across. The mother said, "I am trying to get the courage to cross. I have been staying at the RV park here for a week, and this is the first time I have been able to even step onto the bridge." So we gently encouraged her to try, and our kids followed, and kindly put a careful grace into their steps so as not to jostle her. The mother slowly reached the middle. Then— perhaps she looked down at the crashing river hundreds of feet below her— she dashed across to the other side, leaving her child, who was slowly taking it step by step, board by board across.

My nephew then walked beside the little boy, who reached out and grabbed his hand. Their steps got bolder, until the younger boy, who was about 4— was wildly stomping and making the bridge swing toward the end of it as he and my nephew and Kai laughed confidently together.

To many of us, that gap between what is human and earthly, and what is holy and divine, seems wide. It seems un-passable. We might gaze upon it and think that it could never be crossed. John's gospel says that God gave to all who received the Word the power to become children of God. I wonder if that's because the bridge between what is holy and what is human is not so hard for children to cross. Perhaps that is why God, when deciding to put on human flesh, came to us as a child.

As we bridge one year to the next, I wonder what Jesus' presence can help you cross. Who have you been, and who might you become?

What in your life, or in our world, needs redeeming?

What relationships are stuck and need to be filled out, with grace and truth?

What is most frightening about being on that bridge between our earthly experience and our intimate communion with God? Is it taking the first step? Is it being in the middle, suspended in a not-there-yet sigh?

Is there someone who might walk with you to get there and make the journey less scary and maybe a little more fun? What keeps you from asking, from reaching out for a hand?

For the new year, Amanda Gorman offered words of hope in a poem, "New Day's Lyric"-- I will now share some of them:

May this be the day

We come together.

Mourning, we come to mend,

Withered, we come to weather,

Torn, we come to tend,

Battered, we come to better.

Tethered by this year of yearning,

We are learning

That though we weren't ready for this,

We have been readied by it.

We steadily vow that no matter

How we are weighed down,

We must always pave a way forward

Gorman's poem speaks to the reality of struggle in this world we know. Even so, her words insist with hope that something can be made new and good of it. Or, as in John's poetry, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it." The God whose word made both darkness and light, spinning the earth into orbit around the sun, knows that both darkness and light will rise and fall upon us. In that rising and setting, the word dawns on us, promising that, once again, we can be made new.