



## *Texts in Context*

# Telling the Christmas Story with No Shepherds and Angels (John 1:1–14)

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**I**n the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The opening verse of John is familiar language. Many Christians can recite it by heart. Yet many do not realize that this is a Christmas story. Although John 1:1–14 is always the lectionary text for Christmas Day, relatively few American Christians attend church on Christmas, even when it falls on a Sunday. As a result, this is a Christmas story that is rarely heard.

Perhaps it is not difficult to see why. After all, this is a Christmas story without shepherds or angels, without long journeys by camel or donkey. This is a Christmas without a manger or even a baby. What kind of Christmas is that? We come to church during Advent and on Christmas Eve expecting the story of a Christ who enters the world by humble means, born in a stable. We come expecting to sing “Gloria in excelsis Deo” with the angels. We come with the hopeful expectancy of those awaiting the birth of a baby, those preparing a space for that sweet child in our midst. John’s Christmas story is something unexpected.

The hymnic introduction to John’s Gospel gives us an opportunity to step

*Even without shepherds and angels, John 1 is a Christmas story. It requires, though, a different sermon than the Christmas messages we so often hear: urging us to put aside the inevitable busyness of Christmas and pay attention to the baby in the manger. Those are not wrong, but John proclaims that God has paid attention to us, that the world is transformed by its very Creator, and that we are called to receive this gift that will reorder our lives and the world itself.*

back and reconsider what we assume to be true about the Christmas season. If we can bracket the nativity as we are used to seeing and hearing it (and this is no small matter), we may find in John a new way of understanding Christmas and ourselves.

#### LOST IN THE FOREST AT CHRISTMAS

One common refrain that I hear in sermons during Advent and Christmas is a message that laments how we are absorbed in preparations for Christmas and exhorts us to pay attention to the real meaning: Jesus. I hear prayers confessing our distraction, as well as adult and children's sermons encouraging a focus on Jesus instead of Santa, decorating, or shopping. Elements of the traditional Christmas story often stand in the background. Whether it is the angels announcing the coming of Jesus, the responsiveness of Mary and Joseph, or the shepherds gathered around the manger, the Christmas passages often point us to a more attentive and receptive approach to Jesus. We tell the Christmas story in a way that yields a message like this: "Focus on Jesus. Pay attention. Something important is happening, and you might miss it!"

One Christmas, a number of years ago, listening to this message on Christmas Eve, I found myself aching to hear something more. It was not that I could not relate to the problem of busyness. That evening, my spouse and I had brought our family to a church that was familiar to us but not our regular place of worship because its Christmas Eve service began at four o'clock. With two-year-old and six-month-old sons, we knew they would not make it or, perhaps more to the point, we would not make it through our own church's six o'clock service. We were exhausted by our efforts to prepare to celebrate Christmas in a meaningful way, finish a semester of teaching, and keep a household going on an even keel.

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As I walked the six-month-old back and forth across the narthex, I listened to the preacher nudging us to pay attention to the meaning of Christmas. All of us had spent the last weeks buying, wrapping, cooking, sending cards, and going to parties, and now she asked us to focus on the meaning of it all. She quoted a classic sermon by Frederick Buechner, "The Innkeeper." The sermon is largely in the first person, telling the story of Christmas from the perspective of the regretful innkeeper, who misses the birth of Jesus because he is busy with many things.

"Do you know what it is like to run an inn—to run a business, a family, to run anything in this world for that matter, even your own life? It is like being lost in

a forest of a million trees,” said the Innkeeper, “and each tree is a thing to be done. Is there fresh linen on all the beds? Did the children put on their coats before they went out? Has the letter been written, the book read? Is there money enough left in the bank? Today we have food in our bellies and clothes on our backs, but what can we do to make sure that we will have them still tomorrow? A million trees. A million things....

“Later that night, when the baby came, I was not there,” the Innkeeper said. “I was lost in the forest somewhere, the unenchanted forest of a million trees.”<sup>1</sup>

There was real wisdom to the sermon I heard, as well as to Buechner’s description. His words resonate with modern life and the easy way that we get caught up in a million mindless things. We lose sight of the purpose behind the celebration, the decorations, and the gift giving. I hold up Buechner for consideration not because the message is wrong but because his is a beautifully phrased articulation of something we experience to be true.

And yet, as I bounced that baby along the rear wall of the church, I found myself wanting more from the message of Christmas. I wanted a message that did not hinge on me doing one more thing, as if it is my action or thought makes Christmas real. I wanted the hope that God’s gift of Jesus has already transformed the world, whether I am conscious of it or not.

#### THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS

I find that message in the Gospel of John, where the Christmas story is a story of God’s transforming presence in the world. It is a story of the creative power of God, the same power that first brought forth life on earth. It is a birth story, though not in the way we expect. John’s language alludes to Jesus’ birth—“and the Word became flesh and lived among us” (1:14)—and also to the rebirth of those who believe, to whom the Word gives power to become children of God (1:12–13).

John’s Gospel begins, not with the moment of the incarnation itself, but with its significance. The opening words evoke the creation story: “In the beginning...” (John 1:1; Gen 1:1). Even prior to the creation itself, John hearkens back to the time when God alone existed. As in Genesis, God creates through speech, so for John and other Jewish writers, God’s word existed alongside God from the beginning. John 1:1–2 takes us back to that primordial moment before creation began.

Tied to its creation background, “the word” is a powerful metaphor that expresses a unique relationship with God. In Greek, the word *logos* refers to the spoken or written word, but it also expresses the notion of a thought, idea, or intention, whether or not it is communicated verbally. It makes sense for John to say that “the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1), because the *logos* is an embodiment of the mind of God. As intimately as speech is connected to the speaker, so the Word of God is God and comes from God.

<sup>1</sup>Frederick Buechner, “The Birth,” in *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury Press, 1966) 66–67, 68.

John uses the rich concept of *logos* to express the relationship of Jesus to God. We should recall that the Gospel precedes by about three centuries the development of creedal language to describe the relationship of Christ, God, and the Spirit. Efforts to explain how John's language fits later notions of orthodoxy tend to flatten out the richness of the Gospel and can miss some of the important content of the evangelist's message. John offers a unique metaphorical expression that gives voice to an important piece of his understanding of the identity of Jesus.

God's word is a powerful force, expressing the will of God. In Gen 1, each act of creation is preceded by God's speech: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen 1:3). Later writers affirm this power. The Psalmist also reiterates the relationship of God's word to creation (Ps 33:6–7). And Isaiah expresses the certainty of God's power to accomplish God's will. Speaking in God's voice, Isaiah writes, "My word...shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa 55:11; cf. Wis 18:15–16). God's word is so uniquely one with God that it becomes an agent in God's creativity: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:3). John's expression calls forth the creative power of God, exercised through the word.

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It is not simply that the word causes or gives rise to creation. As God's rational principle, the *logos* orders all creation. It inheres in the fabric of reality. The statement that "all things came into being through him" reminds the reader that God's word has already made its impression on every created thing. There is a strong parallel between John 1 and the description of God's wisdom in Proverbs. Wisdom speaks with her own voice of her role in creation: "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth" (Prov 8:22–23). Wisdom goes on to describe her presence with God in the creation: "When he established the heavens, I was there...when he marked out the foundations of the earth..." (8:27, 29). The poetic description has a point: "And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways" (8:32). The pursuit of wisdom leads to happiness because it aligns the seeker with God's will, an intention that orders and inheres in all creation. John's understanding is similar. All things were made with and through God's word. As in Proverbs, the wise or happy person responds to and seeks to know the intention with which God has ordered human life. The human's role is to receive and to trust (John 1:12). Like the "foolish" of Proverbs, however, many of

those who encounter God's word do not know God or accept God's word (John 1:10, 11; see, for example, Prov 1:7; 12:1–13:25).

Even in the rejection of God's word, John positions the reader to see Jesus as the continuation of God's word and wisdom. The language of the Prologue reminds the reader that the story of the rejection of God's word has repeated itself in Israel's history. "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (1:11). These words clearly resonate with the story of Jesus, but they are also the story of God's word. Indeed, John 1:10–13 is an interesting transitional passage, because the verses could apply easily to the time before or after the incarnation of the word. Positioned before verse 14, there is some reason to see them as descriptive of what has already happened. God has sent forth God's word, through the law, wisdom, and the prophets, and Israel repeatedly has not accepted it. They have turned away: to the golden calf (Exod 32:1–35); to the gods of other nations (see, for example, 1 Kings 11:1–2); to avarice and greed (as in Isa 58). Yet these verses describe equally well the responses of many people to Jesus. "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (1:11). It is not necessary to choose one referent for the verses. Instead, John cues the reader to see the familiar story of God's word played out in the story of Jesus.

For John, the word of God is also expressed in the law. Christians are often ill-equipped to see the continuity between Jesus and the law as the word of God. We have told the story of Jesus as one of his rejection of Jewish legalism in favor of an emphasis on belief. John certainly values belief in Jesus; it is what the Gospel seeks to encourage (1:12; cf. 20:30–31). Yet for John, Jesus is the continuation of the intention and purpose of God, which was also expressed in the law. Thus, there is great continuity between Jesus and the law (cf. 5:39–40, 46–47). Overwhelmingly, interpreters have read a contrast between Jesus and the law in John 1:17: "the law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." To read the verse as creating an opposition between Jesus and the law, the reader must assume that the law is opposed to grace and truth. This is an idea that was foreign to Jewish thought, which understood the law as a vehicle of God's grace, through which God communicated to people the way to draw near to God. John's early readers were likely to assume that the law is a good gift from God. For such readers, verse 17 affirms the importance of the law and points to the presence of God's word in Jesus as a similar expression of grace and truth.

John also wants the reader to know that God's word brings life, as it always has. God's word is elsewhere seen as a life-giving force. Isaiah points to its fruitfulness: "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth" (Isa 55:10–11). Isaiah is pointing to the effectiveness of God's word. God's wisdom and law are life-giving (cf. Prov 8:35; Ps 119:93), and have a ripple effect: the watered earth gives rise to fruit, with benefit to sower and eater alike. So

also in John's Gospel, the life of God's word emanates outward. It is found in the abundance of "grace upon grace" (1:16) that is received by those who are born of God (1:12–13). And it permeates the stories of the Gospel, where the life-giving power available in Jesus flows into the lives of those who believe (see John 3:14–17; 6:35, 40, 48–51; 11:25–27, 40–44).

As in the creation, God's word brings both life and light: "in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:4–5). God's word brought forth light, but it also is light, bringing with it understanding and the knowledge of God. Similarly, the psalmist speaks of God's law as a light (119:105, 130). Yet the word of God is not understood by many and is often opposed (see Baruch 3:20, 31; Prov 9:13–18). So also God's light in Jesus meets with darkness, and brings with it the hope that the darkness will not defeat the light.

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John's radical claim is that this light- and life-giving force has taken human form in Jesus. Although the idea of the *logos* would have been familiar to early readers both from Greek and Jewish philosophical ideas, it is only John who envisions God's word taking on human form: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14). Though simple in form and language, these words posit a fundamental change in the nature of human relationship to God. God's word became flesh. As Gail O'Day writes, "The Word becoming flesh is the decisive event in human history—indeed, in the history of creation—because the incarnation changes God's relationship to humanity and humanity's relationship to God. The incarnation means that human beings can see, hear, and know God in ways never before possible."<sup>2</sup> God's word has always revealed God's will, but Jesus makes God known (cf. 1:18) in a new way. When the word of God becomes flesh, the revelation of God's word is immediate, tangible, and perceptible in the person of Jesus Christ.

#### AND WE HAVE SEEN HIS GLORY

John's Prologue brings with it the possibility of a new sermon. The good news of Christmas is this: it doesn't matter if you're paying attention. The word became flesh independent of human consultation or fanfare. And the change that God wrought is not dependent on human noticing. It permeates creation, making all things new.

It is not that John is unconcerned for human response. Indeed, the Prologue itself is permeated with allusions to human acceptance and rejection of the Word.

<sup>2</sup>Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 524.

The incarnation meets the opposition of the darkness (1:5), ignorance, and rejection (vv. 10–11). Yet at the same time, Jesus is also “the true light, which enlightens everyone” (v. 9). How is it that not everyone sees the light? From the beginning, John lays a framework for the reader to understand something about humans through their varied responses to Jesus.

The Word-made-flesh transforms all creation. Yet not everyone sees it. It is ironic, as Raymond Brown notes, that John the Baptist needs to testify to the light (1:6–8): “Ordinarily light can be seen and there is no need for someone to testify to it; but in [John 1:] 19ff. it is a question of testifying before those who are hostile and who have not yet seen Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> Although God’s wisdom has always been visible in the creation, many do not recognize God in it (see also Wis 13:1; Rom 1:19–20).

For John, the problem is not inattention. Jesus is the light shining in the darkness (cf. 8:12; 9:5). It should be difficult for people to ignore. Throughout the Gospel, the hostility Jesus encounters does not stem from apathy or inattention, but from recognition and rejection of Jesus’ claims. When in John 8 the Jews seek to stone Jesus (v. 59), it is not because they have misunderstood him. Instead, they comprehend the depth of his assumption of God’s name, “I AM” (v. 58), but reject that claim as blasphemy. The deep problem of John’s Gospel is not distraction but a failure to recognize the revelation of God’s word in Jesus.

This is a failure Christians share in today. Gift-giving and preparations for the feast of Christmas cause busyness in our lives, but they can also be elements of recognition and thanksgiving for the gift God has given us in Jesus. A deeper problem may be our failure to accept that the life of Jesus manifests the mind of God, that in his ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection we see the deep purpose of God for creation.

Those who do see Jesus as the Word of God come to know something of the purpose of God, the same purpose that structures the created order. Like others who have sought God’s wisdom, the believer responds by acting in ways that reflect God’s purposes. Receiving Jesus means a reorientation of one’s aims and the source of one’s identity. As John puts it, those who believe become children of God, “born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (1:13). As a Christmas message, John 1 reminds us to trust in the one whose word ordered all things, long before even the first Christmas, and long before the one we celebrate now. At Christmas we celebrate that this word was “made flesh,” and that through him we may come to know the wisdom of God. ⊕

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<sup>3</sup>Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John (1–xii)*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 29A (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 28.