

August 18, 2019
The Tenth Sunday After Pentecost
John 1: 1-6
Rev. Chip Whitacre

Before I left for vacation, I read the Gospel appointed for today in the Revised Common Lectionary. Not remembering that we were using a different liturgy with accompanying lessons for part of the summer. Over our three weeks away I had hammered out a perfect return-from-vacation reflection. Actually, it was yet another rant about the contrast between the quiet of wilderness and the chaos of city life. Fortunately, on Thursday I discovered, much to my surprise, that I was about to write a sermon for the wrong lesson. This was a twofold blessing as it saved me from much embarrassment and you from yet another one of my diatribes about the vagaries of urban life. But it is also a blessing because these few opening verses to John's Gospel are some of my favorites. In language that soars the author speaks to both past and present.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 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. John 1:1-5

The prologue to John's Gospel is one of the most poetic pieces in all of the Bible. It is so beautiful that it is often found in anthologies of world literature. There is some speculation among scholars regarding whether it was included in the original text or added later. But that is not unusual among those who study the Bible. Whatever the case, the themes of light, life, darkness, and others expressed in the prologue, are indeed more fully developed throughout the Gospel. But the poetry is in the prologue. In the portion that we read today, the author of the Gospel is making some important assertions about Jesus. He was there at the beginning of time. He was directly responsible for creation. And he is, therefore, God. And John is also providing a word of encouragement. Assuring the community that the darkness has not won.

But it is actually the first three words of the reading that pulled me back to something that I think is very important. In the beginning. In the beginning was the Word.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. Genesis 1:-3

It sounds so simple. God said. And it was. Out of the mouth of God came a universe that is beyond our imagination. And probably even beyond our ultimate comprehension. It is certainly a mystery beyond our understanding how something so expansive and yet so intricate can be spoken into existence. But maybe the problem is one of imagination. We simply cannot imagine how our spoken word could possibly create anything. But think about it for a minute. The root of any action is an idea that is first spoken, whether to oneself or another person. An idea that becomes compelling enough leads to action. There can be a direct connection between a word and creation of something new. Now we could have a lengthy discussion about where those ideas come from, but that is another sermon. So, let me give you an example of an idea that became a reality.

On April 30, 1937 eight people incorporated The Wilderness Society. It was then, and is now, dedicated to the preservation and management of wilderness areas in the United States. The founders included a number of notable and ultimately influential conservationists including Aldo Leopold and Ernest Oberholtzer, a proponent of the Quetico-Superior wilderness area. Over the years many notable conservationists have served on the governing council, including Sigurd Olson, Gaylord Nelson, Ansel Adams and Wallace Stegner. Harold Zahniser served the organization for almost 20 years - first as executive secretary and then as executive director. It was Zahniser who drafted the Wilderness Act, which was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in September 1964. But here's the thing. The Wilderness Society was incorporated in 1937. But it was actually formed in 1935 by a man named Bob Marshall, Chief of Recreation and Lands for the US Forest Service. It was an idea from an individual. An idea that became a spoken word. A spoken word that became an organization. An organization that has contributed to the dedication of over 110 million of acres of public land to wilderness.

Now let's go back to the Gospel of John for a minute. It seems clear that John is asserting the divinity of Jesus. It is, I think, equally clear that he is encouraging the community. And here's what I wonder. I wonder what John might be telling his readers? Is he telling them that their very existence is both the reason and the proof that the light continues to shine in the darkness? And is he telling them that as long as they are here, God's wisdom and creative energy are here. That it actually continues to flow from the beginning of time through them and into the future. And if they can imagine it and speak it, then it can be. And what does that have to say to us? Now, none of us is likely to speak a universe into being. And few of us will create an organization with the size and influence of The Wilderness Society. And I don't think we need to. We just need to accept the gifts we have been given to use. And use them to their fullest. But if the answer to those questions is yes, then aren't we also sources of that power to create? To speak something into being? To turn our passion into a reality? Imagine that. Amen.