

Reality Made Flesh, Full of Grace and Truth

John 1:1-18

January 3, 2021

The beginning of John's gospel has been called the Prologue. A better word might be Overture because these 18 verses are a theological poem, much like an Overture to a Broadway musical which the orchestra plays to set the stage for what is to follow. It is a "Theo-poetic", full of wonder and wonderment.

Reality, reality itself, the Reality (capital R) behind reality (lower case r) has become flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

When did Christ's story begin? Matthew traced it back to Abraham, Luke traced it back to Adam. John is even bolder; he traces it back to the dawn of Creation. Ours is a Christ-formed universe!

You can almost hear a flute playing its clear notes behind the opening words:

In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.

I have been entranced this week by Eugene Peterson's translation of this passage in his translation of the Bible, *The Message*:

The Word was first,
The Word present to God,
God present to the Word.
The Word was God,
in readiness for God from day one.

And what did this Word bring?

In the Word was life,
and the life was the light of all humanity.

Now hear the good news we need to hear every year, especially this year:

The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not put it out.

I read this week that scientists have discovered that there is far more light in the vastness of the universe than we have known. The darkness has not put it out, not in the far reaches of space, not in human history, not in the human heart.

The great message of John in his gospel is that in God comes life and light and love. And that we know it and see it because the Word became flesh, Reality became flesh and dwelt among us.

II

“In the beginning was the Word.” To the Hebrew mind the “Word” was the “Speaking” of God. That is how the world began in Genesis’ creation story: God spoke the world into being.

And God said, “Let there be light,

And there was light.

(Genesis 1:3)

But if you were part of the larger Greek/Roman/Hellenistic world you heard another sense of the word. John’s Greek word was *logos*, and *logos* referred to the organizing, underlying principle of the universe, the Thought behind the thing, the Reality behind reality as we perceive it. Reality itself became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus.

III

We need today a healthy dose of what I’d call “reality-based religion. In our dangerously politicized world we have been thrown into a crisis of knowing, of knowing what is real and what is true. We hear phrases like “alternative facts” or people in high places saying “truth is relative.”

“When I use a word”, Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is”, said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many things.”

“The question is”, said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be the master—that is all.”

In *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll was making a critique of his world and ours. Do the ones in power get to say what words mean?

Today millions of American Christians are disregarding science—which is adding to the death toll in the pandemic. Perhaps, then, we need to re-examine the relationship of religion and reality.

Take gravity, for example. It works 100% of the time. In the wilderness Jesus was tempted by Satan to ignore the reality of gravity. “Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple and

the angels will bear you gently to the ground”, the devil said, quoting a verse of scripture from the Psalms. Jesus responding quoting scripture himself: “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord your God”—put God to the test. There has been a tragic amount of tempting and testing God this year. Science disregarded and a false theology promulgated that said if you are among God’s chosen you will have special immunity from the virus.

There are the physical laws of the universe. We learn them in physics. There are also the moral laws of the universe which are as sure as gravity. Both point to the Reality behind reality, the Thought behind the thing, the Morality behind our moral dos and don’ts, the Mind of the Maker present in creation itself.

Evelyn Underhill was the British scholar and mystic who wrote two classics, one entitled *Mysticism*, the other entitled *Worship*. Writing of mysticism, she said, “Mysticism is the art of union with Reality.” By reality (capital R) she meant not just the Divine Reality but our everyday reality too. The two are connected. The Maker of

Divine Reality is the maker of all reality. So today a good working definition of true religion: “The art of union with reality”.

We work hard to avoid reality. As the poet T.S. Eliot wrote, “Humankind cannot bear very much reality.” We are masters of denial, the psychological defense mechanism by which we refuse to accept parts of reality in order to defend ourselves against the truth we do not wish to know, or cannot bear to know. As the British lady said, “I do not care to know that!” We turn our eyes from scientific truth, historical truth, moral truth in ways that do us in.

Galileo’s scientific finding about the universe, about the earth revolving around the sun, not vice-versa, were condemned by the Vatican. While under attack he asked his colleagues at the University of Padua to look through his telescope and see for themselves. They refused to do so. How many telescopes have we refused to look through? Denial is easier to spot in other people than in ourselves.

Baptist Christian ethicist David Gushee wrote in his Facebook post in August 2019 that for him today the fundamental question of ethics is “what is real and true, not what is right and wrong. Reality is prior to morality.” It startled me at first, but it has seemed more and more true every day. How can we act rightly, how can we do what is good, if we cannot know what is real and what is true? Or if we choose not to know.

One of the great needs of the church today in these days when science is denigrated and disregarded by so many Christians is a new re-engagement with science. Science and Christianity have had a rocky on-again, off-again relationship through the centuries, from Galileo in medieval Italy to the Monkey Trials in Dayton, Tennessee to our own day. Sometimes the church has opposed science as an enemy of the faith. Other times it has embraced science as a partner in the quest for truth. An early astronomer, Johannes Kepler wrote: “I was merely thinking God’s thoughts after him.” He saw astronomers as “priests of the highest God in regard to the book of

nature.” John Polkinghorne, a British physicist and theologian, points us to such a re-engagement with these words:

Both science and religion are needed to interpret and understand the rich, varied and surprising ways the world actually is.

As Christians we can search for truth wherever we find it without fear because God is the author of all truth.

V

Now we come to the urgent and perennial question about the nature of reality itself. What is at the heart of reality? Does reality have a meaning? Does it have a face? If God is the Maker of all that is, what is the character of God?

John takes us there in verse fourteen:

And the Word became flesh
and dwelt among us
full of grace and truth.

Reality is gracious, and there is truth that is truth.

The Word is not only life and light, it is also love. At the end of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Dante looks at creation and looks at the incarnation in Jesus. His mind and imagination almost fail him to comprehend it all, and then with the last lines of the book he writes:

My will and my desire were turned above

The love that moves the sun and the other stars.

VI

Eugene Peterson's translation brings us to the close of the Overture.

John pointed him out and called, "This is the One!" The One I told you was coming after me but in fact was ahead of me. He has always been ahead of me, has always had the first word.

And then the closing words. You can almost hear the music:

We all live off his generous bounty,
gift after gift, after gift.

We got the basics from Moses,
and then this exuberant giving and receiving

This endless knowing and understanding--
all this came through Jesus the Messiah.

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.

Truth and love are one. And in Jesus we see it best of all. In his
first epistle John writes:

See what love the Father has given us,
love as if from another country,
that we should become children of God.

And indeed we are.

Now is the time of giving and receiving, of endless knowing and understanding. And here we are in our “child-of-God selves”, and we as the hymn goes, are “Lost in wonder, love and praise”. (*Love Divine All Loves Excelling*)