

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Regarding today’s Gospel, Bible scholar N. T. Wright says, “John knows perfectly well he’s making language go beyond what’s normally possible, but it’s Jesus that makes him do it” That quote pretty much sums up what’s at stake when we consider these stately, majestic sentences.

The author of the gospel of John is taking language well past boundaries we consider “normal,” precisely because in the historical person we know as Jesus of Nazareth or Jesus Christ, God has come to us within our own boundaries in order to take our normal understanding of “reality” well beyond its usual boundaries.

“In the beginning” No one remotely familiar with the Bible can hear these words without thinking of the creation stories in Genesis. And that is precisely what we are being given in this passage: a new creation story.

The story begins, of course, with God. In the beginning was what John calls the Word – and that Word was with God, and that Word was God.

This Word that John is talking about is more than speech. The Word is not simply a word. This, among other things, is apparent right from the beginning, and it becomes ever more apparent as we continue to read.

This Word was with God in “the beginning”; not only that, but this Word was God. The Word is of “one being,” as our Nicene Creed says, “with the Father” to the extent that Word and Father are indistinguishable – and yet they are distinguishable as particular entities: at-one and yet of one substance. (It is John who introduces us to the joys and trials of the Trinity!)

Moving on a little way, we learn that this Word-that-was-with-God/Word-that-was-God was and is indeed more than just a word. This Word was the very Creative Principle, or more than that, the action of God by which the world and all that is in it was created.

This Word was not just an act of speaking, but life itself – greater than life itself; this Word contained life within itself, and is the light which enlightens all people. What we understand of life and all its fullness began with this Word that was with God and that was God.

Twice we are told, in verses 5 and 9, that this light that is God’s Word enlightens all people; everyone. Verses 6 and 8 clarify the role of the one history knows as John the Baptist. John the Baptist was not this Light, this Word, these verses tell us – because back then there were followers of John who suggested that he was.

He was not the light; he was a forerunner, preparing the way. He came to bear witness to the light. The light that was coming shone brighter even than John.

And then John, the gospel writer, once again pushes language's envelope. This Word that was with God and that was God was not only with God, in some kind of far-off heavenly perfection, dwelling in pristine oneness with the Father, far removed from the world and its mess.

This Word, this light that enlightens everyone did not enlighten us by shining on us from afar off. This light was in the world, embedded in the world, contained within the world even as it transcends the world's boundaries.

This Word, this light was in the world – and yet the world did not know him. Shades, once again, of Genesis: We have here hints of the Fall.

This Word of God, this light from God was intimately involved with the creation of the world, and was embedded in the world, and yet this very same “world” could not or would not see it. What's more, the very people through whom God acted from the beginning did not recognize him.

The world that God created through this Word did not know the Word and did not know God; the world had become estranged from God its Father and the very Word through whom it was given birth.

Finally, these stately cadences, which began with God, end with Flesh.

This Word that was with God and that was God became flesh and lived among fleshly human beings and took into and upon itself the very flesh of which humanity is made.

We are not talking here about some pure and perfect philosophical principle that exists far above the muck and mess of human existence; we are talking about a Word from God that was not only with God, that not only was God, but a Word from God that was and that is human flesh. This passage begins, before time itself begins, with God – and it ends with ... us.

What shall we do with this word from the Lord about the Word of God that pushes language beyond its farthest boundaries? The first thing we can do is ground it in its historical context. This passage was written by one of the earliest followers of Jesus Christ to describe the impact Jesus Christ had on his earliest followers.

In seeing Jesus, they were seeing nothing less than God. And then the author goes on to describe the experience in terms that would have been understood perfectly well by what we would call the “secular” people of the time, who had been influenced by that time's various Greek philosophies.

The early Greeks were not “atheist,” as we understand the term. They held various understandings of “God.”

And many of them talked of a Creative Principle, or Logos, by which the world and all that is in it was created. “Word,” in Greek, is Logos.

In speaking of the Logos that was with God and was God, and by which creation itself was created, John is reaching out to followers of the various, what we might call secular philosophies of the day, and saying:

“Look! This creative principle your philosophers speak of? We have found it! Or rather – it found us! We have seen it, right here among us! He took on our flesh; he walked with us; he talked with us! We have seen him and known him, and his name is Jesus!”

These words about the Word that sound so outlandish to us did not start out as some esoteric doctrine designed to set a little group of followers of the “true Word” apart from the rest of society.

When John spoke of the Logos/Word, he was not separating himself from the “secularists” (if you will) of the day; he was speaking to them in their language, using terms with which they would have been right at home.

By the same token, this author of John – who himself was born and raised a Jew, and who saw Jesus Christ as the Jewish Messiah and the fulfillment of Jewish scriptures – is in these opening passages talking about Jesus using language very similar to the language that

Proverbs and other Old Testament era writings use when talking about the Wisdom of God.

Proverbs tells us that God worked through wisdom in creating the world and all that is in it. The eighth chapter of Proverbs especially uses language very similar to John 1 in describing wisdom as being the means by which God created the world.

Again, John is not setting himself apart from his Jewish contemporaries; he is using common language to attempt to find common ground.

Using common language to find common ground with Greeks and those influenced by Greek philosophy, and with his brother and sister Jews – that is what John is doing in this majestic opening passage of his Gospel. And that above all is what we need to do in our day.

What is John telling us that we need to shout from the rooftops to people of our day and our generations? That God does not exist, as it were, on the other side of the sky in splendid purity, having nothing to do with our dirty old world.

That is not what our tradition says, even not – especially not – in this most seemingly esoteric of our gospels; even not, especially not, on this day on which we celebrate that Word coming to us from the womb of a human mother.

For all of its pushing of language's boundaries, this gospel tells us that the Creator of all that is, was, and ever will be has come to us and lives with us and is firmly embedded within our boundaries, in our world, in our very flesh.

Our God does not judge flesh or condemn flesh; our God is flesh, and we can find him, not in some mythical heaven, far removed from our reality.

We find him living and moving among us and with us, in the flesh of the one history knows as Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man. By looking at him, we see God. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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The quote at the beginning of this sermon is from Tom Wright, John for Everyone: Part One (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004), page 5.