

Prologue to the Gospel of John

Larry Taylor Text and John 1:1-14

The inspiration for today's seasonal music is the Prologue to the Gospel of John. No other book in the world opens with such breathtaking statements as the Fourth Gospel. As readers and listeners, we know instantly that we are face to face with the august and the tremendous. Luke's Gospel takes us to Bethlehem for Christmas; John takes us back to eternity and the Big Bang. Words alone are not adequate to say what is attempted here, and so the writer calls upon a cluster of artistic forms to express his Advent message.

The first is poetry. Someone has said, "The poets know more about God than the theologians." But our writer is both a first-class theologian and a literary genius.

The Prologue is a poetic meditation on the Word of God. Frederick Buechner says, "Poetry is immensity compacted." Listen to the sound of immensity compacted: "In the beginning was the word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Poetry, it seems, is the native language of faith. Kathleen Norris writes, "People want answers, but sometimes they'll settle for poetry."

A second art form John calls upon to express the inexpressible is, of course, music. Music can be many things if the soul is big enough. The verses of the Prologue are a hymn, probably set to music and sung in the early church.

In one of its recent, better hymns, the church sings:

How often, making music, we have found
A new dimension in the world of sound
As worship moved us to a more profound
Alleluia! Alleluia!

No wonder Leonard Bernstein spoke of music as "the beautiful and utterly satisfying combination of mathematics and magic." In the Prologue the music of the spheres takes on flesh. God's first statement about God's self, in creation, now makes room for the second statement, in a person, mediated to us today through music.

Next John calls upon a certain creative idea, a concept, called the Logos, the Word. It's patterned on the portrayal of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible. It's a difficult idea for us, but it had currency among the first readers of this Gospel. To the Jews Logos recalled the power of God who spoke the world into existence by his Word. To the Greeks the term denoted the rational principle at work in universe that the mind is somehow calibrated to reality. And to Christians Word referred to proclamation, the preaching of the Gospel.

The Prologue would be minus its impact on us were it not for the skillful use of metaphor. Here we read not only Word, but also life, light, darkness and truth. Nietzsche said, "Truth is an army of metaphors."

John's language is multivalent and deceptively simple. He paints in black and white; he is the Rembrandt of Gospel writers. John is always saying more than it appears.

Aristotle insisted the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. Our writer is such a master. He enables us to make the quantum leap from here to there. To paraphrase Robert Browning, "Our reach must exceed our grasp, else what's a meta-for?"

Story is a chief component of the Prologue. The Gospel comes to us in story form, rather than in propositions or dogmas. Stories are primary, doctrines are derivative. Here is a fine literary sense. Whatever else the Bible may be, it is literature, and whatever else the Holy Spirit may be, the Spirit is literate.

The Gospel writer further employs drama to introduce the advent of Christ. Before the Gospel was preaching or scripture, it was drama. Much of Jesus' public ministry was street drama. Drama is ever the premier art form of the church. The drama of the Prologue unfolds on two stages, as eternity mingles with history, poetry with prose, God with humankind, and spirit with flesh.

And then the Gospel writer takes our breath away again with the sentence that is the acme of his Prologue: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth." Psychologist Sam Keen calls it "the most stupendous claim in all of literature."

John's Prologue dazzles us like a moment's glance at the sun. He writes of things best seen oblique, of incarnation's hide and seek. John invokes a faculty usually associated with the mystic.

We are left to wonder what to make of it all. That we should be surprised that the advent comes to us wrapped in the form of the human arts; and that we can only begin to comprehend such words when we read the poets, listen to creative music, sing the hymns of Advent, explore a multitude of creative ideas, and play with a variety of metaphors.

Hear, then, the Word of the Lord:

1. John 1:1-5

[1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

[2] He was in the beginning with God;

[3] all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

[4] In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

[5] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

2. John 1:6-9

[6] There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

[7] He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him.

[8] He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.

[9] The true light that enlightens every person was coming into the world.

3. John 1:10

[10] He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not.

4. John 1: 11-13

[11] He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.

[12] But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God;

[13] who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God.

5. John 1:14

[14] And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have gazed upon his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.