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John 1:1-5

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HAIL, GLADDENING LIGHT

“Hail, gladdening light!” These words begin each verse of our offertory song: *Joyous Light*, written by Chris Tomlin and others. Though this is a new song (2004) it has ancient roots, for it is based on a Greek hymn from the third century, *Phos hilaron*. “Hail, Gladdening Light” is how John Keble rendered that phrase in his 1834 translation of the hymn. The Greek word *hilaros* developed into our English word “hilarious,” so we might translate *Phos hilaron* as “Hilarious Light.” But we use “hilarious” in a very different sense, denoting something that is very funny or uproarious. The Greek word, though, denotes cheerfulness. The adjective and its cognate noun are used once each in the New Testament: “it is the *cheerful* giver God loves” (2 Cor 9:7); “the one who does deeds of mercy should do so with *cheerfulness*” (Rom 12:8). Here again we’re tripped up by our modern English usage, for cheerfulness is often used to describe someone who is simply chipper or upbeat. Biblical cheerfulness, by contrast, is a deep-seated Joy. Marva Dawn picked up on this word, entitling her book about Romans 12:1-8, *The Hilarity of Community*. Years ago I had the privilege of taking a class from Marva. Despite her numerous physical ailments she is one of the most truly joyful people I know. Every time she uses the word joy in her books, and she uses it frequently, she capitalizes it: Joy. She has true hilarity—in the old sense. But her hilarity must have been too much for some marketing executive for the title of her book was subsequently changed to *Truly the Community*.

The Christmas season, or the Holiday season as it is increasingly called, is billed as a season of cheer and joy. But for many the cheer and joy are hollow. How many Christmas gifts are given by genuinely cheerful givers rather obligated givers? How many family gatherings actually enhance joy rather than expose dysfunction, pain or loneliness?

Where is true Joy to be found? The early church knew. Each evening, when it was time to light the lamps, they sang this song, *Phos hilaron*: a hymn of praise to the triune God who has shone his light into the world through his Son. Jesus Christ is the joyous light of the heavenly glory. He is himself full of Joy and he bestows Joy on those into whom he shines. With cheerful hearts these early Christians praised the giver of cheer: “Hail, Gladdening Light!”

The early church sang *Phos hilaron* at the lighting of lamps, a daily event that required some work which brought with it the opportunity for reflection on the significance of light. Now at the end of a day we simply flick a light switch and think nothing of it. But the season of Advent restores to us the opportunity to reflect upon the symbolism of light.

Advent is the beginning of the Church Year. By at least 1500 years ago the church had settled on an annual cycle to give rhythm to its services, to provide set times for reflecting upon the life of Christ and its implications for the life of the followers of Christ. There is nothing sacred about the Church Year. God commanded Israel to commemorate its history at certain set seasons each year; the keeping

of these feasts was a holy obligation. Next Saturday Jews will commence their 8-day festival of Hanukkah, which is itself a festival of lights. It wasn’t commanded in the Old Testament, but we read of its observance in the New Testament, as the Feast of Dedication. But that was then; this is now. Paul said that these set times were only a shadow of things to come, but the reality is found in Christ (Col 2:17). There are no longer sacred times or seasons; even the Sabbath is no longer sacred. Why then do we bother with the Church Year? Isn’t it a return to the shadows? The Church Year is only a tool, not a sacred obligation. It can be a useful tool to guide our thought and practice. We are not formally a liturgical church, but over the last ten years we have tried to be a little more intentional about observing certain seasons within the church year. This includes Advent.

Advent is a season marked by the lighting of lamps and the singing of certain songs. Before us we have an Advent wreath; this being the second Sunday of Advent, two candles are lit. Advent means “coming”; it is a season when we reflect upon God’s promises to come to his people to save them, upon his promises to restore light to a dark world. But we look upon these promises from the vantage point of the church, when the promised hope has begun to become reality. Nevertheless, the story is not over yet: as we look back to the first advent of Jesus we also look ahead to his second advent.

Several times in recent years we have taken some of these weeks to present a series of Advent messages. Most frequently we’ve used the infancy narratives from Luke or Matthew. This year, for the first time, we turn to John’s gospel for our Advent series. Over the next three weeks we’ll look at John’s Prologue to his gospel (1:1-18). This is one of the most remarkable passages in the New Testament. The elegance of its language and structure have led many to speculate that it is, in whole or part, an early hymn. Some English versions lay it out as poetry. Even if it’s not poetry, it’s half-way there. This is no ordinary language. Both the subject matter and the manner of presentation of that subject matter evoke wonder and worship.

This Prologue serves as both an introduction to the book and an initial presentation of many important themes within the book. Today we take the first five verses; I’ll take them in three sections.

The Word that Was (1:1-2)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.
(John 1:1-2 TNIV)

“In the beginning...” How would you begin the story of Jesus? In the beginning, obviously. But the four evangelists have different points of beginning and three of them tie their stories of Jesus back to things before those beginnings.

Mark began his gospel in the beginning, but his was “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” For him the beginning was the appearance of John the Baptist calling people to repentance and an-

nouncing the imminent arrival of one greater than himself, a ministry which he connected to Old Testament prophecy by quoting from Malachi and Isaiah.

Matthew began his narrative thirty years earlier with the conception of Jesus, to which he prefixed a genealogy to connect this Jesus to Israel's history, particularly to Abraham, David and exile.

Luke began his story of Jesus still six months earlier with the conception of John the Baptist. At the point at which Jesus began his ministry he inserted a genealogy to tie this Jesus all the way back to Adam, the son of God.

John outdoes them all, going as far back as it is possible to go. John starts at the *very* beginning, a very good place to start. "In the beginning..." Not only is this the very first phrase in the Bible, it is also the Hebrew title of the first book. So John's readers would immediately jump back to Genesis. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." But John goes back before that beginning, back before God created the cosmos. Four times he uses the little word "was" to tell us what was already there at the beginning: not what came into existence at the beginning, but what was already there. This four-fold word provides a rhythmic beat to these two verses: In the beginning *was* the Word, and the Word *was* with God, and the Word *was* God. This *one was* in the beginning with God.

John's beginning is an absolute beginning, beyond which we cannot probe. But already there at that absolute beginning there was something, or rather someone. In the beginning, already there, was the Word.

What is the Word? We use words to express ourselves; they are instruments of revelation. We use words to actually do things, what linguists and philosophers call speech acts. A few weeks ago I performed a wedding. When I said the words, "I pronounce you husband and wife," they actually became husband and wife! "In the beginning" has taken us back to the Old Testament. "The Word" further anchors us in the Old Testament, where it has a rich history. In Genesis 1, God's word, spoken ten times, created a formed, filled cosmos out of a blank world—an unparalleled series of speech acts. Later God expressed himself to people in the word of the Lord. But these speech acts and these words of revelation are still in the future here "in the beginning." Before there was any formless and void earth shrouded in darkness and sea into which God could speak a word, before there were any people to whom the word of the Lord could come, the Word was already there.

The significance of this Word is clarified in John's next statement: the Word was with God. Again John uses the verb "was." But he doesn't use the regular preposition for "with." He uses one that usually means "to" or "toward." The Word wasn't simply with God, he was in front of him, face-to-face with him. Eugene Peterson tries to capture the sense of this: "the Word present to God, God present to the Word" (*The Message*). God and the Word were in relationship, the one with the other. At the very end of the prologue John is more precise about exactly where this Word is in relationship to God: he is "in the bosom of the Father" (KJV, NASB). Many English versions say "at the Father's side," but that's a bit weak. TNIV has improved the NIV to now read "in closest relationship to the Father." Again Eugene Peterson captures the sense the best: this Word, whom the intervening text reveals as the only-begotten, is "at the very heart of the Father."

John's third statement is even bolder: the Word was God. Not simply that the Word was divine or God-like, but that there was

a full equality between the Word and God. And yet the two are distinct for the Word was with God. We're so familiar with this passage that we can be blasé about this. To a Jew of the first century this would have been shocking, unheard-of. The Jews were staunch monotheists, prepared to die rather than compromise this fundamental belief that "the Lord your God, the Lord is one." The early Jewish Christians remained monotheists but realized that the risen, exalted Jesus was fully worthy of praise and worship as God. The Gentiles who came into the church abandoned their polytheism not for another form of polytheism but for monotheism in which both the Father and the Son were worshiped. This worship of Jesus Christ as God is a truly remarkable feature of the early church.

In verse 2 John says nothing new, but drives home his statements of the first verse. "This one," he emphasizes as he points back to his three statements about the Word, "this one was in the beginning with God." John will show in subsequent verses that this eternal presence of the Word to God, is the eternal presence of the Son to the Father, in his bosom, at his very heart.

This is where all joy and gladness start, in the joy and gladness of the Father in the Son and of the Son in the Father. In the gospels we are shown occasional glimpses of this: at Jesus' baptism and later at his transfiguration, a word from heaven pronounced upon Jesus, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." In John's gospel, Jesus gives us an even closer glimpse, talking of the glory he had with the Father before the world existed (17:5), of the Father's love for him before the foundation of the world (17:24). Repeatedly he talks of his love for the Father and the Father's love for him. This is where it all begins.

In verse 3 John moves on to what happened once the beginning began.

The Things that Came to Be (1:3)

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (1:3)

John maintains a careful distinction between what was and what came into being. Four times in vv 1-2 he used the word "was" for what was already there at the beginning. Now he uses the verb "came to be" three times to show what came into fresh existence once the beginning got started.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1 shows us that he did so through his word. He spoke and it came to be. He said, "Let it be" and "it was." Not once, not twice, but ten times in Genesis 1 we read, "Then God said." We call this creation by divine fiat, *fiat* being the Latin for "let it be." But that can seem rather remote and soulless: God snapping his fingers and things happen. John shows us that this word is not simply a ten-fold command. Instead this word is the Word, the one already timelessly present with God in the very beginning before time began, the one eternally present at the heart of the Father.

John continues to maintain the distinction between God and the Word, between the Father and the Son. The Word did not create all things, but was the agent through which all things came into being. It was God who created all things, who brought them into being, but he did so through the Word who was with him, equal to him, but distinct from him. John states this first positively then negatively. In both statements he is emphatic: "all things through him came into being, and apart from him came into being not one thing that has come into being."

I can't even begin to imagine how this worked. I'm on the side of the "what came to be," and so is every scientist and theologian. Who can say how this worked scientifically? Every scientist who has tried to probe the origins of life is on the side of the "what came to be," unable to penetrate back beyond to the "was." Who can fathom how this worked theologically? Every theologian who has tried to plumb the mystery of the Godhead is on the side of the "what came to be." We bow before this text with humility, in awe of even this little glimpse of God the Father and of the Word, his only-begotten Son.

This fundamental divide that John carefully maintains between what was and what came to be has some important implications.

Firstly, God and his Word, who are together on the side of what was, were fully satisfied in their presence, the one to the other. This loving relationship between Father and Son is the archetypal love; it was already there in the beginning.

Secondly, God created a cosmos, the realm of the "what came to be" not because he had to but because he wanted to. He did so not out of any need, but solely for his good pleasure. His creation of the world is the overflow of the love within the Godhead. He expressed himself through his Word because he delighted to do so. God liked the world he made. It's because he took pleasure in it that he goes to such efforts to redeem it.

Thirdly, God is not codependent or contingent upon the realm of the "what came to be." The success of his work does not depend upon us. The success of his purposes depends upon him. He is faithful and he will do it.

Fourthly, we are on the side of the created not the Creator, of the "what came to be" not the "what was." But we so often get this mixed up. We play at being God, or we think that we have to be God, or we try to get God onto our side, which really amounts to the same thing. If we but remember that we are creatures we will be relieved of a great burden, the burden of being God.

If our thinking does not rest on God but on ourselves, if we forget "In the beginning God," if we have too small a view of God or too high a view of self, then we are placing too great a burden on ourselves, a burden we were not made to carry. It then depends upon us to get God onto our side. Fear God and we will have nothing else to fear. Don't fear God, and we will have everything else to fear. Come to a right belief about God and we'll be relieved of many problems.

Life and Light (1:4-5)

In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (1:4-5)

In verses 4-5 John adds yet more themes from Genesis 1: life and light and darkness. Before God spoke his first word the earth was a blank slate, formless and empty. Shrouded with darkness and sea it was devoid of light and life. The first of God's ten words was "Let there be light." "And there was light." As simple as that: God spoke and it happened. God spoke light and the darkness had to yield. On the fifth day God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures." And so he created every living creature in the water. Just like that: God spoke and life came to be.

Since God brought all things into existence through the Word, in the Word was both life and light: the light that banished the darkness and the life that filled the cosmos. But John has in mind more than just the physical light and life of Genesis 1. Life and light are

favorite themes of his story of Jesus. For both John and Jesus life and light are essentially synonymous. Jesus presented himself as the light and the life: "I am the light of the world" (8:12; 9:5), "I am the bread of life...the living bread" (8:48, 51), "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25), "I am the way, the truth and the life" (14:6).

The Father and the Son have life in themselves (5:26). All the rest of us, being on the side of the "what came to be" do not; we have life from God. But because the Son has life he is able to give it to those who come to him (5:40). God gave us life physically through his Son, and he gives us new life spiritually if we but come to his Son.

Opposed to the life and the light is darkness, another frequent theme of John. Darkness is the realm of death. There may be physical life, but because those who live in darkness live in rejection of God the source of true light, they have rejected true life. In the beginning God shone light into darkness. In the incarnation he has done so again.

The darkness tried to grasp hold of this light, tried to master it. The mastery it sought was not that of understanding the Light, but that of bringing it under its supremacy. In the short term it seemed as though the darkness did just that. At the cross the world showed that it would rather continue to live in darkness. Jew and Roman joined together to put out the true light. But God would not allow his light to be put out. He could have withdrawn that snuffed out light back to the realm of eternal day. He did withdraw his light to the realm of endless day, but only after raising him back to life. And then, having returned the light to endless day, he sent his Spirit to shine that light into a world that continued to prefer to live in darkness. And so,

God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. (2 Cor 4:6)

Where are true joy and gladness to be found? Only in him who is the light and the life. We will never find the light and the life until we first accept that we have been living in darkness. So radical is the transformation that God makes when he speaks his life-giving word into us that it can only be described as the transition from darkness to light, from death to life. Is this how we understand our own Christian lives: that we have passed from darkness to light, from death to life?

God sent his Son not simply to make our lives happy, to give us health, wealth and prosperity. He shone his Son into a world of darkness, not to give people just another option among many, but to give people an alternative to the darkness. As John portrays it, there are only two realms: the realm of darkness and the realm of light. God, who in the beginning spoke light into darkness, now speaks light into our darkness.

The Gladdening Light

At the heart of all joy and gladness is the joy and gladness of the Father in the beloved Son who is at his very heart. God does not keep that love to himself. He expresses it. That's what a word is for. He expressed it first in creation. He expressed it again in the incarnation. And he expresses it now through his Spirit who shines light into our darkness, life into our death. John ends his prologue by saying that the only begotten Son, who is in the Father's bosom, has exegeted the Father, has expressed and revealed the Father. That's what a Word is for.

At Advent we sing, “O Come, O Come Immanuel...Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death’s dark shadows put to flight.” We read the Old Testament prophecies that the people walking in darkness will see a great light (Isa 9:2). But we sing these songs and read these prophecies from the vantage point of the New Testament. We know that later we will sing “Joy to the World, the Lord is Come!” “Light and life to all he brings.”

But we are not yet at the end of the story. We await a yet more radiant day. We await the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to banish all darkness. In the new heavens and the new earth there will be no darkness at all. There will be no more night, nor sun nor moon, for God and the Lamb will be the light, in whose radiance we will enjoy true life. And to us God will say, “You are my son, my daughter, whom I love; in you I am well pleased.”

And so we say of Christ, “Hail, Gladdening Light.”

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