

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, December 30, 2007**

WORD, LIGHT, LIFE: FLESH

John 1:1-18

Way back when, while I was serving at a United Methodist church in Greenville, North Carolina, we were coming home from church one Sunday in Advent when our daughter Rebecca turned to her mother and asked, “Why did we stand up at the end of the choir singing?” She meant, why did we stand up for the Hallelujah Chorus, the conclusion of Handel’s “Messiah,” which the choir had sung that morning. Maryanne then told her a story about King George II of England, who was among those who attended the world premiere of “The Messiah” in 1728.

George, as did much of the royalty of Europe in those days, had a very elevated view of kingship. He expected that when he came into a room, people would rise as a sign of respect for both the office and its present incumbent. That night, as he listened, awestruck, to the magnificence of Handel’s creation, King George must have been repeatedly reminded of the overwhelming glory of God. Finally, as the concert reached its climax, he heard for the first time those words which, set to Handel’s music, have stirred millions since. “And He shall reign for ever and ever. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! King of Kings, and Lord of Lords! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!” And in what must have been a moment of true revelation, it came home to the King of England, one of the world’s mightiest monarchs, that even he was only a subject of the King of Kings. So as a sign of respect and of awe, George stood through the Hallelujah Chorus, as did the entire audience that night, and audiences throughout the world ever since have followed his lead.

This morning, as we celebrate the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ on the first Sunday in Christmastide, I would like for us to leave behind all of the things with which we have encrusted Christmas. Not just the commercialism of which we all complain – that’s the easy part. Leave behind the shepherds and the wise men. Leave behind the spectre of Herod, ready to kill every male child in Bethlehem to snuff out the threat to his regime. Leave behind even Mary and Joseph. Dim the lights on all the minor characters, and bring them up on the only one that really matters.

Focus, for a few moments, on a child, newly born, and with all the needs of the newly born. He cried, He wet His swaddling clothes, He required feeding, He clung for warmth and love to His mother. He was in every respect save sin a human being like you or me. But He was more. Much more. There in the manger of Bethlehem, looking out at the world through the eyes of an infant, lay the Word of God, the light of the world, the life of all God’s people.

We’re told these three things about Jesus in the first chapter of John. In the prologue to his gospel, we read of the beginnings of Jesus Christ, not in terms which can be

sentimentalized, much less commercialized. John's terms for Jesus are the loftiest in Scripture, and it is only in light of them that we can even begin to understand the events of the first Christmas. John's good news to the world starts not with birth, or even with conception. It begins at the beginning of all things, for, he says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Jesus Christ did not have His origin in the womb of Mary. The human form, the flesh which He took on, did. But as a person, as a personality, the child who was born in Bethlehem was as old as God, which means He had always been.

There is something fascinating in these first three verses of John's gospel, which because we take these words so much for granted as part of our faith may never have struck you before as they struck me in preparing this message. You'll notice that John calls Jesus something that He's not called anywhere else in Scripture. He calls Him "the Word." Not the Son of God, not the Son of Man, not the Lamb, not the Messiah, but the Word.

In the beginning, before our world existed, before the stars or the planets, before all else that is, the second Person of the Trinity, who was to become incarnate in Jesus Christ, was the Word, and the Word was God. What this says to us is that speech, communication, is at the very heart of who God is. Relationships between persons who can offer to one another love and caring and friendship are part of the very nature of God. His Son, who was sent into the world that He might reestablish His relationships with us, is the embodiment of God's ability and desire to communicate.

Since we're at the beginning of everything anyway, you might want to turn in your Bibles to the very first chapter of Scripture. It's a chapter with which we're all pretty well acquainted, but I want to jog your imagination a bit. What do you suppose the writer of this first chapter of Genesis meant when he wrote in verse 4, "And God said, 'Let there be light.'" Why didn't God just snap His fingers, figuratively speaking, and have light appear? For Him the creation of light would've been as easy as for us to flick a switch – even easier. Or why didn't the writer just put down that "Then God created light." Simple. Direct. To the point. But no. God spoke light into being. Why? Because God is at heart a communicator, and therefore, a Person who relates to what He creates.

In some way, God has a relationship with light, with the stars and the galaxies, with all the wonders of nature. How that can be, I'm not exactly sure, but I suspect that some of the musicians and artists in our congregation can explain it. When one creates a work of art – a painting, a song, a poem, a sermon – one has a relationship that's both indescribable and yet very, very real. Have you ever heard an artist or a songwriter refer to his creation as his "baby"? That's how God is with every single thing He's made. We know that's so because of the next verse in John, chapter 1: "Through Him [that is, through the Word] all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made."

God, then, is a communicator, who in creating the world and creating us has made us for relationship with Himself through His Son, who is the essence of relationship. But for us, there's a little more to it than that. You'll all remember the last creature that God spoke

into existence as described by Genesis: us. People, the writer says, are made in the “image of God.” That means that we’re communicators, too. No matter what your college degree says, no matter what you concentrated on in high school, we are all speech majors, because the focus of our lives are our relationships with God and each other, and these find their substance in the words which pass between us.

When Jesus Christ was born of Mary, it was the creative Word of God that was sent into the world to redeem us all. And it’s the creative words of humanity, those sounds and symbols which enrich or impoverish our lives, which have been made holy by Christ’s coming. This gives us a real responsibility for the way that we use words. We can use them to hurt or to heal, to build up or to break down, to depress or to uplift, to judge or to forgive. Much as we might like to think so, there’s no such thing as a “throwaway” word. When we ask a person how life is treating them, we had better be prepared to listen, not only because they might tell us, but because it should matter to us. When we offer help to someone in need, we had better be prepared to give it, because such an offer may sound for all the world to a grieving widow or a house fire victim like a verbal life preserver. When we pray for others, know that we’re not simply pouring words into the air; in fact, we’re communicating with those persons in a profound way. The Russian poet Irina Ratushinskaya, who spent several years in Soviet prisons for her faith, has written of this in a way that genuinely moved me. She wrote:

Believe me, it was often thus:
 In solitary cells, on winter nights
 A sudden sense of joy and warmth
 And a resounding note of love.
 And then, unsleeping, I would know
 A-huddle by an icy wall:
 Someone is thinking of me now,
 Petitioning the Lord for me.
 My dear ones, thank you all
 Who did not falter, who believed in us!
 In the most fearful prison hour
 We probably would not have passed
 Through everything--from end to end,
 Our heads held high, unbowed--
 Without your valiant hearts
 To lighten our path.

Talk, brothers and sisters, is not cheap. For the Christian, talk is holy, because talk, whether between humans or between us and God, is the stuff that binds us together. Whenever you hear someone say, “it doesn’t matter what you say, it’s what you do that counts,” know that they’ve set up a false dichotomy, because the Word of God has declared in His very being that both words and deeds make a difference.

So the baby Jesus was the Word of God. He was also the light of the world, and more specifically, John says in verse 9, He was “the true light that gives light to everyone.”

The world and the lives into which Jesus Christ came that night were filled with darkness. The word which John uses for darkness in verse 5, where he writes that “the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it,” and throughout his gospel is a word with multiple meanings. Sometimes it refers to evil, sometimes to chaos, sometimes to rebellion, sometimes to unbelief. In every instance, it refers to the forces which are opposed to God, to His purposes in creating the world, to His intention to save His people, and to His final plan to renew the world in justice and in love. In every instance, it refers to the forces which are opposed to the coming of Jesus Christ for the salvation of His people, forces which, like cockroaches, cannot stand up under the glare of the light which He is and has brought into the world.

Perhaps you’ve never heard evil and sin compared to a cockroach before, but the comparison is apt. Roaches scurry about when exposed to light, desperate to return to the dark and secret places where they can do their damage without fear of interruption. Evil likewise operates in the dark. The criminal, whether petty pickpocket or powerful dictator, has to keep his activities hidden, away from public view, away from the harsh light of publicity which shows his thievery or murder for what it is.

When we sin, through harsh words or abusive acts, or merely through carelessness or thoughtlessness, we’d rather that the fact not be broadcast to the community. Such is human nature, and such was the world into which Jesus was born. That world has, however, been forever changed. The light of Christ now shines into every corner of human activity and being. The old expression, “you can run but you can’t hide,” now applies to everyone, at every time and in every place. Is that a scary thought? It doesn’t have to be. The obedient child of God has no more reason to fear his heavenly Father than an obedient child has reason to fear a loving parent.

Of course, children don’t always obey us, as we don’t always obey God. That’s when it’s time, not to cringe in fear, hoping not to get caught, but to step forward in admission of an honest mistake, or even a terrible wrong, knowing that the love that was there at the first is still there, and always will be. That’s why the light which Christ brought into the world at Christmas is something to be welcomed. He has made honest children out of us. Children, as it turns out, who will live forever. For the Word and the light came into the world, ultimately, in order to bring life to those who did not have it. This Jesus Christ could do, for as John says in verse 4, “in Him was life.”

To say that in Jesus was life is to say that He’s the source, not only of our physical life, but that He gives our lives their meaning, their purpose, their substance. There can be no doubt that there was life in the world into which Jesus was born, but it was life of the most crude sort. Physical life was typically short, it was hard, it was full of brutality, whether by private citizens or by the state, it was unjust, and – worst of all – it was meaningless. People lived, people bred, and people died in an animal existence that most often seemed aimed at only three things – perpetuating the species, deriving physical or emotional pleasure from one’s surroundings, or enhancing one’s power over others, if one was from the privileged classes.

Philosophers of various stripe – Platonists, Aristotelians, Epicureans, Stoics, Hedonists, and others – tried to read some meaning into life, some purpose for our existence. In the end, however, they either came back to nihilism (or meaning-lessness), to pagan mythology, or to some arbitrary good chosen because it suited the temperament of the philosopher.

Into this world came Jesus Christ. He came bringing life, eternal life, purposeful life, meaningful life. John hints at this in verse 18 when he writes, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is at the Father’s side, has made Him known.” I wholeheartedly believe that Scripture teaches that life’s meaning is to be found in the knowledge of God – to know who He is, what He has done, is doing, and will do, why He moves in our lives, and how His works have affected us personally. Life’s purpose then is to be discovered in serving Him in whatever manner He desires. Francis of Assisi, in his best-loved words, captures this when he prays:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light; and
Where there is sadness, joy.

Though Dickens does not say so, I think that that’s what Scrooge was really talking about when he said he would keep the spirit of Christmas all year ’round. That’s the kind of person we’ll be, if the life that Christ brought with Him to Bethlehem has become our life.

The Word, and we might add the light and the life, became flesh and dwelt among us. So says the Apostle John in verse 14 of his prologue. God has become one of us, in order that we may become children of His.

Which brings to mind a story. It is told of Shah Abbas, a Persian monarch whose love for his people was the stuff of legends. To know and understand them better, he would mingle with them in various disguises. One day he went as a poor man to the public baths and in a tiny cellar sat beside the fireman who tended the furnace. When it was mealtime the shah shared the man’s coarse food and talked to his lonely subject as a friend. Again and again he returned to the fireman, who became very fond of his visitor. One day, the monarch told the man who he really was, expecting the man to ask some gift of him. But the fireman sat gazing at his king with love and wonder and finally said, “You left your palace and your glory to sit with me in this dark place, to eat my poor food, to care whether my heart is glad or sorry. On others you may bestow rich presents, but to me you have given yourself, and it remains only for me to pray that you never withdraw the gift of your friendship.”

Today, we celebrate the gift of God’s friendship, His light, His life, and His love, all brought to earth and offered to us by His Son, the “infant holy, infant lowly” who slept in

heavenly peace that night, who was also the Incarnation of God. This morning, as we worship Him, offering our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, I close with a psalm of praise, written by Joseph Bayly, in the hope and prayer that it may be ours as well. Bayly writes:

Praise God for Christmas.
Praise Him for the Incarnation
for Word made flesh.
I will not sing
of shepherds watching flocks on frosty nights
or angel choristers.
I will not sing of stable bare in Bethlehem
or lowing oxen,
wise men trailing distant star with gold
and frankincense and myrrh.
Today I will sing praise to the Father
who stood on heaven's threshold
and said farewell to His Son
as He stepped across the stars to Bethlehem and Jerusalem.
And I will sing praise to the infinite eternal Son
who became most finite a Baby
who would one day be executed for my crimes.
Praise Him in the heavens.
Praise Him in the stable.
Praise Him in my heart.