

The Word of Love that Changes Everything

Second Sunday of Christmas, January 3, 2016

Let's imagine that as this new year is beginning, we looked around us and thought "As I look back on 2015, it seems as though there were some remarkable things that happened. Some that were really good, some that were less than stellar and some that were downright tragic. I think I'd like to write a book that will tell future generations about the incredible contrasts in the world in 2015."

Every great book needs an opening line that will immediately grab the attention of the reader. Soooo... how about if we start OUR book off with a real zinger: "It was the best of times...it was the worst of times."

Now, in case you're not a fan of Charles Dickens, that's the opening line of his classic novel "A Tale of Two Cities," set in London and France just before and during the French Revolution. And opening a novel with that line would be a pretty outrageous act of self-importance and pomposity.

And...probably a death sentence for our book since it's not likely that ANY editor would read past the first line if we were obnoxious enough to steal such a famous line from such a distinguished writer.

The writer of the Gospel of John is an individual with the audacity to steal a classic line and use it to open **HIS** Gospel- his tale of Good News. And not only does he plagiarize another writer's work, he pulls it right out of the sacred scriptures.

Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created..."

John 1:1 “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.” NRSV

Everything was created through him;

nothing—not one thing!—

came into being without him. The Message

It's apparent that John does not believe that God has sent a special prophet or messenger- but that God has personally come into the world in the person of Jesus- who is the very embodiment of God's creative and life-giving power. In Genesis, God speaks God's Word, and creation comes into being. In John, God's creative and life-giving Word enters the world- and as Eugene Peterson translates it in the Message

The Word became flesh and blood,

and moved into the neighborhood.

While Matthew and Luke give us stories of Jesus conception, birth and childhood to reveal his humanity, John is much more concerned about sharing the news that God is doing a new thing. Creation is taking a whole new direction, and God has moved beyond being “out there somewhere” to a level of intimacy that is unprecedented in humanity's experiences of their Creator.

First of all, John wants us to recognize Jesus as God's "Word". In Greek he is the Logos: God's logic, God's reason. But even more, words are the very heart of communication. They are the most intimate and precise way we have to express thoughts and feelings.

The power of words can sometimes be most apparent when speech or written language is NOT possible; for example when trying to communicate with someone who speaks a different language; or when a friend or loved one has experienced a stroke that impairs speaking or understanding what is spoken.

My oldest son, Will, who just died this past October, was born with cerebral palsy. He was profoundly impaired physically, but had an extraordinary intellect. Unable to physically form words, he was trapped without the ability to speak until he was 8 years old, when he learned to use his first computerized speech device. After working with his teacher and speech therapist for several weeks, he was finally able to bring his communicator home for the first time and show us what he was learning.

When he got off the bus, I brought him into the house, set him up at the kitchen table and connected the head switch he used to activate the device. He was excited which increased his spasticity, so it took several minutes for him to accurately choose the symbols that would access the phrase he was so anxious to share as his first spoken words to me. And then came the magic moment: "I love you, Mom." And everything was changed.

THAT'S the exact same "magic moment" that John wants us to recognize in the coming of Jesus.

Over the centuries, humanity had been interpreting their relationship with God through laws and regulations, rituals and sacrifices designed to make themselves into creatures that somehow had to meet a certain standard before God would recognize or acknowledge them. All along, all God wanted humanity to know was that they were loved, and that God desired a close and intimate relationship with them.

Laws and rules weren't made to mold us into acceptable beings, but to protect us, to keep us from being hurt-and hurting others.

John understood that it was so important to God that we understand the message that God was willing to come and live among us, to become like us, in order to help us clearly see who God was. John says in verse 18:

¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.
(NRSV)

*No one has ever seen God,
not so much as a glimpse.
This one-of-a-kind God-Expression,
who exists at the very heart of the Father,
has made him plain as day. (The Message)*

It's why it's so important that we pay close attention to who Jesus is, what he says and what he does. Jesus is the very embodiment of who God is, God's spoken Word in the flesh to show us how much God loves us and how God wishes us to live.

Jesus birth marks the beginning of a new relationship of God with humanity- but it is the death and resurrection of Jesus that is the pivotal moment. The ancient world was filled with many so-called “gods” who demanded obedience and worship, who demanded sacrifice and used violence and death as weapons to demonstrate their power and to maintain control.

Jesus revealed a God to whom the only acceptable sacrifice was self-sacrifice; a God who ruled through forgiveness, mercy, and compassion; who refused to respond to violence with violence.

John’s Gospel announces a new beginning in humanity’s relationship with God; a new beginning in which God speaks to us and is revealed to us in a way far more intimate and far more eloquent than ever before.

And the very foundation of the relationship is this: In Jesus, God says “I love you” with unmistakable clarity: I love you enough to come and live among you, to become like you, to touch your lives, to heal the illnesses of your bodies and your souls, to forgive your sins, to die for you and to help you understand in no uncertain terms that I am a God of life.

In the beginning was the Word: God’s creative, life-giving Word. And God has never stopped creating. In this new year, God is continuing to create, and in the life and person of Jesus has given us a clear vision of who God is, and invites us to be embraced by a love that has the power to transform us and the world around us.

When we are struggling, when we wonder if God is really there, if God really notices, if God really cares, we have only to turn to Jesus, God’s Word revealed to us, to hear clearly the precious words:” I love you”...and in that moment, everything is changed.