

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 1:1-18

“In the Beginning”

Famous British Bishop, Theologian and author, and quite a wonderful man as well, his name is N. T. Wright and he wrote about the Gospel of John: “this book is like a pool that’s safe for a child to paddle in but deep enough for an elephant to swim in. But, though it’s imposing in its structure and ideas, it’s not meant to scare you off. It makes you welcome.” Millions of people have found that, as they start to examine this book, the “Friend above all friends” is coming out to meet them. Picture, if you will, an image that this book has a long driveway, that takes you off the main road, showing something about the place you’re heading toward before you even get there. The beginning of the Gospel of John tells us so much about what is ahead before we even get to the main part. It is my favorite book in the Bible, in all of the New Testament.

It’s almost as though this long driveway has large signs with pictures of the marvelous rooms that you will find in the house and the people you were going to meet there. This Gospel reading is important at Christmas time even though it isn’t only about the birth of Jesus Christ, but about everything He was, and is, and did. The more that we explore the Gospel of John, the more we’ll discover what a complete introduction John 1:1-18 is. Continuing with the image of the driveway – it is a long driveway – and if you are from Georgia – it is a dirt road -the gate is capped by the unforgettable opening words: ‘*In the beginning was the Word.*’ Right away it has a very familiar ring to it. ‘*In the beginning*’ –let’s face it – anyone who has ever opened a Bible recognizes this as being just like the start of the first book of the Torah, the first book of the Bible, the Book of Genesis: ‘*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*’ God, through the Apostle John, wants us to see his book as the story of God and the world, and is much bigger than just the story of one person in one place and one time. This book is about the Creator God acting in a very new way within His much-loved creation. It is about the way in which the long story which began in Genesis and continued up until these events, reached the culmination that God had always intended, and He will do this through ‘*the Word*’.

In Genesis 1, the high point of creation is the sixth day – when God created humanity in His image. In John 1, the high point is the arrival of a human being, the ‘Word’ become ‘flesh’. When you think about speaking a word, it is, in a sense, a part of you. It’s a breath that comes from inside you, making the noise that you give it with your throat, your mouth and your tongue. When that word is heard, we hope they hear it just as you intended. ‘But you said...’, people might comment, if our actions don’t match up to our words. We are responsible for the words we say, and when you think about it our words have a life which is independent of us. When people hear them, words can change the way they think and live. Think of the words ‘I love you’; or, ‘C’mon, it’s time to go; or, the infamous - ‘You’re fired’. What do you think of when you hear “you’re fired?” I know... that old TV show with that old President! When you hear the words “I can’t believe he did that” – did you hear that this morning? I left just before the readings and I said into the mic “I can’t believe he did that.” I want to know if you heard it? I did it purposely because I wanted to see if you caught it. No one did anything – and I just threw it out there because I would be speaking about words. Each of these words open up new situations and people react or act according to them. The words remain in their

memory and go on affecting them. We should watch what we say and who we say it to. Simply put, our words carry weight and consequences – good or bad.

In the Old Testament, God acts by means of His ‘*Word*’. What He says, happens—in Genesis. ‘*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made*’ says Psalm 33:6. God’s Word is the one thing that will last, even though people and plants wither and die. “*The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.*” (Isaiah 40:7–8) God’s Word will go out of his mouth and bring life, healing and hope to Israel and the whole creation. (Isaiah 55:10–11)

When I attended Trinity School for Ministry, my seminary from 2002 until 2005 – I almost immediately was confronted with people talking about the ‘Logos.’ Here I was new to seminary, after living in Jacksonville for nine years, and then moving my family to Pittsburgh for three – and I was one of the oldest people in my class. All of these kids are walking around talking about the “logos” and I had to do some checking. It is a Greek word for ‘Word’ and I never knew up to that point that the language of the New Testament was Greek, the written word of that time period. In the first century, the ‘Logos’ or Word of God, - the principle of divine reason and creative order, was identified in John’s Gospel with the second person of the Trinity incarnate, in Jesus Christ. That’s part of what lies behind John’s choice of ‘Word’ here, as a way of telling all of us who Jesus really is. John probably expects some readers to see about Jesus, what some writers had said about ‘Wisdom’ in the Old Testament.

In the time of Jesus, many Hebrew scholars discussed, ‘how can the one true God be both different from the world and active within the world?’ Some had already combined them within the belief that the one true God had promised to place His own ‘Presence’ within the Temple in Jerusalem. Others saw them enshrined in the Jewish law, the Torah. All of this, comes together when John writes of God’s ‘Word.’ John is saying to all of the thinkers that the Word isn’t an abstract principle, it’s a Person - and I’m going to introduce you to him. Listen to verses 1, 2, and 18: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*” Then verse 18 – “*No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only,, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*” This image that we are given of the ‘Word’ - is intimately close to God. John goes where no one ever went before – because Jesus that makes him do it; verse 14 says that “*the Word became flesh*” – He became human, became one of us. He came as a baby – dependent on others – if HE wanted anything He had to cry like any other baby. Mom had to change Him – and He became, in fact, the human being we know as Jesus of Nazareth, whose birth we just celebrated on Christmas.

The theme and purpose of the Gospel of John is pretty clear: if you want to know who the true God is, take a long and hard look at one person - Jesus. The one that we know as Jesus is identical, is the ‘Logos’ the ‘Word’ who was there from the very start, the ‘Word’ through whom all things were made, the One who contained and contains life and light. The ‘Word’ challenged the darkness before creation and now challenges the darkness still that is found within the

creation itself. The 'Word' is bringing into being the new creation, in which God says once more, *'Let there be light!'*

- But when God sends His 'Word' into the world, the world pretends it doesn't recognize Him.
- When God sends the 'Word' specifically to Israel, 'the chosen people' don't recognize Him. Jesus comes to God's people, and God's people do what the rest of the world do: they prefer darkness to light.

It is because of humanity's preference that new grace is needed, on top of the grace already given in the Law given to Moses, *"From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.* (John 1:16) Grace is something that we don't ask for – and we don't deserve – but He gives it to us anyway. The Law points people in the right direction, but, like Moses himself, it doesn't take us to the promised land. For that, you need the grace and truth that comes only through Jesus the Messiah, the son of God, who said on the night before He died *"I Am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through Me."* (John 14:6)

You know what I find exciting? It is that in this first part of John's Gospel - it is that we're in it too: Listen to verses 12 and 13 *"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."* That means anyone at all, way back then and right now. You don't have to be born into a particular family or part of the world. God wants people from everywhere to be born in a new way, born into His family which He began through Jesus and which has since spread through the world. Anyone, and I mean anyone can become a 'child of God', which goes beyond the fact that all humans are special in God's sight. Something can happen to people in this life which causes them to become new people, or a Paul says, *"a new creation, people who (as verse 12 says) 'believed in his name'.*

Throughout John's Gospel, we can see, if you make it a resolution in the New Year to read it, going forward into the great building to which this driveway has led us, the great drama of God and the world, of Jesus and Israel, of the 'Word' who reveals the glory of the unseen God –that this is for everyone, not just a chosen few, but you and I included. As we make our way up this driveway towards the main building, a figure comes into view. He turns and looks, but points us to the house. Verses 19 and 20 tell us that he isn't the man that we want, but his job is to point us to him. *"Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ. " He is 'giving evidence about the light'. If we are to meet the Word of God, we can start by reading the Gospel of John – and start right *"In the beginning."**