

1-2-22

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John 1:1-5, 9-14, 16

Close to Home: Our Cosmic Home

Listen with me for a Word from God from the first chapter of the Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. *This is the Word of the Lord*

This is the beginning.

Almost anything can happen.

This is where you find

the creation of light, a fish wriggling onto land,
the first word of *Paradise Lost* on an empty page.

Think of an egg, the letter A,

a woman ironing on a bare stage
as the heavy curtain rises.

This is the very beginning.

The first-person narrator introduces himself,
tells us about his lineage.

The mezzo-soprano stands in the wings.

Here the climbers are studying a map
or pulling on their long woolen socks.

This is early on, years before the Ark, dawn.

These are the opening words of one of my favorite poems, *Aristotle*¹, by former US Poet Laureate Billy Collins. And here we find ourselves in the beginning – the beginning of a new

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46706/aristotle>; Originally published in *Picnic, Lightning*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998.

year that seems a little too much like where we were last year. And yet a new year beckons us with possibilities to experience light and grace and laughter and love amidst the darkness. A new year beckons us while we continue to celebrate the birth of Christ. And even though the radio stations playing Christmas music have gone back to the regular programming and the after-Christmas sales are actually starting to fade away and trees are being taken down and decorations packed away for next year, we are in the season of Christmastide. We are in the 9th day of Christmastide – the 12th day of Christmas will be Thursday, January 6. We will celebrate Epiphany next Sunday, when the wise men bring gifts to the infant-child Jesus.

Christmastide marks the season when we acknowledge that the promise of Christmas has arrived. No more waiting. Love and light have overcome the darkness. And every year at this time, we hear about THE BEGINNING from the Gospel of John. And there is nary a baby or a shepherd or even an angel in sight. It seems that we need to hear these words from John every year to awe us, to inspire us, and to challenge us as we decelerate from the Christmas frenzy.

There is something about this passage that stirs our souls as a new year lies before us, crisp and clean, like a fresh notebook at the start of the school year. Or maybe the allure is the mystery of what lies ahead. You see the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Although the recent weather might suggest otherwise, darkness cannot take the light, cannot seize the light. From a physics perspective darkness is nothing, but light is something. Light is particle and wave, light has energy, light travels, light can be measured. But darkness... it is nothing. But from nothing, we were created at the beginning.

In his book "*From Nothing – A Theology of Creation*", Ian McFarland, Professor of Theology at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta writes about why claiming our creation from the nothing, from the darkness is so important.

For McFarland *from nothing* means "that in the beginning there is nothing but God, that there is created nothing apart from God, and that in creating, nothing limits God". For McFarland, these terms blossom when considered with the opening verses of John's Gospel. **Nothing but God** takes the form of love that is realized in the mutual communion of the Father with the Son in the power of the Spirit. **Nothing apart from God** proposes the sharing of the being that constitutes God's own triune life. **Nothing limits God** is a means of ensuring creation's flourishing. The point of creation from nothing is to affirm God's total and unrestricted dedication to creation.²

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Out of the darkness, out of the nothing came the light. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. God's total and unrestricted dedication to creation, to the genesis, to the beginning.

Scientists have mapped The Beginning of the cosmos from 10^{-43} seconds after the Big Bang to the present. At 10^{-43} sec after the Big Bang there was only one kind of particle and one kind of force. Multiple particles emerged around 10^{-4} seconds, nuclei at 3 minutes. Atoms did not form until 500,000 years after the Big Bang. If you are like me, you maybe asking how do

² Ian McFarland. *From Nothing- A Theology of Creation*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p106.

we really what the universe was like at 10^{-43} seconds after the Big Bang. There were no angels or shepherds or wise men to announce its birth.

No, instead we have cosmic background radiation that testifies to the formation of the cosmos. This radiation was discovered accidentally in the 1960's. It is not the Big Bang event itself, but it points to the formation of the cosmos. It is a powerful testimony. Much of modern astrophysics is built on the witness of this radiation.

Witness and testimony... John the Baptist came to witness and testify that Jesus Christ was the light in the darkness, the Word made flesh, the one who came bring grace and truth. John the Baptist had a unique style of testimony, one I'm not sure we'd all be comfortable with – especially in "our frozen chosen" Presbyterian world. In general testimony is not something we Presbyterians in the PC(USA) are known for. Nonetheless, testimony to the light – to the glory – to the power of grace of Jesus Christ is part of our call, be it through contemplative practices or bold proclamation. For me, testimony begins with first acknowledging that there is darkness. Darkness in individual lives riddled by diseases. Darkness in the grief of loss. Darkness in the wilderness of our minds. Darkness in the fears that grip us. Darkness in society. Darkness in the ideologies that separate us.

I learned a lot about testimony when I was in seminary. And much of what I learned was from my friends and colleagues in ministry from traditions where testimony is part of the fabric of their faith. My Korean friends have taught me about Tongsung Kido, which literally means "praying together out loud". And I mean out loud, with an emphasis on the loud. Now you would think that would be easy thing for someone like me, whose voice can project and who was constantly in trouble in school as a kid for being too loud. But the first time I practiced it, I voiced my prayers silently, barely even moving my lips. It was part of a class and I wish someone had filmed it, because we Anglo Presbyterians were so far out of our comfort zone and our Korean Presbyterian and Pentecostal and Baptist colleagues modeling this complete surrender to God.

Tongsung kido is passionate prayer, where the depths of darkness are recognized, where no pain is hidden from God, and where the light comes from relinquishing all suffering to God who hears you as you cry out. This prayer tradition in the Korean church comes from a place of oppression – the Japanese occupation of Korea in the early 20th century – and from conflict – the Korean War. This was a way for the people to both acknowledge the darkness and testify to the light, that God stands with the oppressed. That God liberates the oppressed. And that light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. I have experienced Tongsung Kido a few more times since that first intimidating experience and I have moved to prayer shared aloud. I don't know whether I will ever get to a place where I can shout about the darkness and shout my testimony to the light. But I am glad that I can pray and weep in solidarity with my Korean siblings as they shout their testimony to the light in their lives.

Testifying to the power of the light with our words can be a daunting task. It means that whatever the darkness is, whatever the nothing we come from is, whatever we are estranged from, we humans cannot overcome it ourselves. It takes the Word, the Light, God Incarnate to overcome this darkness. It takes Jesus, the one to whom John the Baptist testified.

For John it was pointing away from himself, pointing to Jesus. It was recognizing that while John could call for repentance, only Jesus could offer salvation. Because from the fullness of Jesus we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

At the beginning of my message, I mentioned that today is the ninth day of Christmas. Nine ladies dancing we hear in song. Some speculate that the origin of the twelve days of Christmas in song was to secretly teach aspects of Christianity to new followers of Christ – a kind of catechism in code so as to avoid persecution. Now this theory has been widely debunked by scholars, seeming to be pretty contrived³ – how do two turtle doves relate to the two testaments or eight maids a milking relate to the eight beatitudes or today's nine ladies dancing equate to the nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit.

However, I am intrigued by the speculation of Jesus Christ as the partridge in the pear tree. The thought is that Christ is symbolically presented as a mother partridge shielding her nestlings and the tree is the symbol of redemption, since the cross was made of wood.⁴ The partridge represents the fully human Jesus – “made flesh” and the tree represents the “fully divine” – the Word. Now whether there is any validity to theory, I can’t say. But I appreciate the attempt to make concrete one of the essential mysteries of our faith – that Jesus Christ is fully human AND fully divine. The Gospel of John conveys this mystery through beautiful language: And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. The early church struggled to convey this mystery of full humanity and full divinity – and after councils and meetings and battles and decrees, the Nicene Creed was adopted as our first set of Christian beliefs – our first statement of faith. We will share the creed together in a few minutes. We will also sing of this mystery in song, in *Break Forth, O Beauteous Heaven Light*, singing, “This child, now weak in infancy, our confidence and joy shall be, the power of Satan breaking, our peace eternal making.”⁵

The Word made flesh who dwells with us, full of grace and truth. We are called to testify to the power of this mystery. To the hope of light in the darkest of times. To the freedom of redemption no matter how far we stray. To the grace that means our sins are forgiven. To the truth that we are loved for who we are, for who God created us to be. When we proclaim these truths to ourselves and to others we are testifying to the light, testifying to the mystery of our faith, testifying that there is something bigger than ourselves, something we cannot fully explain, yet something we believe.

Testifying to the light bring us out of our comfort zones. It can be downright scary. Maybe the light seems so faint that we are not even sure it is there, like the first star of the night. Maybe the light is like a sputtering candle, threatening to be extinguished with each breath we take. But it is there, because despite the depth of darkness, there is nothing but God, there is nothing apart from God and nothing limits God.

³ <https://www.vox.com/21796404/12-days-of-christmas-explained>; <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/twelve-days-christmas/>

⁴ <https://news.hamlethub.com/coscob/life/214-the-first-day-of-christmas-revealed>

⁵ *Glory to God Hymnal* #130; Author: Johann Rist, 1641; trans. John Troutbeck, 1873