

*In the Beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

The first chapter of the Gospel of John is my very favorite reading from the Bible. With musical language it invokes the Christian world view at its most glorious. It is mysterious, cryptic and complicated, and different things pop out for me each time I read it. Since Christianity was new, this opening chapter of John has both evoked and taken on layers and layers of theological meaning. John, unlike the other three gospels, does not begin with a story about the life or birth of Jesus but with a poetic description of the cosmic Christ, and this passage has been central in shaping Christian doctrine over the centuries.

In fact, John's gospel is far more doctrinal than the other three gospels, and can sometimes be confusing in its poetic approach. And frankly, it can also often jar our sensibilities and bring up some uncomfortable baggage. Because the Gospel of John makes no bones at all about asserting that Jesus is more than a prophet, more than a wise teacher, more than just an all around nice guy to follow. In John's gospel we're told in the very first sentence that Jesus the Word was not only with God in the beginning but, in fact, is God. That's a big statement. And the Gospel of John is full of big theological claims like this one. Talk to anyone who has been burned or wounded by the church, and they'll likely tell you why in a way that somehow harkens back to some doctrinal statement made in the Gospel of John that they either see as nonsensical or hypocritical.

Because of the human tendency to take things quite literally and to try to distill complicated things down into simpler concepts, people often try to reduce John's gospel into simple, understandable facts, even though it is overflowing with complex historical references, imaginative and free flowing metaphors and bold theological challenges. By trying to tame and contain John's audacious statements of faith, the "Word of God" has often been used more as a blunt instrument than as the nuanced and complex signpost that it is – a signpost which through its complexity manages to point those of faith toward deeper understanding. The church has at times used a literal interpretation of the Gospel of John to fuel the fires for things like Crusades against the Moors or violent persecutions of so-called heretics or the holocaust of World War II. And we know all too well that this way of taking the Bible literally is not just an issue of the past. It pervades our lives today. Televangelists proclaimed that Hurricane Katrina was brought on by the residents of New Orleans, who they said were refusing to obey the Word of God. Some of our Anglican brothers and sisters this very day feel unable to abide with the Episcopal Church because they believe our actions have gone against the Word of God. It is as if we believe we can actually not only understand and interpret God's unimaginable word, but speak for God, too!

But we humans are like that. We always want to feel like we're in control and that we understand the territory. We re-create things in our own image. Perhaps when you were younger, you received a "Red Letter" edition of the Bible in which the words of Jesus were printed in red ink so that the "Word of God" would be easier for you to understand – and the Bible could become a rulebook for you to follow to live an upright life. But just taking those few words and phrases out of their full context diminishes the wholeness of the Bible, and can even diminish the wholeness of God, reducing God's glorious word into a too simplistic guide for living – into the realm of the bumper sticker that says "God said it, I believe it, that settles it."

But having a literal interpretation of the Bible is not the exclusive realm of conservatives. In the 90's, a group of liberal theologians called the Jesus Seminar undertook the heroic task of cross referencing the gospels with multiple sources to see if they could discern which of those red words might actually be genuine words that the historical Jesus, the man, might actually have really uttered. And after years of painstaking research into historical and archeological records, they printed their own red letter version of the gospels. The few words and phrases of Jesus

that they all agreed were probably historically accurate were in red. Those that were in doubt but were *possibly* historically accurate, they printed in pink, and those words that they all agreed were clearly composed doctrinal statements rather than actually having been spoken by Jesus himself were written in gray. In their final version, only about 18% of the words of Jesus in Matthew, Mark and Luke were printed in either red or pink, and in the Gospel of John, nearly all the sayings of Jesus were judged inauthentic and printed in gray.

So the arguments go on and on from all directions about what the Word of God really is, and the issues of the Bible and its interpretation are so complicated, that it may seem easier to just abandon the whole thing – to find meaning in other places and other sources. People leave the church over these things quite regularly, or at least check out when the subject comes up. But yet, year after year at Christmas time, we still read this mysterious and beautiful passage from the Gospel of John in church. And the church still embraces the Scriptures just as they were set down centuries ago. Because we recognize that the Word of God, Jesus, the Bible, are not static and unchanging, recorded once and for all in stone, even though the actual written words have been the same for generations.

We are not meant to be slaves to God's word. As Paul preached centuries ago, Jesus, the Word, the Logos in the original Greek, came to earth to reveal what it means to have faith, to free us from being subject to the stern disciplinarian of law written in stone. Just as our lives are never as simple as black and white, Jesus the living man, Jesus the word, Jesus the Christ is more complex than any law. Christ comes to us to be in living relationship with us, to have a continuing and deepening conversation with us, to enter into the many complexities of our lives, and transform us from being slaves of the law into having the power to become children of God – heirs of the very Kingdom. Even though the written word may point us in the right direction, Christ is too immense and immeasurable to be fully captured by a few simple words on a page.

So is the Bible the Word of God? Yes, it is, because Christ speaks to us through those words – not in a way that is clear and black and white and simple to interpret – but in a way that is alive, continually speaking, and still being heard afresh by each of our hearts in the way we most need to hear it every time it is read. The Bible is the Word of God not because God himself wrote it down or animated some ancient person's hand to write it down just as he dictated it. The Bible is the Word of God because Jesus the Word, somehow and mysteriously comes to us through its strange collection of words and stories – comes to us new and fresh everyday – every time we take the time to use our ears to listen.

The prophet Isaiah wrote of his encounter with God, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." An encounter with God, which for us Christians is an encounter with Jesus Christ, does not just give us a new way of thinking about things. It brings us a new way of being, of perceiving ourselves, of experiencing our bodies, our lives, our relationships with God and the world. Through the Word of God, through Christ, we are clothed in new garments of salvation and righteousness, and filled with a new and burning desire, as a bride or a bridegroom has for their beloved.

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth. For in him is life and light, and from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. Thanks be to God. Amen and Amen.