

*“The Word and God in the Beginning Creating Life and Light”*

Today’s text is frequently used for Christmas Eve Candlelight Worship Celebrations, so there is a good possibility most of us have either read it or heard it before. It is very tempting to view the entire Prologue for the Gospel of John in Chapter 1:1-14 as a Scripture, which has very beautiful imagery but also an extremely mysterious and incomprehensible meaning. Many academicians believe it is from a pre-existing and perhaps gnostic hymn, which the author of the gospel modified to use as the start of his story about Jesus Christ. Since they conclude it was not original to the Gospel of John, they also argue it is proof of the lack of historicity in this specific gospel. These professional studiers of the Scriptures further claim today’s Reading demonstrates the Gospel of John, unlike the other New Testament gospels, declares Jesus is God – a much higher Christology than the one portrayed in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Their conclusion is the Gospel of John is outside the historical ballpark of Jesus and not representative of his theology. I agree with the description of the prologue being a beautiful proclamation of the incarnation of God in the flesh. However, the conclusions, which academicians claim, about today’s Reading, about the entire Prologue of Chapter 1:1-14, and about the whole nature of the Gospel of John are not necessarily true nor accurate.

Today we enter the Church Liturgical Season of Advent, which prepares us for our Christmas Celebration about how God came to us in the flesh through the birth of God’s Own Son. This sermon examines the meaning of the pre-existent relationship between Jesus and our Divine Parent, both for them and for us.

Let’s consider first, the issues related to the Prologue found in John 1:1-14. If it was a pre-existing hymn, it was either authored by someone closely associated with the gospel writer or the author of John so re-worked the original that it is no longer recoverable. My conclusion on this is based on the fact much of John 1:1-14 relates directly to many parts of the gospel. Direct connections in our Reading today to important elements of Jesus’ message and purpose are found, for example, in this series of Jesus’ statements about the “Light”, such as when **Jesus revealed to Nicodemus that he is the “Light”, in John 3:19-21, “This is how the judgment works: the Light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the Light, because their deeds are evil. Those who do evil things hate the Light and will not come to the Light, because they do not want their evil deeds to be shown up. But those who do what is true come to the Light in order that the Light may show that what they did was in obedience to God.”**

Later, when confronting the Pharisees in **John 8:12, Jesus said to them, “I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the Light of Life and will never walk in darkness.”**

Another example, was when Jesus just prior to healing a blind man, discussed with his disciples why a man was born blind, **Jesus said in John 9:5 “While I am in the world, I am the Light for the world.”** Then Jesus healed the man!

When cryptically explaining to his disciples how he would raise Lazarus from the dead, **Jesus said in John 11:10-11, “A day has twelve hours, doesn’t it? So whoever walks in broad daylight does not stumble, for he sees the light of this world. But if he walks during the night he stumbles, because he has no Light. Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I will go and wake him up.”**

After Jesus learned the Greeks wanted to see him, he prayed aloud to the Divine Parent to fulfill his purpose, and God answered with a voice from heaven. The crowd who heard it wondered what it meant and asked him. **Jesus explained, in John 12:35-36, “The Light will be among you a little longer. Continue on your way while you have the Light, so that the darkness will not come upon you; for the one who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Believe in the Light, then, while you have it, so that you will be the people of the Light.”**

These examples about the importance of Jesus being the Light are only but a few of the multitude of connections between what is written in John 1:1-14, especially, John 1:1-5, and the rest of the Gospel of John. The Prologue is a brief encapsulation of the message of the Jesus’ gospel in John. The author did not just take someone else’s beautiful ancient hymn and plug it in at the beginning of his gospel. Instead, the Prologue is the writer’s summation of what God did through Jesus and how the Son of God described his identity and purpose. **It is essential to understanding the whole of what Jesus said and did, as recorded in the Gospel of John.**

Let’s specifically examine the five verses of today’s Scripture. **John 1:1-2 reads, “In the beginning the Word already existed; the Word was with God, and the Word was God. From the very beginning the Word was with God.”** If those words remind you of the ones from the Old Testament book, Genesis, then you have begun to process how the Gospel of John reveals the **pre-existing relationship between the Creator – Divine Parent and God’s Son – Jesus the Christ or Messiah.** Intentionally relating the summation of the relationship between God and Jesus with God’s work of Creation as described in Genesis is what John was all about in its Prologue of John 1:1-14. Making such a claim about the connection between the Creator and **“the Word”** would have been seen by many of the Jewish Christians as quite appropriate.

The pre-existence of Jesus was reaffirmed in John 1:15 and 8:56-58. **John 1:15 states, “John spoke about him. He cried out, ‘This is the one I was talking about when I said, ‘He comes after me, but he is greater than I am, because he existed before I was born.’”** The words of the Baptizer showed Jesus was greater than his cousin, John, because he existed before John was even born. The Baptist was not saying Jesus was born before himself, for John was actually born first. **The gospel writer wants us to understand Jesus’ essence existed with God from before Creation.** Jesus did not merely base his claim to a special relationship with our Divine Parent on his miracles. **Indeed, in 8:58 Jesus told some of his critics, “I am telling you the truth. Before Abraham was born, I Am.”**

The Text describes *“the Word”* much as the way Jewish Wisdom Literature connects Sophia (Wisdom) and the Creator. Additionally, **Dr. Richard A. Burrige**, an important scholar, has done a close examination of the Prologue of the Gospel of John, including how it was perceived by Jews during the time of the early Church. You may recall my previously mentioning I had heard Dr. Burrige make a presentation about the Gospel of John in which he demonstrated it would have been perceived as a biographical and historical account about Jesus. He presented that paper at an Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature about 10 years ago. I also mentioned Dr. Burrige has a more recent book, which is especially pertinent to our examination of the Prologue of the Gospel of John. Beginning on page 240 of his book published in 2006, which is titled, **The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple**, Burrige wrote: “Any Jewish reader of the Gospel would at once recognize the opening verses as a retelling or interpretation of the beginning of the Genesis creation narrative (Gen. 1:1-4).” By the way, it was used in today’s Call To Worship. Burrige continued, “The opening words (‘In the beginning’) are identical with the opening word(s) of Genesis, and the impression of the retelling of Genesis would be furthered by the repetition of these words in verse 2, the reference to the creation of all things by the Word in verse 3, and the key words ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ in verses 4-5 (cf. Gen. 1:3-5). Retellings or interpretation of the Genesis creation narrative are common in Jewish literature of this period. Some of them were especially concerned with the monotheistic message that YHWH was the sole Creator of all things, who designed and accomplished his creation entirely by himself. In fact, it was a key element in the common Jewish understanding of God’s unique identity that he alone was the Creator of all things. This was perhaps the simplest way of making, as Jewish monotheism required, an absolute distinction between God and all other reality. God alone is Creator of all else; all other things were created by God.”

Dr. Burrige elaborated, “John 1:3 echoes very emphatically this monotheistic motif: *‘All things came into being through it [the Word], and without it not one thing came into being.’*” Burrige stated, “I translate the pronoun as ‘it’ rather than ‘him’ because at this stage of the prologue there has been no clear indication that the Word is to be understood as a personal agent, though this emerges in the course of the prologue. That all things were created by God through the instrumentality of his Word is very commonly said in Jewish statements about the creation (beginning with Ps. 33:6). It is simply a concise expression of the fact that in the Genesis creation account each act of creation is effected by God speaking. Although Genesis 1 itself does not use the term ‘word,’ it is easily understood as saying that all things were created by God’s Word. When John uses the term *‘Word’* in the opening verses of his prologue, he means simply this: the divine Word that all Jews, on the basis of Genesis, understood to have been active in the creation of all things. Moreover, there was no question of this Word’s being something or someone created.” **“As God’s own word, it was intrinsic to God’s own unique identity.”** “To say that all things were created by the Word did not compromise the belief that God alone was Creator of all things, since his Word belonged to his own identity. In fact, to say as John does that all things came into being through the Word is precisely to categorize the Word as belonging to the identity of God rather than to the creation.”

The second part of today’s Reading describes the functioning of the relationship between the Creator – Divine Parent and the Word – Son of God. In John 1:1-14 – the Prologue, the gospel author summarizes important aspects of what and why God sent Jesus Christ to do in human history. The gospel writer stated in vs. 3-5, ***“Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him. The Word was the source of Life, and this Life brought Light to people. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.”*** The first 3 verses of today’s Reading emphasize how the ***“Word”*** (Logos) out of its pre-existing relationship with God was instrumental in creating.

This understanding of Jesus the Christ – the Son of God having been in a pre-existing relationship with God was, contrary to the beliefs of skeptics, expressed in other New Testament books. **Just a few examples of assuming the pre-existent relationship of Jesus with God are in the Apostle Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians 8:4-6; Colossians 1:15-19; Hebrews 1:1-3 and 11:3; 2 Timothy 1:8-10; and 1 John 1:1-4.**

The Prologue also says to the ***“Word”*** (which comes in the flesh as Jesus) is the means through which ***“Life”*** and ***“Light”*** were brought into existence. This is an important claim because it later helps explain the irony of how the Creation reacted to the Word made flesh. Specifically, the gospel’s testimony is this - the ***“Word was the source of Life”***. Along with this life, the ***“Word”*** or ***“Logos”*** brought Light to human beings. This gift of Light was given long before Jesus was born as a human. Yet, the inference is clear that in Jesus the **Light was personified and came with great revealing of the Truth – revealing how God’s Love welcomes us into the special relationship with our Divine Parent and *“the Word”* – Jesus the Son of God.** Indeed, the testimony, ***“the darkness has never put it out”*** remains part of the message of Christians today.

This Truth reminds us, we are agents of our Savior in the ongoing battle between the Light and the darkness. **Unfortunately, a temptation is to believe one’s personal beliefs should be imposed on all other Christians and non-Christians. Ironically, when we give in to this temptation, we align ourselves with darkness.** We are called to honor how the Light has shined through the Law of the Hebrews and in other ways through different cultures. Instead of imposing our enlightened views on others, we are called to welcome the good deeds motivated by other expressions of the Light.

Trusting the Word has been in a special relationship with the Divine Parent since before Creation, we celebrate how **God has worked through the *“Logos”* to bring about Creation, Life and Light.** We are called to be agents of Christ’s Light by fostering self-giving love, the welfare of others and mutual respect. Over the years, the UCC has run TV ads emphasizing our welcoming of all people. **We do well when we are agents of such Light.** Remembering, the essence of Jesus is the pre-existent ***“Word”*** helps us rejoice in the close and special relationship God and our Lord had from the beginning and offer for us in God’s Eternal Kingdom. Amen.