



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: January 3, 2010

A Most Poetic Statement of Faith, Robert B. Culp

John 1:1-5, 10-14

If you have spent any time reading through the four Gospels, you know that every Gospel begins the story of Jesus in a different way. Matthew tells us about Joseph and his wife, and some wise men from the east. Luke talks about Mary and her husband, as well as some shepherds who, as they kept watch over their sheep, heard angels sing. Mark simply jumps in at the beginning of Jesus' ministry as an adult who gets baptized in the wilderness.

The Gospel according to John, though, begins with a hymn. It is a song in praise of God, and God's glory present in the face of Jesus. John begins his Gospel with a song that reminds us of the very first verses in Genesis. And indeed, the advent of Jesus is like the fresh and new beginning of all creation. John says that just as the light once separated the darkness to form night and day, just so the light of God has come into our darkness to show us the way.

Perhaps the most striking and interesting thing about this hymn is John's description of Jesus as the Logos ... the Word. It is a word uttered before all creation began; a word uttered to bring in creation; a word now become flesh so that we might hear it, see it, touch it. There is an extraordinary and deep mystery in this connection between the Word and creation, God and Christ, that draws me back to these opening verses in John quite often.

Recently, I asked Kathy to bring a movie home from the library that I had seen in the past, but wanted to view again ... a movie perhaps you have seen: *A River Runs Through It*. It is one of those movies that seems to get better with each viewing, I think, as there are various layers of meaning within the touching tale this movie tells. You may remember that this is the story of a Presbyterian minister in Montana, and his two very competitive sons ... one educated at Dartmouth who is an aspiring college professor, and the other a hometown boy who is a reporter for a newspaper and who has a gambling and drinking problem. The favorite activity of all three of them is fishing – fly fishing.

Fly fishing is as much art as it is sport. You take a rod about seven feet long, which is as big around as your finger, and use a line that is almost as fine as thread. You attach a tiny lure, designed to look like an insect, and in fact is an insect sometimes. Then with great dexterity, you whip the rod and line and lure back and forth until the lure sails out, and it lightly descends on the surface of the water. There is much of this art that is woven into the movie in a beautiful way, and some of the scenes in the back country of Montana create a awesome and moving sense of nature's wonder and majesty.

But more than that, this movie tells the story of the whole of life by looking closely at one community, one family. It is a life where God is intimately involved, but seldom named or invoked. It is a movie that ponders the mysterious depths of God's love for people who in their lives use their talents for good or evil. It tells the story of two sons who are each trying to find his place in the world, sometimes patiently, sometimes impulsively; sometimes joyfully, sometimes tragically. It is about the struggle we all face in some way along the course of our own lives.

Early in the movie, the father takes his two young sons down to the river, and even a fishing trip is an opportunity for him to teach the boys. When one of them finds a fossil, the father says, "Boys, this river flows through the land over the rocks to the sea. The rocks are half a billion years old, and they show the marks of raindrops which fell long eons ago. And underneath the rocks are the words of God. Listen." And they all lean over and listen to the gurgling waters as they flow by.

"Underneath ... are the words of God." Older than the rocks. More life-giving than water. I'm not sure I have heard a more poetic statement of faith than that short phrase: "Underneath ... are the words." It is the Word of God that calls the world into being. It is the Word made flesh that gives it its meaning. It is the Word eternal that holds it all together. Underneath are the words of God, even when we may not be sure what they are saying. I suspect that Montana, fly-fishing, Presbyterian minister knew the opening words of John's gospel by heart.

You and I are living in a world that thinks words are cheap, disposable, and empty of any permanent meaning. Elected leaders in Washington carefully plan their deceitful tales for maximum deniability. Advertisers constantly boast of new and improved versions of the same old things. Contracts become longer and more complicated trying to find ways to make people stand by their words. One of my minister-friends in Maryland is also a lawyer. He once told me that in his course on contract law, the first two weeks focused on writing the perfect contract, while the rest of the term was spent on learning how to break it!

In our jargon, words are ordinary and small, and they are as flimsy as a soap bubble. "Talk is cheap." "It was just a speech." "She said it, but I doubt very much if she really meant it."

With the frail flimsiness of our words, though, comes the growing sense that everything is caving in, that nothing is to be depended upon or trusted any more, and that all creation seems to be coming apart at the seams. Marriage vows are fragile and don't last; promises are not kept and betrayed; contracts are ignored or thrown away; laws are broken even before the ink is dry on the paper. Even the treasured phrase "I love you" has become as common as a football player saying "Hi, mom" to the TV camera.

This is the first Sunday of a new year for all of us, a new year that will see change within the life and leadership of our church family, a new year that will place before us all profound challenges and opportunities. As we look back at the old and look forward to the new, I'm wondering where do we find the courage to go forward? What do we trust? Where is our hope? What "word" can we believe?

John tells us in his Gospel that our hope is in God – who spoke the Word, who sent the Word, who dwelt among us full of grace and truth. At the beginning of this new year with all the developments in store for this church family, it is important for us to remember again the old, old story ... and the Word that God has spoken to us. Jesus is God's Word – a promise, an invitation, a welcome.

As John puts it, "All who believe this word receive the right to become children of God." Those who trust this word find their place in God's creation. They find their feet upon a path laid down long ago that leads to life in abundance. They find themselves in the company of brothers and sisters who do not forsake them during the hard days and the dark nights. This is God's gift to those who trust the Word.

A Seminary professor once told the story about the years of pain in his own family, as his wife suffered from severe depression. She was finally hospitalized, having become dysfunctional and unable even to get out of her bed. All the life and joy had been drained out of her by her illness. He said, "The worst part of it all was this: I would go and sit by her bed day after day. I would take her hand in mine, look deeply into her eyes, softly caress her cheeks, and tell her that I loved her. But she would not believe me."

He told us that after many months she began to recover, and after some years had passed, she was well. They are still married today, some 55 years together. They are a model of faith and faithfulness. He stuck with her through it all ... until the day came when she could again believe his words, words made true by his sitting with her through the darkest hours and not losing hope.

Our faith teaches us that Jesus is that eternal Word, from before creation, who has come to us in person to take our hand, and to lead us back into the family of God and into the fullness

of life itself. He will not give up on us, or on this creation ... though we may very well give our Lord cause to abandon such a project of love. But our Lord's love is stubborn and steadfast, and he will not stop until we believe, until we trust, until we are whole and wholly God's very own.

Until that day arrives, the rivers flow to the sea. They flow over the rocks, which are half a billion years old, rocks touched by the rain that fell eons ago. And underneath the rocks are the words of God. The encouragement of our faith is for us to be still and listen closely, and we will hear all that we need to know, for this year and the next, and the next ...

William Sloane Coffin tells of what he learned as he listened prayerfully for that Word after his 24-year-old son Alex, whom he described as "fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky," accidentally drove his car into Boston Harbor and (in Coffin's words) "beat his father to the grave."

Coffin writes, "Among the healing flood of letters that followed his death was one carrying this wonderful quote from the end of Hemingway's Farewell to Arms: 'The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.' My own heart is mending," Coffin reflects, "and largely thanks to so many of you, my dear parishioners; for if in the last week I have relearned one lesson, it is that love not only begets love, it transmits strength ... through those who only want to hold your hand, who simply bring food and flowers, who sign letters simply, 'Your broken-hearted sister.'" Coffin concludes his comments by saying, "You have understood so beautifully the undergirding presence of God in our moments of tender need. And, my friends, you gave me what God gives us all – minimum protection, maximum support. I swear to you, I wouldn't be standing here were I not being upheld."

Indeed, ours is the consolation and the encouragement that our Lord's love never dies, and ours is the joy-filled invitation to find peace in the dazzling grace that always is and ever will be.

Let us pray: O Lord our God, underneath are your words ... older than the rocks, more life-giving than water itself. In faith, may we hold on to such a truth tightly. And yet, as we cling to such a wondrous promise, may we discover that it is we ourselves who are being held ever tightly and tenderly by your love for us in Christ, and that this is a love from which we will never be separated. In Jesus' name. Amen.