



Sticks and Stones

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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John 1:1-14

December 18, 2016

I learned the rhyme as a child, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” As near as I can tell, the first time this rhyme appeared in print was 1862, although it was likely in wide circulation much earlier. This rhyme was hauled out when I was a child whenever someone threatened me with menacing words.

We need to put this fable to bed once and for all. Words hurt every bit as much as sticks and stones. Words may not break bones, but they can surely break hearts. We’re not immune to insults. We can be deeply wounded by malicious words; even verbal abuse. Bullying has become a serious social problem.

There’s no support for this “sticks and stones” adage in Scripture. “The tongue has the power of life and death,” we read in Proverbs 18:21. Words have power. They can heal and hurt. They have the power of life and death. Today’s sermon is all about the power of one Word.

Our focus this Advent is the coming of Jesus in the four gospels. Matthew and Luke recount the well-worn Christmas story of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. Where would we be without the magical story of the shepherds, wise men and the angels who sang “Glory to God in the highest.” Mark skips over this birth narrative entirely. Instead, he opens with Jesus’ baptism as a signature event.

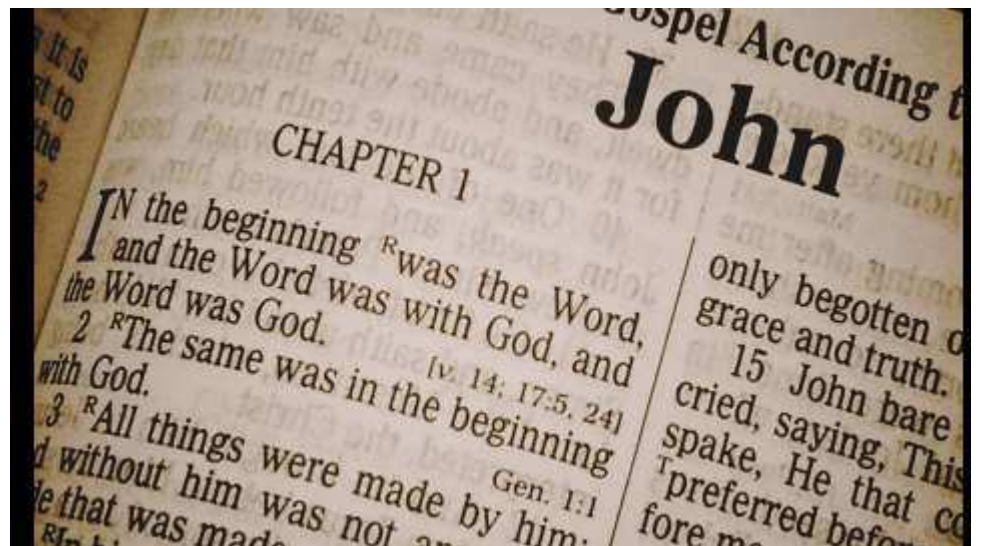


John’s gospel takes us back to the beginning. Jesus’ coming is coupled with creation itself. John wrote his gospel at the end of the first century, after the other three gospels were written. The scrap of papyrus on your screen is

the oldest historical link we have to the New Testament. It was found in 1920 among some discarded papers in Egypt. Archeologists date it to 125AD. It's the account of Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate that is told for us in John 18.

John opens his gospel with the words, "In the beginning." This ought to be a dead giveaway to the way the Bible begins. We read in Genesis, "*In the beginning* God created the heavens and the earth" (1:1).

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (1:1). This Word exists in the closest possible relationship with God. This word, in fact, was God.



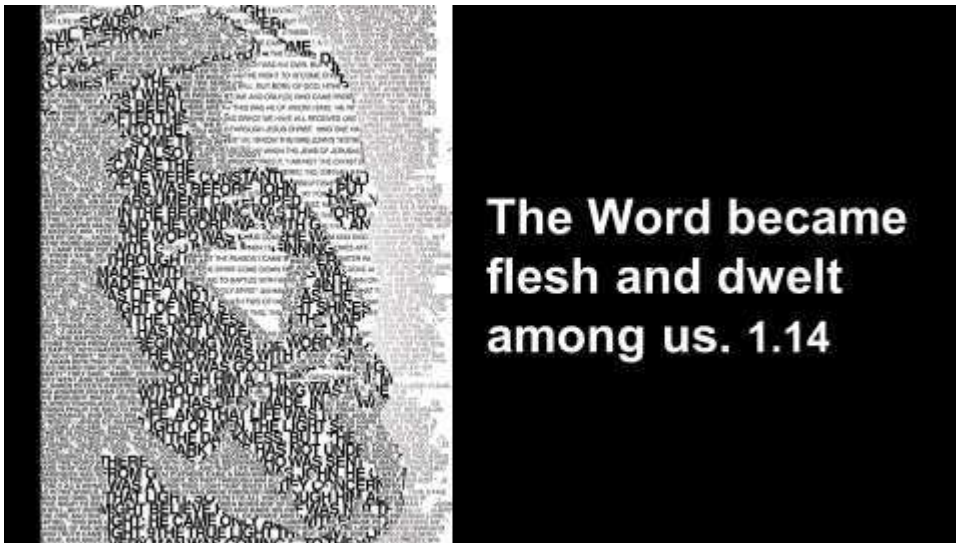
The term *word* in the original Greek is *logos*. It's a term that would have been well-known to both Jews and Greeks alike.

To the Greeks, *logos* was a word taken from Greek philosophy. It was the all-pervasive reason or rational principle that governs the universe. It's the force or energy that puts everything into motion. Logos was detached. It was not a personal pronoun. Logos was an "it." Logos was impersonal and unknowing.

To the Jews, *logos* was a term referring to God's self-expression. God's very Word accomplishes God's work in the world. Let me take you back to the first chapter of Genesis. When God said, "Let there be light, there was

light” (1:3). God speaks everything into existence, water and sky, earth and heaven, land animals and sea creatures (1:3, 9, 11, 14, 24, 26).

John tells us, in verses 4-5, that this Word brings light and life to people. John the Baptist’s role, in verses 6-8, is to bear witness to this light coming into the world. But sad to say (verses 10-13), many of God’s people don’t welcome this light into their lives.



Verse 14 functions as John’s one sentence clincher: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” It’s obvious who John

is writing about now. Although Jesus is not mentioned by name until verse 17, he’s clearly the Word made flesh. The Greek word used for flesh, *sarx* is a vivid, almost shocking term. This eternal Word became flesh and blood. The Greek word for *dwelt* literally means to *pitch one’s tent* or to *tabernacle*. In the Old Testament, God would meet his people in the tabernacle in the wilderness. The tabernacle represented God’s localized presence. In Jesus Christ, God pitches His tent with us. I like Eugene Peterson’s translation of this verse in *The Message*, “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.”

There are two things in John’s gospel I want you to see about Jesus’ coming. First, John is writing Jesus’ story in obvious parallel to the creation story. God speaks creation into existence through His Word. In John’s gospel, God speaks a new chapter of salvation history into existence through Jesus Christ.

My second point follows the first. John tells us something vitally important about Jesus from the outset. Jesus is not a created being. The fatal mistake groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons make is that they interpret Jesus' birth as his beginning. John tells us that "All things came into being through him. Without him, not one thing came into being" (1:3). Jesus doesn't come into existence at Christmas. He is eternal. Rather, Jesus becomes human at Christmas.

Last Sunday, our choir sang the Christmas portion of Handel's Messiah. My job was to provide commentary on this sacred work of music. I became fascinated with its backstory. I still am, given that I'm still talking about it a week later.

Handel was a starving artist in 1741. He had already gone through bankruptcy and was fighting for his life to stay out of debtor's prison. One day, his friend Charles Jennens paid him a visit. Jennens had already compiled Bible verses to tell the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. He wanted Handel to put these Biblical texts to music. Handel said it would take about a year to complete. He then proceeded to write it in 24 days—260 pages of music in 24 days.

Jennens put these Scriptures together to challenge a popular movement in his day that was sweeping across England called Deism. Deists believed God created the world and allowed it to run without divine interference; much like a watchmaker who wound a watch and let it wind down. Deists discounted miracles and denied

DEISM

**God doesn't intervene
Miracles cannot happen
Jesus is not divine**

Jesus' divinity. They rejected any notion of a personal God. Jennens' brother Robert took his own life after denying his Christian faith following a lengthy correspondence with a well-known deist. Most assuredly that had something to do with it.

THEISM

God intervenes
Miracles can & do happen
Jesus is divine

Handel and Jennens were theists. They believed God was intimately involved in human life. Miracles can and do happen. They took John at his word, that Jesus is the divine Word made flesh. We, likewise, are theists in the Christian tradition. Jesus is God's ultimate act of self-expression.

He is God come near.

But here's the rub as I see it. There are times in our lives when God seems removed and far away. If God has come near, why does God seem distant at times? This brings us to the so-what moment. So what does this sermon have to do with my life? Three things come to mind.

First so-what: If you are feeling as though God seems very far away, you are in good company. Take King David, whom the Bible calls "The man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). I want you to notice what David asks God in prayer. Here are but a few examples. "Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (10:1). "How long will you hide yourself from me?" (13:1). "Why have you forsaken me?" (22:1). "Has God forgotten to be generous?" (77:9).

We urge you to read and pray the Psalms because these prayers give voice to our feelings of estrangement. When we feel distant from God, we need to know that we are not alone. We draw strength from each other. That's the reason we come together, to encourage each other in dry spells.

Second so-what: Things are not always what they seem. God's seeming absence is not a true absence. God is always present to us, even when God seems very far away.

Maybe you have heard of the phrase "helicopter parents." In this post 9/11 world, overprotective parents are becoming increasingly common. Helicopter parents hover over their children and swoop down at the first sign of trouble.

But *letting go* is an essential part of parenting. If we refuse to let go of our children, we can actually smother them and stunt their growth. Part of the maturation process for both parent and child is learning to let go.

There are times when God pulls back from us to help us grow. St. John of the Cross coined a phrase in one of his poems to describe this growing process. He called it the "Dark night of the Soul." God sometimes pulls back on comfort so we will learn to trust. I grow the most about faith when I struggle to remain faithful. God's seeming absence is not a true absence. It is only a *seeming* absence.

Third so-what: Trust God, regardless of how you feel. God created us with healthy emotions. They are a wonderful, God-given part of our lives. But feelings are also fickle. They can change on a whim. Sometimes they play tricks on us. They don't always give us an accurate gauge of what is happening. Feeling in love doesn't always translate into being in love. Love is more than a feeling, you know.



**Things are
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Don't trust your emotions; trust God's good promises for your life. One of the most referenced promises from Scripture that Christians often quote is, "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not to harm you, plans to give you a future filled with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). So, what's the problem? Why don't we trust God for this promise? Fear and anxiety rob our hearts, that's why. They take us like an elevator all the way down to the bottom floor of despair.

John's gospel tells us that God comes near in Jesus Christ. Even when God seems very far away, God comes near. Trust God's promises, regardless of how you feel. The Word becomes flesh. God comes near in Jesus Christ to save and redeem.

Trust God.