

**IN THE BEGINNING; JOHN 1:1-18; SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS; 1/4/16;
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The reading today is the last, majestic reading we hear on Christmas Eve at the Service of Lessons and Carols. It is referred to simply as the Prologue of the Gospel of John, yet it is nothing less than the beginning of a new bible.

It was written during a time of high tension between the Jewish community and the new religious movement known as the Way, emerging out of Jewish synagogues and homes; this new movement was part Jewish sect and part new religion and was rapidly evolving into what would become Christianity.

Today's passage is familiar perhaps only because we have heard it so many times, yet there is a real sense in which it is totally alien and strange – an outlier among familiar quotations from the bible.

If John's opening line "In the beginning..." sounds like the opening line of Genesis that's because it is. John shrewdly links the Creator God of Genesis to the historical Jesus of 1st Century Palestine. If Genesis goes back to the beginning of creation; John goes further back, before physical creation, to the beginning of time.

The writer of the Gospel of John tells us he is starting from the *very* beginning, the Source of Life, to embark on a new narrative, the story of Jesus the Christ, which reveals new information and necessitates retelling the story.

Unlike the other three Gospels with which many of us are more comfortable, it is not the earthly Jesus we find in John's Gospel but the cosmic Christ who is, we learn straightaway, one and the same as the Yahweh of Creation. John is connecting the dots on the theological map; he is saying that the Creator of the Cosmos is one and the same, in substance, yet different in form from Jesus of Nazareth.

It is difficult to imagine a more radical claim; John collapses the categories of time and space; he tells us that the energy of Creation or godhead is malleable and takes on different forms, in different times and places. In this human Jesus, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, all things were made through him and for him, he holds all things together, he was before life itself.

Hearing comments like this is like looking into an amusement park mirror. It distorts our previous perceptions and understanding of human nature, the nature of God and the category of time.

To our 21st century minds, rooted in 18th century Newtonian physics this does not make sense. We struggle to comprehend any ancient text or description of God that cannot be historically and/or scientifically verified. Our culture operates with an understanding of the universe in mechanistic terms; terms that were outdated by the discovery of quantum physics a hundred years ago. But the old Newtonian universe holds sway because it offers a worldview that conforms to common sense, while quantum physics, and the Prologue to John

describe a new reality of time and space that are a conundrum to common sense.

John's Prologue talks about something far more profound and essential to our religious experience than the historical Jesus – that pale figure of the popular mind who has replaced the Jesus of the Gospels. John says today we cannot fully grasp the historical Jesus apart from his cosmic identity and purpose. I raise these issues to point out that our faith is rooted in more of the bible than we are often willing to acknowledge. It is articulated in theological terms that dwarf the watered-down, secularized shadow of the faith to which rationalism will not object.

We have suffered a public relations and marketing war between evangelical and progressive Christianity. This war for adherents and resources has been waged since the 1960s, although after half a century there are signs we may be moving beyond it. Add those who feel exiled from the church and reject organized religion as well as an anti-religious secular audience who caricature evangelical Christians as ignorant people who take their Bibles literally.

The result is a social construct of a God whose existence and power is dependent on what people think and has little to do with what the bible tells us about the nature of God.

One way to get out from behind our theological/political bunkers in the culture war is to consider Christ not as an answer or even a theological formula but as a gracious response of the power that formed the universe.

To the problem of suffering he says, "I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink." Where there was gross and violent injustice he "took the form of a slave and was obedient unto death."

One writer says that religions are expressions of the sound human intuition that there is something beyond being as we experience it in this life. What is often described as a sense of the transcendent might in some cases be the intuition of the actual. Religions are right to conceptualize this in terms that exceed the language of common sense. ⁱ

If the conservative wing of the church which worships a glorified Christ in whom the creative power that formed physical creation was completely present and at work in the world; if this wing of the church errs on the side of interpreting a God who performs miracles upon request, Jesus as a wonder-working super hero and the Bible as the literal words of God dropped from on high;

then the progressive wing of the church which sees Christ as a real but shadowy historical figure who was an effective preacher and teacher but no different in his human existence than Gandhi or Buddha; this wing of the church errs on the side of shrinking the God of Creation, Jesus the Cosmic Christ and the wonder of human life into little boxes that Newtonian science approves of.

The trick is to avoid limiting our expectations for who God and Jesus are, what the church is capable of doing, and thinking small about the Bible.

One of our millennials – a 20/30 something young adult – shared with me an online post entitled, “An open letter to the church.” It was on a website that hosts serious conversations about religious life and spirituality. This young man’s reflections beg us to push out the old boundaries and limiting definitions for the church – much like John does today in his Prologue.

“Dear Church, A lot has been made over the Millennial generation and their religious life. Why they go to church. Why they don’t go to church. What they want. What they hate. I’d like to tell you what’s true for me, and what I’ve seen to be true of others like me. I’ve always been in church...but felt in recent years like a misfit, a skeptic, a doubter, an outsider.

“My relationship with you is love/hate. Love the bible, hate the way it’s used. Love Jesus, but hate what we’ve done to him. Love worship, but hate religious entertainment.

“Here are a few things that just might work with me and my generation. They may seem crazy and contradict what you’ve heard but here’s what would work for me.

Don’t expect a ‘worship style’ to do your dirty work. Contemporary worship hasn’t worked. The longer we extend the life of this failed experiment, the more we see the results. Don’t give us entertainment give us liturgy. Follow that simple yet profound formula that’s worked for the entire history of the church – entrance, proclamation, thanksgiving, sending out; gathering, preaching, breaking bread, going forth in service. Give us a script to follow, songs to sing, the traditions of the church, Holy Scriptures to read. Not life groups but sacraments to grow and strengthen us.

Don’t target us. Be yourself, use your regular old liturgy, offer your regular old sacraments, sing your regular old songs. Cast a wide net, let whosoever will come. We are more likely to show up when we don’t feel like fish snapping up the bait.

Be inclusive. Tear down silos. Save us from ourselves. We need more of each other. We need to look into the faces of old and young, rich and poor, gay and straight of different races, ethnic backgrounds so we can learn to see Jesus in faces that don’t look like us. So we can remember that the kingdom is bigger than our safe, socio-economic bubble. Our connectivity is fine. The rest of our lives is a different story. We are hopelessly disconnected. Church, you can be a powerful remedy if you stop acting like a company trying to sell a product.

Finally, welcome the roughest, deepest, grittiest, most desperate, most shocking questions. We have lots of questions. More and more, what we see in the world jive with what we’ve heard from the pulpit. You’ve done more damage by requiring politeness, refusing to engage by rebuking honesty and vulnerability. Be a safe place for struggling, grappling, doubting.

We don’t need you to be our therapist, we need you to be our church. We need you to grapple with us, to push back, to show us how to be the hands and feet of Christ, making it more on earth as it is in heaven.

Signed, “Your friend, Jonathan”ⁱⁱ

There are a couple of ways to go with a New Year’s sermon: encourage the making of sensible resolutions that will incrementally improve the quality of life – *if we can stick to them*; or mess around with our spiritual DNA – the stuff that shapes who we are and what we believe.

The latter is surely what John was doing when he wrote his Gospel to the church; he was calling for deep change and radical transformation of our understanding of God and Jesus.

There’s a lot at stake – especially in today’s world. Profound spiritual hunger and fragmented, disconnected lives are the plight of all age groups. It’s good to chip away incrementally at some things. But it’s also good to recognize when we need to go deeper and risk rethinking, redefining who we are, who Jesus is and what we, the church, are all about.

Jesus did nothing less when he sat with his disciples, on that dark night on which he was a hunted man;

and took the sacred tradition of his Jewish faith – the Seder –and multiplied its meaning exponentially when he said,

“This is my body broken for you, my blood shed for you. Amen.

ⁱMarilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things: Essays* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux: New York, 2015) 188.

ⁱⁱ Patheos.com – Hosting serious conversations about religion and spirituality; An open letter to the church from one of those millennials you can’t figure out; 05/13/2015.