John 1:1-5 | The Oldest Christmas Story | Luke Knight

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Light and Life: Christmas in the Gospel of John

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1.1-5)

Advent is here and Christmas is coming. For our two small children these days are full of sparking ornaments, messy baking, silly songs, and uncontrollable bursts of excitement. We have fun, because as Dickens wrote, *"It's good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child Himself."* Of course we try to ensure the main character of the season stays in focus, so the other day I was pleasantly surprised when I asked our three-year-old, "who is Jesus?", and she responded with, "God!". I followed up with another question, "and who is God?", to which she replied, "Jesus!" I admit I didn't expect such theological clarity and depth from a three-year-old. She must be reading John's gospel by flashlight under her covers after we put her to bed.

An old saying goes that John's gospel is so deep you can't find the bottom, and yet so accessible a child can paddle around quite easily. Such is the nature of great poetry, and an argument could be made that John's prologue (the first eighteen verses) is the most influential work of literature in human history. So brilliant and clear, John's is the gospel we nudge new Christians to read first. So dizzying and dense it's driven scholars nuts. Tom Wright, a biblical scholar and historian, tells a story about applying for a post at a university and being asked what he thought about the Gospel of John, as opposed to Matthew, Mark or Luke (the other ancient biographers of Jesus). Tom replied, "I feel about John how I feel about my wife. I love her deeply, but I do not pretend to fully understand her."

Many of us are at least a little familiar with the Christmas story, which is usually a mishmash of events in the gospels, pushed together on our mantlepieces in the form of a nativity scene. Mary, Joseph, angels, shepherds, a baby in a manger. That's Luke's version of things. Matthew gives us Jesus' genealogy and the mysterious magi (better known as the wise men). John is different gravy. Probably writing a few decades later, John didn't knock off Luke's or Matthew's version, those were hits the first Christians already knew and loved. So John doesn't focus on the shepherds, magi or even a manger. Ambitiously, John aims at deeper mysteries. His biography of Jesus begins as a wide-shot of the *whole story*. John zooms out and zooms in; cosmic and glorious in scale, yet as enlightening and intimate as a candle in your window. "The light shines in the darkness, and darkness has not overcome it..." (John 1). It's no wonder the traditional symbol for John's gospel is an eagle - he gives us a wonderfully clear and high vantage point.

Still, John's gospel isn't always the top pick in the jolly old season. It's Matthew and Luke who record the particulars of Jesus' birth, so why not stick with the classic Christmas hits? The answer is in the lights we put up, the candles we burn, the presents we give, the food we eat, the life we celebrate. You can't yank the symbolism and imagery out of this bizarre season, because if you did, you'd have nothing left. And a great deal of the imagery we step into at Advent and Christmas finds its origin in the Gospel of John. We read John's gospel at Advent and Christmas because in a way it's *the oldest Christmas story*. John begins at the very beginning. Not with Mary, not even with Abraham. He takes us past pre-history, into pre-time, and the more you read John, the more Christmas with all its depth and hope and light comes home for you. When you finally get your head and heart around John's gospel, even a little, it's like swimming in the reservoir which has been feeding water to your kitchen faucet all these years. To put it simply, John takes us to the source.

We read John's Gospel at Christmas because *Jesus is the heart of Christmas*, and Christians believe that it's Jesus who brings light and life to everyone and everything. Humans can't see in the dark, and we have a death problem. We are desperate, totally dependent on *someone else* for light and life. For John, for millions over millennia, that someone is Jesus.

Today we're looking at John 1.1-5, covering more of John's prologue through December. What does John say about Jesus? Take a deep breath…

Well, we hear right away that **Jesus was God from the very beginning**. "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning."* We can't begin with pointing out John's beginning. He's echoing the Hebrew creation story (what we call Genesis 1), "In the beginning… ", which takes us not in the middle, or the end, but at *the start*, telling us that Jesus was *there*. And not only was Jesus there, that Jesus *was with* God, but that Jesus *was* God. For John's, Jesus isn't God's side-kick or any kind of lesser being. The Jesus whom John is going to tell us more about in the rest of his gospel is *the source* of everything. Jesus was there when the cosmos were born, when time began, there for everything we call, "beginning". We're not even out of verse 1 and already our heads are spinning. Wasn't Jesus a human being? Isn't Jesus described as God's son? The mysteries of the Trinity and the incarnation hit us head on in John's opening lines. But he's adamant - whatever else you think about Jesus, however else you want to describe him, John sees Jesus as the Lord of Creation, *the Creator.*

The word John uses for Jesus in his prologue is "the Word", which is a term so historically and philosophically dense I'm tempted to chicken out and skip over it entirely. But notice a couple of things. First, back in Genesis 1 God "speaks" creation into being. Words, as we know, have power, and for many cultures words not only do things, but a word is *like a thing*. A word can be blessing, and word can be weapon. So when John says Jesus is "the Word" he's making a connection between Genesis 1 and Jesus' power, place and agency. We might even say that for John, Jesus is the body language of God. Second, the Greek word which John uses for "Word" (logos) can also be translated "reason". Reason was highly prized in the ancient Greek speaking world, the philosophers were nuts about it. The thinking was that some kind of higher *thought or reason* was above everything, at the very beginning of things, even what held everything together. John's writing at the end of the first century trying to make connections for people with limited knowledge of Jesus' Jewish roots. So John's trying to put Jesus to them in a way they might understand, without totally dislocating Jesus from Israel's history. This is part of his genius. John uses the term (logos or "the Word") and the "in the beginning" language to get close to the Jewish *and* Greek listener to say to them *both:* "What you believe makes sense of things, to be responsible for everything, the thing you prize above all else, holding everything together, that's actually this *person*, Jesus." As mentioned earlier, John's ambitious. He was also Jesus' closest disciple, waiting till the very end of his long life to finally put pen to scroll. But when he does, boy does he have some conviction about Jesus' identity.

"Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind." Next, John builds to clarify that not only was Jesus present at the beginning, *Jesus made everything.* What does he mean by everything? The heavens, the firmament (what we call space) and of course the earth. Remember, John's an ancient person, so he can't Google facts about the universe for fun on a rainy day. But that doesn't make him or other ancient people stupid. They looked around and they looked up, just like we do. Of course, we can look further now and have looked around more, but ancient people wrestled with questions about where they came from and how we got here just like us. A publication on space, Skylight Magazine of the BBC says, "*The Universe has not existed forever. It was born…. all matter, energy, space – and even time – erupted into being….Whatever way you look at it, the idea that the Universe popped into existence out of nothing – that there was a day without a yesterday – is utterly bonkers. But that is what the evidence tells us."* Even though we know a good deal about the cosmos and our planet, we still don't know exactly how everything came to be, but we know it began. So we're still somewhat in the dark with the ancients, we've not answered all the questions yet, not really answered many of the *big questions* at all out there in the stary sky. One scientist in that same publication is quoted as saying: "the universe is not stranger than we imagine, it is stranger *than we can* imagine."

So what John's putting to us is that there is a being, a person, who set all this in motion and keeps it all in motion: **Jesus, creator of all things, life's origin and sustainer.** You can take or leave some of these space facts, but the scientists at NASA say, *"Our Milky Way galaxy is just one of the billions of galaxies in the universe. Within it, there are at least 100 billion stars, and on average, each star has at least one planet orbiting*

it. This means there are potentially thousands of planetary systems like our solar system within (just our) galaxy!". Are we starting to feel small yet? Are we starting to imagine how big Jesus is if you call yourself a Christian? A manger can't exactly contain him.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." This is a good time to mention that John loves using binary opposition in his gospel, because he's reaching so clearly back to Genesis. *Life and death, light and darkness,* being two main examples. Can you guess how he describes Jesus? **Jesus is the light with whom darkness can't compete, the life with whom death can't contend**. What kind of darkness and death? Well, everything frightening and problematic out *there,* Jesus can handle. *And everything frightening and problematic inside us,* Jesus can handle. John's speaking cosmically and morally. Space isn't scary to Jesus, and neither are the depths of my heart. Jesus is the light who can't be snuffed out, and the life who can't be destroyed. As John says later in his gospel (as do the other gospel writers) even when you think you've snuffed him out or have totally destroyed him, Jesus will shine, Jesus will live. He is light. He is life - the source billions of stars, of thousands of galaxies. So when we sing, "yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so" or "this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine", to put it very mildly, we can't possibly comprehend power of that light, life and love.

We've just done an *extremely* light survey of The Gospel of John's opening words. Libraries are literally full of research on John's incredible biography of Jesus, and I encourage you to dig further into John's gospel through the season any beyond in our daily attention to Scripture – there's so much more to learn. But an important note. We don't listen to the gospel first as researchers, but as bang average human being, here one minute and gone the next in the vast fabric of space and time. We're just people with worries, fears, unanswered questions, and unanswerable questions. And we're here trying to talk about and trust Jesus. Trusting the light in the darkness, trusting he's the life that death's no match for.

As we begin this crazy and comforting season, please hear this on this first day of Advent: by all means be warmed by the kindness and intimacy of a baby in a manger, but as John insists, don't mistake Jesus for anything less than what and who he is. Christmas is more than cuddly. It's deeper personal, and it's indescribably powerful. It's why we shout, "let heaven and nature sing!" - this is cosmic, eternal stuff. We're comforted by the humility in the cradle, yes, but we're also inspired at Christmas to look up at the stars, gobsmacked to hear that the one above and beyond every light we see and can't see has been held and can be trusted. At Christmas we take Jesus in our arms, which leads us to put our lives in Jesus' more than capable hands. Hands full oceans and mountains, of planets and stars, of you and me.

So here at the beginning of the season: as Dickens encouraged, be a child this Christmas season. Some of us are professionals, others homemakers, others educators, business owners, students. First, be a child. Be small, be dependent, be filled with wonder and need and curiosity and tears. Christmas signals to us that the time for pretence is over, we can quit the charade of self-sufficiency, and let it all hang out.

So if your mind is a mess, if you're your own worst enemy, if the future is unsure, if the future is terrifying – the light shines in the darkness. If you're lost beyond words, if you're anxious about tomorrow – the light shines in the darkness. If you're sick, if someone you love is sick, if you've failed worse than you ever feared, if you're desperate for hope – the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can't overwhelm it.

My friends, Jesus is *more than capable* of holding and healing us. We can bring him *anything*, because *nothing* compares to him. At Advent and Christmas we widen our gaze to see our life set in God's big picture, drawn to devotion and worship. *O Come Let us Adore Him, Christ, the LORD.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What has been your relationship to John's Gospel (if any?)
- What of Jesus does John show us if we read his gospel this time of year?
- How does John's vision of Jesus' inform your vision of Jesus? Is there anything you're picking up, or need to put down?
- How will John 1.1-18 shape or inform your holiday season?

[i] Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Carol"