

UNDERNEATH ARE THE WORDS

John 1:1-5; 10-14

2nd Sunday after Christmas, a; January 2, 2011

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Prayer: Dear God, in the newness of this year, speak to us the age old words of your love for us in the person of Jesus Christ. Help us to hear something new, something hope-filled; something startling so that we might be a hope-filled and loving people. Amen.

Every Gospel begins the story of Jesus in a different way. Matthew tells us about Joseph and his wife and some wise men from the east. Luke tells us about Mary and her singing when she heard the news that she would be the mother of the Savior of the world, and some shepherds who heard angels sing. Mark cuts to the chase and starts with Jesus as an adult about to be baptized.

The gospel according to John begins with a hymn of sorts. It is a song in praise of God and God's glory present in the face of Jesus. It states that the beginning of the gospel of Jesus does not begin in the manger or at his baptism, but at the beginning of all creation. John says that just as the light once separated the darkness to form night and day, just so the light of God has come into our darkness to show us the way.

And the way John does this is by describing Jesus as the Word: a word uttered to bring in creation; a word now become flesh so that we might hear it, see it, touch it. It is a very unique testimony as to who Jesus is, and I am drawn to it every year at this time.

One of my all time favorite movies, probably in the top 5, certainly the top 10, is *A River Runs Through it*. Part of the attraction, I'm sure, is that it is the story of a Presbyterian minister in Montana, and his two very competitive sons; and the favorite activity of all three is fishing—fly fishing.

Though I have never been fly fishing (Believe me, you don't want to take me), it is obvious that fly fishing is as much art as sport. Apparently you take a rod seven feet long, which is as big around as your finger, and use line as fine as thread. You attach a tiny lure, designed to look like an insect. Then, with great dexterity, you whip the rod, and line, and lure back and forth until the lure sails out and lightly descends on the surface of the water.

But the movie is more than just a movie about fly fishing. It tells the story of the whole world, really, by looking at one community, one family. It is a world where God is intimately involved, but seldom named. (It was not a Billy Graham movie where someone comes to Jesus in the final scene.) It is a movie that ponders the mysterious depths of God's love for people who use their talents for good and evil. It is about two sons, each trying to find his place in the world. It is about the struggle we all face.

Early in the movie, the father takes his two young sons down to the river. Even a fishing trip is an opportunity for the father to teach the boys. When one of them finds a fossil, the father says, “Boys, the river flows through the land over the rocks to the sea. The rocks are half a billion years old, and show the marks of rain drops which fell long eons ago. And underneath the rocks are the words of God. Listen.” And they all lean over and listen to the gurgling river.

“Underneath are the words,” he said. Older than the rocks. More life-giving than water. I have never heard a more poetic statement of faith. “Underneath are the words.”

It is the Word of God that calls the world into being. It is the Word made flesh that gives it its meaning; it is the Word eternal that holds it all together. Underneath are the words of God, even when we are not sure what they are saying.

That Montana, fly fishing, Presbyterian minister had been reading the Gospel of John.

We live in a world that thinks words are cheap, disposable, and empty of permanent meaning. Politicians carefully plan their lies for maximum deniability; advertisers constantly boast of new and improved versions of the same old things; contracts become long and more complicated trying to find ways to make people stand by their words. (One time a lawyer friend of mine told me that in his course on contracts, the first two days focused on writing the perfect contract. The rest of the term was spent on how to break it.)

In our jargon words are ordinary, small, and flimsy as a soap bubble. “Talk is cheap.” “It was just a speech.” “He said it, but I don’t think he meant it.”

And with the flimsiness of our words comes the growing sense that everything is caving in; that all creation is coming apart at the seams; or, in Paul’s words, “all creation is groaning in travail.” Promises aren’t kept; vows don’t last; contracts are dismissed; laws are broken even before the ink is on the paper. Even the treasured “I love you” has become as common as the football player saying “Hi, mom,” to the TV cameras.

On this first Sunday of the new year, as we look back at the old and look forward to the new, where do we find the courage to go forward? What do we trust? Where is our hope? What word can you believe?

John said our hope is in God, who spoke the Word, sent the Word, who dwelt among us full of grace and truth. At the beginning of this new year with all the changes that a new year brings, it is important to remember again the old, old story. And the world that God has spoken to us. Jesus is God’s Word: a promise, an invitation, a welcome.

To summarize John, those who trust this word find their place in God’s creation. They find their feet upon a path laid down long ago. They find themselves in the company of brothers and sisters who do not forsake them during the hard days and hard nights. This is God’s gift to those who trust the Word.

I remember one of my professors telling about the years of pain in his own family, as his wife suffered from severe depression. She was finally hospitalized, a near-zombie. All the life and joy had been drained out of her by the illness. He said, “The worst part of it all was this. I would go and sit by her bed day after day. I would take her hand in mine and tell her that I loved her. But she would not believe me.”

Now, this story has a happy ending. After months, she began to recover. After some years she was well. He stuck with her through it all, until the day came that she could again believe his words—words made true by his sitting with her through the darkest hours.

Jesus is that eternal Word, from before creation, who has come in person to take our hand, and lead us back into the family of God. He will not give up on us, or on this creation; until we trust, until we are whole and wholly God’s.

I have to admit that I don’t fully understand it all. Philosophy was not my forte in college. But that does not keep me from trusting, from trusting that love is at the heart of all creation. At the very end of the movie, after Paul, the youngest son who was quite a fisherman and in some ways the apple of his father’s eye, but always the rebel, the mischievous one, gets beaten to death and dumped in an alley by some characters that Paul had gotten involved with. In the final scene the father is preaching. He doesn’t refer to his son directly, but he does say something that he had always known and preached, but now had a special poignancy.

“You can love completely without complete understanding.”

This I know, this I trust, but this I do not understand: God does not give up on us, and at the center of God’s heart is love. We believe, we trust, until we are whole and wholly God’s.

Until that day comes, the rivers flow to the sea. They flow over the rocks, which are half a billion years old; rocks touched by the rain that fell eons ago. And underneath the rocks are the words of God. Listen closely, and you will hear all that you need to know, for this year and the next ... and the next ... and the next.

Amen.

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