

Images of Jesus in the Gospel of John: The Word

On January 12, 2007, Joshua Bell emerged from the Washington D.C. Metro (subway) and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket in the station. He was a young white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a Washington Nationals baseball cap, pretty nondescript. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money and began to play.

For the next 45 minutes, Bell played Mozart and Schubert as over 1,000 people streamed by, most hardly taking notice. If they had paid attention, they might have recognized the young man as a world-renowned violinist. They also might have noted the violin he played was a rare Stradivarius worth over \$3 million dollars. It was all part of a project arranged by The Washington Post, what they called "*an experiment in context, perception, and priorities – as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste.*" The Washington Post wanted to know if, "*In an ordinary everyday setting, at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?*"

Just three days earlier, Joshua Bell sold out Boston Symphony Hall, with ordinary seats going for \$100. In the subway, Bell collected about \$32 from the 27 people who stopped long enough to give a donation. (Gene Weingarten, "Pearls Before Breakfast," The Washington Post, 4-10-07; www.PreachingToday.com)

On a particular day, over 2,000 years ago, God entered our ordinary everyday world, but very few people hardly noticed Him. Even to this day, some might throw Him a tip, attend a Christmas Eve service, or put up a Nativity set, but do they really know who He is?

After all, when God became a man, He was born to a peasant girl in a small farm town and laid in a feeding trough. He wasn't much to look at; but if we pay attention, we'll find that He's so much more than what He seems on the surface.

So who is this Jesus? Over these coming summer weeks, let's take the time to see who Jesus really is, as described by the disciple who named himself, *the one whom Jesus loved.*

The Apostle John wrote his account of the ministry of Jesus last, probably around 90AD. Matthew, Mark and Luke's earlier gospels had focused so much on the humanity of Jesus that by the end of John's life a spreading heresy claimed that "human" was all Jesus ever was. So John wrote his account specifically to focus on the truth of Jesus as fully God; just wrapped in human flesh. And the best way he knew to do that was to use **metaphors** to call comparative attention to Jesus' otherness.

Remember your English lessons? A **simile** makes a comparison between two objects using the words "like" or "as;" a **metaphor** does the same but without using those two words. So John's gospel, talks about Jesus, "the Word of God," "the lamb of God," "the bread and water of life," along with several other metaphors, to help us better understand Jesus' transcendent beauty as He appeared in our otherwise everyday ordinary world.

The first metaphor, by which John opened his gospel account, was Jesus: **THE WORD.**

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

John 1:1

Saint Augustine suggested that these opening lines from John's gospel should be "*written out in gold and placed in the most conspicuous place in every church.*" And I agree, because in these first few words we get the most powerful image of who Jesus really is; let's start with His title: **THE WORD.**

Notice that John intentionally opened his gospel account by making a direct connection with the first words from the book of Genesis which reads, *in the beginning God created.* From the very start, John was equating Jesus with being God.

While Genesis tells us that *God created the heavens and the earth*, now John tells us that through "THE WORD" *all things were made.* The comparison is inescapable, if "God made" and the "Word made," then God and the Word are the same person.

For a long time during His ministry, wanting His miracles to speak for him, Jesus refused to personally make this claim about Himself. But near the end of His ministry – perhaps growing frustrated with the Pharisees stubborn refusal to believe the evidence – Jesus began to directly name Himself as God.

These two Hebrew words translated "I AM," used by themselves, form God's proper name. When Moses asked His name, God's reply was ***tell them "I AM" sent you.*** In the religion of Jesus' day, God's name was considered so sacred that no faithful Jew would even speak it out loud. So whenever Jesus claimed this name for Himself, some would believe but others would pick up stones to kill Him. (Gen.3:14, John 8:24, 58).

We should also notice that many of Jesus' other metaphors, ***I am the bread of life,*** ***I am the good shepherd,*** include God's name as well; thus Jesus was in effect saying "God is the good shepherd, ***I am*** that good shepherd, God gave you bread from heaven, ***I am*** God's bread given from heaven."

But since the power inherent in the Hebrew name, "I AM," is completely lost on us non-Hebrew speaking Greeks, John had to come up with another equally impressive Greek name which is, **THE WORD.**

The Greeks had many petty gods who engaged in lots of misadventures, but around 600BC Greek philosophers coined the name, "**LOGOS**" (THE WORD), for their concept of the ultimate being, the divine mind who was the primary principle in shaping and directing the universe. Thus, in giving Jesus the title of LOGOS, John was saying that Jesus is the very same universe controlling, ultimate being envisioned by the Greeks.

But John didn't want us to then create the opposite heresy – which some have – of saying that Jesus was just a god pretending to be human, so he makes it clear beyond question that while He walked among us Jesus was both and the same.

Who is Jesus? He is the LOGOS, that ultimate, universe guiding being, who became completely human; a person that we could see and touch, and yes ... also hurt, or even kill.

Christian apologist John Dickson once spoke on "The Wounds of God" at a university campus. After his speech, he opened the floor to questions from the audience, and immediately a young Muslim stood up and declared how preposterous it was to think that the Creator of the Universe would be subjected to the forces of His own creation – that He would have to eat, sleep, and go to the toilet, let alone die on a cross.

He argued with Dickson for ten minutes, insisting that the notion of God having wounds was illogical. How could the "Creator of Causes" be caused pain by a lesser entity? It didn't make sense to him, and he considered it "outright blasphemy" as stated in the Koran.

Dickson said he had no argument that would convince the man otherwise. So he simply thanked the Muslim student for demonstrating the radical contrast between the god of the Koran and the God of the Bible. What Muslims denounce as blasphemy, Christian's hold as precious: God has wounds. (John Dickson, *If I Were God I'd End All Pain*, Mathias Media, 2012, pp. 66-67; www.PreachingToday.com)

This takes us from Jesus' Title to His eternal existence: *in the beginning WAS the word.*

The key to Jesus' eternal existence is found in the word, "**was.**" John's Gospel began where Genesis began, saying "In the beginning," but then he inserts Jesus' title along with the word "**was,**" which in the Greek describes a continuous action. Thus, to more accurately translate John's Greek, this opening line should read, "*In the beginning the Word continually was, and the Word was continually with God and the Word continually was God.*"

What John wanted us to understand, was that Jesus was there before creation began; before there was any created matter, there was "The Word," Jesus. There never was a time when Jesus wasn't. Kent Hughes in his commentary on the John's Gospel said, "**Jesus always was wasing!**" The "beginning," therefore, wasn't the beginning of God; instead God and Jesus who are one and the same, was there before the beginning. (Hughes, Kent R., "John – That You May Believe," Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 1999, page 16)

Jesus eternal existence can also be seen in Micah's prophecy that the coming Messiah would be "from everlasting." (NRSV translates "... from ancient days.")

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." (Micah 5:2 NKJV)

Since He always has been, even before the beginning of time itself and has continually been in the presence of God, Jesus, "The Word," and God is one and the same, which John doubly emphasizes by turning the sentence around to now literally say, "*God was the Word.*"

Jesus also confirmed His eternal existence before creation in His final prayer saying: "*So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence **with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.***" (John 17:5 NRSV). Or as the Apostle John emphasized by repeating another of his opening phrases, "*He was in the beginning with God.*"

Thus we have dealt with Jesus' **title** and His **eternal existence**. John then goes on to solidify Jesus' identity as God through two additional descriptions: **Jesus, THE WORD, was also the Creator and the Light**

As we noticed earlier, John is again intentionally paralleling the Genesis record by writing that *"All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.."* (John 1:3).

Not only does this declare Jesus' eternal, creative, existence, but it also indicates that there never has been a time – even now – when all of creation, which includes you and me, didn't depend upon Jesus for its existence.

Some of you might be thinking- "Wait a second, I thought God the Father was the creator, didn't God speak and make things happen?" While you are correct, God spoke and it happened, the full answer is that it is all three members of the Godhead were involved in creation. In Genesis we read that *the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters* (Gen. 1:2 NASB) Then John's Gospel tells us that whenever God the Father said, *let there be....*, it was Jesus, The Word, who did and still makes it happen.

As Paul shared in his letter to the Colossian church,

*"[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, **the firstborn** of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together."* (Colossians 1:15-17)

Contrary to yet another heresy, when Paul calls Jesus *"the firstborn of all creation,"* it doesn't mean that Jesus was the first thing God created. In the Greek language, **"firstborn,"** has nothing to do with birth order. Rather, it speaks to being **of first importance**, of having **preeminence** over everything else.

That's why God said that He would make King David, who was the eighth son of Jesse, *"the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth"* (Psalm 89:27). Thus, Paul was saying that as the *first born of all creation*, Jesus is preeminent, having ultimate authority over all creation.

"He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Jesus holds the universe and everything in it together, from the smallest particle to the entire universe. You might say that Jesus is the ultimate superglue. Everything that we know is all being maintained, kept in existence, by and through the power of God's word: Jesus.

Returning to the Genesis record, the first words God spoke were, *let there be light*. Now, John wants us to know **that light was Jesus**; which is his second metaphor.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (1:5).

Darkness is not a thing; it is the absence of a thing. Darkness is basically the absence of light. You take away light, and what you have left is darkness. The only way that darkness increases

is when light decreases. But when light is shining, darkness is dispelled. The phrasing John uses is that the light of Jesus continually shines and so when the darkness of sin invades, the light of Jesus continues to shine exposing it.

There is so much more that can be said about this metaphor of Jesus as “**the light**,” that deserves closer attention, but such will have to wait for another day.

Thus far, we’ve seen the deity of Jesus through His eternal existence and identity as “The Word” making Him the creator and sustainer of everything including life and light. But John gives us one more description of who Jesus is. **As we have already seen, THE WORD,” which is also “GOD” lives in a relationship with the God (the Father), now we learn that THE WORD also lives in a relationship with us; with humanity.**

A major thing we learn from Scripture is that God is a relational God. He wants and desires relationships. God created humanity in order to live in a relationship with us as He already lives in relationship with Himself. This personal relation within the Godhead is what we know as the **doctrine of the Trinity**; the misunderstanding of which has again been the source of several heresies. Whether or not we can ever fathom it with our puny human brains, this is the truth as hammered in First Council of Nicaea (325a.d.): **while God is one, as clearly stated in the Bible, the Bible also makes it abundantly clear that God also eternally exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.**

And we can see this triune relationship within the Godhead in the very first chapter of Genesis when God decided to make humanity in His own image.

*Then God said, 'Let **US** make humankind in **OUR** image, according to **OUR** likeness.'* (Genesis 1:26a). This is not a mistake; this is exactly how yours and my Bible reads

Thus, the word “with” in John’s passage shows us that Jesus was and always has been in existence, living in a relationship with both the Father and the Spirit before time even began. **But now John goes on to add that Jesus also has always lived in a relationship with us.**

According to John’s Gospel, the purpose of Jesus coming into our world was to be the light of life for humanity, but His relationship with us was not as harmonious as His relationship with the Father; with some of us, it was very contentious, with others it became something special. **We humans either reject and ignore Jesus, or accept Him; thus becoming children of God and fellow heirs with Christ.**

Today the name of Jesus has so saturated human history that it is now considered white noise, people hear the name, but it doesn’t make a dent in their consciousness. Why do so many people ignore or reject Him? May I suggest it’s because neither He nor His message fits into their expectations, into their fallen desires. This is as true now as it was in His day, which Jesus made very clear, when speaking of himself, saying

"And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed" (John 3:19-20)

But thankfully for us, John's gospel continues on to assure us of a better relationship which we can have with Jesus.

"But to all who received him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.." (John 1:12-13)

So "The Word," Jesus, is the source and means of creation, the giver of light and life, He is the one who fulfills all God's commands, the one who sustains all of God's creation, and He is the means which God used to share His life-giving message with humanity.

John calls Jesus "**The Word**," because He was and is the message given to us by God. We like to say that *actions speak louder than words*. What God wants to say to us can be found both in Jesus' actions and His words: what Jesus said and did.

Will Jesus, The Word of God, the Son of God, the Lord God of creation and the light that brings life, be ignored, rejected, or accepted? This is the choice that each one of us must personally make; no one is exempt from this choice. Jesus said, *whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters..*" (Matthew 12:30a)

One final thought. A young woman was once engaged to Mozart before he became famous. However, Mozart was short and somewhat plain looking while other men were tall and handsome, so she broke off the engagement to marry someone else. Later, when the world finally recognized his musical abilities, she regretted her decision. *"I knew nothing of his genius," she said. "I only saw him as a little man."*

Friends, Jesus is no little man. And as He asked the apostles, He also asks a life changing question of each one of us: **who do YOU say that I am?** Think long and carefully about this, your answer will determine your destiny.

Let's pray about this.