

λογος
John 1:1-18
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At my previous church, I took the youth to visit our homebound members once a month on Wednesday nights. I believe this was actually the brainchild of Steve Sumerel, who was one of my youth parents at the time and who volunteered with the youth on Sunday nights. We would load into the church vans and travel to various places around town where we could check in with our older members, something that was as beneficial for our youth as it was for our homebound.

One night, we all went to Springmoor to visit with a large contingency from our congregation who lived there. Two vans worth of students split into groups of three or four and each went to visit several different members. Unfortunately, even though we'd called ahead and made appointments with our residents, we somehow didn't time this particularly well, and many of them weren't in their rooms because they were eating or playing cards or singing at the piano or watching TV in the main room. Springmoor is a hopping place at 6:00 on a Wednesday. Our youth and their chaperones ended up wandering the halls, looking for someone to visit.

One way or another, we all ended up at the same place: kneeling at the feet of First Baptist's then-pastor emeritus, Dr. John Lewis. Dr. Lewis served as the pastor at FBC for thirty years, shepherding the church through some remarkably turbulent eras. He also taught at Meredith for many of those years, impacting the lives of countless students and worshipers through the classroom and the pulpit.

At the end of his life, Dr. Lewis lived at Springmoor. Although his health had declined in many ways, landing him in a wheelchair, his mind was still sharp. He did not stray far from his room, but on this evening, he had wheeled out of the door and was lingering at its threshold when one group from our church located him. Then another group came by and joined in, then another, and eventually the entire two vans reassembled and cohered there at this door. So it was that 25 teenagers and their leaders all ended up sitting cross-legged like preschoolers, trying hard not to block the hallway of Springmoor while a soft-spoken man in a wheelchair answered questions.

It was the days before people used their phones to video everything that happened, so we have no record of the visit, and I unfortunately remember only one of the questions we asked him, which was, "What is your favorite scripture?" Dr. Lewis quickly and assertively responded, "The first chapter of John." I remember how he answered even more than what he answered—he spoke with the confidence of one who had studied the Bible thoroughly and comprehensively and who knew, without a doubt, that he would never find anything that struck him as powerfully and poetically as the first chapter of John.

It was a good choice. These are verses that show up engraved in jewelry, that are recited to offer comfort, that somehow ground those who are wandering and uplift those who are too grounded; they have "an almost magical quality."¹ They are words that arrest and convict a

¹ Madsen, Norman P. (1988) "John," *Basic Bible Commentary*. Abingdon, 13.

reader, captivating and enrapturing with simple images that convey complex ideas. Reading the first chapter of John makes one think that the key to understanding Jesus—to really making sense of this bizarre idea that God took human form and lived among us—lies somewhere in these verses. My New Testament professor used to say that the prologue to John was the entire gospel in half a chapter.

Because of this, it is an intimidating passage to preach from. I've cringed at sermons that were ostensibly built on the prologue of John, watching the preacher descend into some disastrous results. Likewise, the commentaries that I typically consult shy away from the text just a little, afraid to try to analyze or pick apart these verses too much. If these verses are indeed the key to understanding Jesus, then it makes sense to tread lightly.

One way to do that, to tread lightly through this scripture, is to focus on just a word or two. There is so much meaning in each word or phrase in this passage, and trying to make sense of it all in twenty minutes is a bit of a fool's errand in the first place. Just as this scripture is key to understanding all of John and therefore all of Jesus, there are a few crucial words in the scripture that can open up the whole passage.

There are two different places where it makes sense to enter the prologue of John, two vivid points of focus that incite a particular contemplative consideration. One is a dichotomy, the same dichotomy that we've explored throughout the past several weeks, the pairing of darkness and light. My New Testament professor also used to say that the Johannine prologue is "a drama of light and darkness."

It's a drama because it is clear in these verses that the Light and the Darkness are at odds with one another. You've heard me say before that I really like the idea of a "both/and" Jesus, a Jesus who incorporates aspects of our world that feel like they shouldn't go together. That is *not* what's happening here...Jesus is clearly identified as the Light, the Darkness is something else, and the Darkness and the Light do not overlap.

This conflict is especially pronounced in verse five, which reads "the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not *understood* it" or, depending on your translation, "and the darkness did not *overcome* it." Actually, depending on your translation, you might encounter any number of verbs there, from "comprehend" to "extinguish" to "overpowered," so that's probably one spot that's worth lingering over a little longer.

First, it's important to point out that none of the translations suggest that the light and the darkness coexist happily. This is not a situation where the Greek is so obscure that we don't have any idea what the word means; it is clear that the light and the darkness are conflicted with one another, and the only question is what that conflict looks like exactly.

Most of our translations fall into two camps. One of these suggests a physical conflict, using words like "overcome," "overpowered," and "extinguished." If we go with this reading, the idea is that the light and the darkness are physically combative, trading blows with one another, trying to undercut and undo the other. This is a war, and light is the victor.

The other camp translates the Greek as "understood" or "comprehend," and it suggests less of a war and more of a debate. The light and the darkness are still at odds with one another, but it's a less violent competition. Again, the light is victorious, but in this case, the light wins because it is so elusive, constantly mystifying the darkness.

In the first case, Jesus-as-light is powerful, taking over the darkness dominantly and wiping it out. In the second case, Jesus-as-light is playful, mysterious, taking over the darkness by stealthier means.

Perhaps the best word in an English translation is something like “grasp.”² Sometimes we grasp things physically, dominantly, holding them tight in our hands until they submit. Sometimes we grasp things mentally, wrapping our brains instead of our fingers around them. The word “grasp” connotes both of these...so when the darkness fails to “grasp” the light, it suggests that the light is victorious in ways that are both elusive and dominant, both powerful and playful, both stealthy and robust.

This is not a word chosen by accident. The light that shines in the darkness has, according to John, been around since the beginning. It has seeped into the cracks of our lives, illuminated but not eliminated the gloom and the grey. In that way, the light has been easy to overlook and hard to appreciate, to perceive, hard to comprehend. But the light is coming in a new way, in the form of the Jesus we read about in the gospels, and that form will be impossible to ignore. That will be a flesh-and-blood human being, one that intimidates kings as a baby and sparks a revolution. The darkness will still not comprehend, and it will also now be completely overcome. The darkness will not grasp the light.

Like “grasp,” the dichotomy of darkness and light sets up several other tensions that will remain prevalent throughout the gospel of John (and, I think, throughout the entire Christian experience). The light and the darkness represent good and evil, understanding and ignorance, prominence and forgotten-ness. All of these themes will be critical to understanding the gospel of John and to grasping Jesus himself.

That is a lot to pack into one dichotomy, perhaps even into one word...and it’s not even the most loaded word in the prologue of John.

Arguably the most loaded word in these verses is the Greek word *λογος* (logos), the word we translate as “word.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” If you ever really want to confuse someone by throwing scripture at them, that’s not a bad verse to throw. It sounds a little like it fell out of an Abbott and Costello routine.

λογος is a remarkably powerful word, John’s first description of Jesus. Unlike the synoptic gospels, the author here chooses to describe Jesus not as a newborn human but rather as ethereally as possible. Upon a first reading, all we know about Jesus from this verse is that he is both with God and is God, and he’s been around since the beginning but not in any way we are equipped to understand.

But upon subsequent readings, there is more about the word *λογος* that, pardon the pun, comes to light. Again, this is a remarkably powerful word, one that manages to convey multiple meanings with just five letters.³

² Jenkins, Phillip. (2018) “Grasped by Darkness,” *The Anxious Bench*. Retrieved 29 December 2021. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2018/01/grasped-by-darkness/>

³ Much of the analysis of this word comes from my New Testament Class and the teaching of Dr. Diane Lipsett.

λογος, being a Greek word, has a Hellenistic connotation that we would associate with reason and study. This is the word we get “logic” from, and the word that forms the “-ology” root that is so pervasive in college course catalogs. It is, in this way, a pretty sterile word, one that may remind us more of Dr. Spock than of Jesus the good shepherd. But we are told, in John, that this is part of who Jesus is, and this is part of how Jesus overpowers the darkness of our world.

It is also a word with Hebraic allusions. As Hebrew texts were translated into Greek, λογος became affiliated with the wisdom tradition, the poetry of Psalms and the beauty of the Song of Solomon and the very essence of the Hebrew Scriptures. Its usage here suggests that Jesus’ coming is also part of these traditions. The understanding of λογος in these circles is not straightforward, emotionless logic but rather the graceful dance of wisdom.

λογος, Jesus, “The Word,” is both of these, both logic and wisdom, both rationality and grace. He is the entire essence of God, an essence so expansive that he is indeed of God and with God.

To put it another way: perhaps you are wondering why your esoteric pastor insisted on putting his sermon title in Greek in today’s bulletin.⁴ Part of it, I’ll admit, is that the Greek word itself matters here...but part of it was that when I wrote the word in English, it looked like “logos.” That is, it looked like I was preaching a sermon on the images that we use to represent our businesses and products and sports teams.

And, I guess, in a way I have been. A logo is an image that conveys the essence of a larger entity in ways that descriptions alone cannot. It speaks logically and emotionally, striking at our hearts and our minds. A good logo makes a business understood to all who encounter it, understood with feeling and with logic, grasped in all ways that it can be grasped.

A good logo becomes the business itself—McDonald’s is the Golden Arches, and Disney is The Mouse. This is how the Word is God, and the Word is also with God. When John writes that Jesus is the λογος, he tells us that Jesus is the way by which God will be understood, comprehensively, completely, available for all.

The darkness did not grasp the light...but we can, with heart and with head, because that is why the light, The Word, is coming to us. To be understood, not by darkness, but by humanity. By *all* of humanity.

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Sometimes we get just one image to try to explain what our faith means or who this Jesus character really is. “Light and darkness” isn’t a bad image to go with when that happens. There is a reason why we have spent the past several weeks focusing on the lights that show up in our Christmas scriptures.

Sometimes we get just one word. I would almost never choose the word “word” to be that one word, but John does, and he makes that a remarkably effective choice. But reading this scripture here at the beginning of the year, I can’t help but wonder what words each of us might choose to convey what our faith is, to tell others who we are.

⁴ That’s certainly what Lois was wondering when I complicated our formatting during a holiday week.

Last fall, I preached a sermon on the word “ridge,” noting that a ridge is a special kind of mountain peak that takes in the view from both sides. That’s a good word for our church, for what church is trying to do. We’ve explored several other words that might carry the load of the church: “covenant,” “call,” “refuge,” “hope,” “faith,” “love,” “light.” One of the commentaries I consult also suggested “compassion,” “justice,” “generosity,” “patience,” “hospitality,” “prayer,” “prophetic,” and “service.”⁵ Those are all good words for what church is trying to do.

Any one congregation doesn’t get to use all of them. We only get a few, maybe only one. We have to know what words we choose. Like a business developing a logo, we have to know what our essence is and how we intend to articulate that to others. This choice is not an afterthought; it is what we undertake In the Beginning.

Whatever words we choose to convey our church to others should embrace the nuance and complexity of the drama of darkness and light we find here in the gospel of John. They should speak to the mystery and yet attainability of Christ, to the permanence and impermanence of Jesus’ presence with us, to the revolutionary openness of the gift of God on Earth. This is the faith we have chosen. This is the faith of *λογος*.

⁵ Taylor, Barbara Brown. (2009) “Homiletical Perspective on John 1:(1-9) 10-18,” *Feasting On The Word (Year C, Vol. 1)*. Westminster John Knox, 191-193.