

In the Beginning
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Prepared by Rev. Tim Moon
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The stories we tell ourselves. The stories we let ourselves believe and live by. These stories matter. They shape how we understand ourselves. They form our consciousness and unconsciousness. They drive how we engage others and determine what we believe ourselves capable of and what we believe we deserve. Sometimes we may even project these stories onto others. Our stories begin in our birth and shine through the artistic and beautiful gifts given to us by our Creator. Our stories begin with light and love. And as we are greeted by this world, our stories begin to evolve, change, and are molded by family, friends, and our life experiences. Through this process, we will experience light AND darkness, joy AND grief, encouragement AND insult, love AND indifference.

The stories that form who we are have powerful influence over how we live out our lives. So when these stories berate us with our darkness, our weakness, and our insecurities, it can prod us to believe that is all we are capable of being, which is when we need someone to retell our story. As I was writing this sermon, I was reminded of Kathryn Stockett's character Aibileen Clark from her book, *The Help*. Aibileen was a maid for the Leefolt family during the Civil Rights Movement in Jackson, MS. Her main responsibility was caring for the Leefolt family's little girl, Mae Mobley. Most of the time, Mae Mobley's mother treated her as if she were a nuisance, or unimportant, or in the way. But as a corrective, Aibileen worked to reshape Mae's story by saying words like, "You is kind, You is smart, You is important." We need to hear stories like these about ourselves, about our goodness.

Similarly, John's telling of the Christmas story begins to "re-shape" the meaning of Jesus' birth. In John's version, there were no donkeys, or shepherds, or a manger, or an inn keeper. Nothing about the wise men or angels singing. He simply begins with: "In the beginning was

the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." If Matthew and Luke focus in on the Word made flesh moment, John chooses to zoom out, all the way out. John was about metanarrative before the word "metanarrative" was cool. John's Gospel was the last one to be written, so what was John trying to re-direct us toward? What did he think people were missing about the birth of Christ? What "corrective" was he offering us?

When we look into John's telling of the Christmas story, it beckons back to Genesis... "in the beginning." In the beginning was the Word...In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. For John, Jesus the Christ didn't come into existence in a manger in the Middle East 2000 years ago. The Spirit of Christ, the Word was present in the creation story. The first command God spoke into existence on Earth was "let there be light." God spoke the Word, and there was light and the light filled the Earth. Later, God breathed breath into Adam and Eve in the garden and they were full of light and goodness and joy and union with God. And it was very good.

Author and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor, says "before his name was Jesus, his name was the Word, and he was with God from the very beginning of creation, bringing things into being, making things happen, shining light into the darkness. He was God's self, God's soul, God's life-force in the world, invisible and indispensable. He was the breath inside all living things. He was the electric spark that charged their hearts. He was the fire inside the sun, the space between the stars, the axis around which the galaxies spun. He was God's message to the world, and the message was life. The message was light."¹ In this way, the light of Jesus filled the world long before the manger scene.

Jesus the Christ is the light of the world and is filled with life and goodness and creativity and joy. John's Christmas message is that this light has been stirring from the beginning, comes forth in the

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Full of Grace and Truth," *Pulpit Resource*, January 2, 2000, p. 4.

flesh through Jesus, and surges through the world in various forms today.

So why was this so important to John? Didn't Matthew and Luke adequately portray Jesus as light coming into the world? Did they not show how joyful a day this was by telling of singing angels and kings bearing gifts? What did he think we were missing? What was his corrective? "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." As John wrote, he wrote during times of war, violence, and oppression. These conditions were quite similar to the world Jesus was born into and lived in. Yes, when Jesus was born the angels, and the wisemen, and the shepherds rejoiced – but , simultaneously, an egotistical and greedy king was calling for his death. In fact, Jesus' entire ministry engaged with the darkness of this world. For those whose worth was diminished through labels of subordinate status assigned by the rich and powerful – woman, slave, poor, foreigner, immigrant, Samaritan, homeless, lame, Gentile, leper – Jesus shed light on their invaluable worth by dining at their tables, inviting them into his teaching circles, and loving them in ways the world had failed to. For those shamed and defined by their darkest acts – the prostitute, the adulterer, the persecutor, the murderer--It is true that Jesus does not gloss over or ignore the darker parts of these people. In fact, many times he lovingly urged the darker corners of their soul into the light. But more importantly, he engaged those deemed unworthy by society as fully human and shed light on their immeasurable worth by not defining them by their darkest moments. As the Word was made flesh, Jesus shows us what this goodness and light can look like. He faces the darkness of suffering, sadness, and heartache of the human experience and shows love. In the form of light and love, Jesus offers a corrective to the stories guiding how they viewed themselves.

And so we have the age old theme. The one that is thousands of years old and has kept box offices busy even in most recent weeks: Light vs Darkness. The Force vs. the Dark Side. Which will triumph? And are we darkness? Or are we light? Sometimes it can feel like we are one or the other. But this dualistic, either/or, good or bad, light or dark,

winners or losers mentality is not helpful. Because the light came into the darkness, right? The light didn't banish the darkness, didn't destroy it, but came in the midst of it. The human story includes good and bad, light and darkness, joy and sadness, love and hate, equality and dehumanization. In Jesus' life, death and resurrection, he shines a light in the darkness. Through our own human experiences we know that we are both light AND darkness. We are both, and we are still, very, very good because God is light and the darkness does not overcome.

Finally, John's retelling of the Christmas story pulls us out of one particular moment and offers a comprehensive look at ALL moments. This story of the light and dark within us has woven its way throughout our collective history as well as our individual ones. FOR JOHN, the Word has been present in each of these moments from the beginning until now. Today's lectionary text in Ephesians fits nicely in John's metanarrative. In verse 10, it says that Jesus plans to "to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." The Greek word used here is *anakephaloisathai*. It just rolls off the tongue, doesn't it? This word means to bring all the parts together around an organizing head to create a whole. Rob Bell points out that *anakephalaoisastai* can also mean to recapitulate or retell the story around this organizing head.² John's retelling from a metanarrative perspective reminds us that the Christ is the corrective and reconciles all our light and dark, our joy and sadness, our insecurities and triumphs, our good decisions and bad decisions and says it's ok, I'm bringing it all together in my grace. Isn't that what grace and love are? To see someone with all of their light and darkness and to say, "You are good, you are loved. You are a child of God." John's large scale retelling of the Christmas story reorganizes all of our existence around a new head, a new source that reshapes our story into one of unending grace.

² Rob Bell, "19 Letters!" The Robcast. Podcast Audio, May 4, 2015, accessed on December 30, 2015. <http://robbell.podbean.com/>.

One of my theology professors, Roger Olson describes the head as “the source or origin of something, such as the head of a river or stream.”³ I think this is a beautiful image. We all drift down a river with the source of life flowing all around us, through us. And this river is grand enough to handle our fears, our insecurities, our dark emotions, the worst versions of ourselves, and continues to push us forward to light, and love, and understanding, and grace. The river weaves all of our unique stories together as the source continues to breath life in his creation.

As we begin a New Year, a time of new beginnings, may we reflect on the stories that direct our paths. What stories do we tell ourselves? What stories are we allowing ourselves to be told? Do they say: I’m not good enough? I’m not valued? I’m not smart? No one cares about what I think? Everything needs to be perfect? And also, what stories should be exposed by light? Do we turn a blind eye to injustice? Do we allow ignorance to shield us from truth? Do we repress our pains? Do we ignore our dark emotions? Do we allow our insecurities to hurt others? And as we begin a New Year, may we follow John's gaze toward the very beginning when there was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. May we seek out this light. For even when we, ourselves, are overcome, this light lives and breathes life into nature, and people, and language all around us, and this light will not be overcome.

³ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 74.