

Gary L. Bagley
Hilton Presbyterian Church
Newport News, Virginia
December 24, 2009

Most Recently
John 1:1-14; Hebrews 1:1-2

One Celtic response to the reading of scripture is:

*For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us*
Thanks be to God

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews was saying something similar in the opening sentence—“God has spoken to us in many ways in the past. Most recently, God has spoken to us through Jesus. “The Word of God” means far more than writings in the Jewish Bible or the Christian Bible. “The Word of God” really means anything and everything that contains the real presence of God and God’s message to us—privately or corporately as a community of faith, a nation of people, or a world community.

Like the other three gospels, the Gospel of John is unique unto itself. There is no birth story. A Christmas pageant based on the fourth gospel would feature one child speaking one line, in front of a curtain of black velvet: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” While it might constitute great savings in the costume and props department, it would no doubt leave the audience feeling shortchanged on a Christmas Eve.

But for this gospel writer’s purpose, the minimal use of characters and props is intentional. The one character is a man sent from God whose name is John. He is not John the Baptist (as Matthew introduces him) or John the baptizer (as Mark introduces him) or John the son of Zechariah (as Luke introduces him). He is just plain John, who will not even say that much when the religious authorities come to question him.¹

They want to know who this noisy man is, this man who will not shut up

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor’s comments on the lectionary reading found in *Feasting on the Word*, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville: 2008), 69-71.

about the light he saw fall to earth, who is baptizing people to help them see the same light, although he has no license to do this, from them or anyone else. The authorities want this John to say who he is, but all he will say is who he is not. He is not the Messiah (never mind that no one asked him that). He is not Elijah. He not the prophet-like-Moses awaited by Israel since Moses' death.

When the authorities press John to say something about himself, he will not even choose his own words. Instead, he paraphrases the prophet Isaiah. "I am the *voice*," he says. He is neither the light nor the Word. He exists to testify to the one who is those things. His being is for the sole purpose of bearing witness to the one whom he is not.

By the time John finishes telling the authorities that they do not know this one, though he stands among them, and that John himself is not worthy to untie the thong of this one's sandals, the negatives in these thirteen verse reach a grand total of ten "nots," "neithers," and "noes." Here, then is a stunning refusal to place the coming one into any of the theological boxes prepared for him, along with an equally emphatic rejection of the religious authorities sent to vet John the Voice.

It is as if the author has asked his readers to watch while John performs the old trick of yanking the tablecloth off the table that has been set for the Messiah. Everything is in place—the best china, the six-piece silverware settings, the Waterford Champaign glasses. The whole point of the trick is to yank the cloth so quickly that all these treasures are left trembling where they stand, but that is not how it happens this time. When John yanks the tablecloth, he takes everything with it—not, not, no, neither, not. The expected crash never comes. All the tableware simply vanishes as if it never were. Only then can John, standing all by himself in front of the black velvet curtain, do what God has sent him to do: testify to the light, and to the light alone.

Faith and hope have a way of cancelling each other out this time of year. Faith is radical trust in what God is doing, even when it is not clear. Even in the wilderness, even without a proper title for himself or a proper name for the coming One, John the Voice goes on testifying to the light. Without costume, props, supporting cast, or a production budget, he survives on the bare minimum of certainty about what God has sent him to do. As Meister Eckhart

has said, God is found in the soul not by adding anything but by subtracting.

Hope, on the other hand, can easily assume the dimensions of individual and corporate wants—I hope for a white Christmas, a peaceful church, a closer relationship with Jesus, a God who makes sense. While there is nothing wrong with any of these hopes, they still carry considerable cargo, suggesting that I know not only what my community and I need from God, but also how God might best come to us. The only hope that belongs on this Messiah table is the bare hope of God’s arrival, sweeping all clutter away.

One of the many documented miracles that have occurred in Lourdes, France, took place in 1957. A French father took his ten-year-old son, blind from birth, on a pilgrimage from Brittany to Lourdes. At the shrine, the child begged his father to pray for him. His dad prayed aloud, “Lord, give my boy his sight.” Instantly, the boy could see. He looked around. He saw flowers, trees, green grass, the open sky. Then, he looked into his father’s eyes, the eyes that went with the only voice he had known during ten long years of darkness and loneliness.

When he saw his father, can you guess what he said?

“Oh boy. Everybody’s here!”

John the Voice came to bare witness to the light. He was not the light. He came to testify to the light. Light shines in the darkness, but the darkness can not overcome it. The true light enlightens everyone.

The Light is among us. Do you sense it?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, open our hearts. Fill us with new life. Show us the way. AMEN.

Isaiah 9:2-7

2The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness-on them light has shined.
3You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when
dividing plunder.
4For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.
5For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire. 6For a child has been born for us, a son given
to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7His authority shall grow
continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his
kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do
this.

Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12)

1Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the
prophets, 2but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he
appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3He is the
reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he
sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for
sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4having become as
much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than
theirs.

John 1:1-14

1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word
was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being
through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come
into being 4in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5The light
shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a
witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself
was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9The true light, which
enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the
world did not know him. 11He came to what was his own, and his own people
did not accept him. 12But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he
gave power to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood or of the
will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

1In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world
should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while

Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"