

Sermon: Resting Place

New North Church, Hingham

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2 January 2022

Based on **Sirach 24:1-12; John 1:1-18**

Have you noticed that we haven't heard Jesus speak lately? For the past month or so, we've heard a lot *about* Jesus, but he hasn't been in view in any of our readings. That will eventually change, of course, but not yet. For now, we're going to hear what John the Evangelist thought of him, and maybe Sirach will back him up.

The rabbis related *logos* to the Torah, and, over time, *logos* came to be associated with wisdom – which is *hokma* in Hebrew and *sophia* in Greek. When John the Evangelist used the term *logos*, he meant Jesus without saying as much:

In the beginning was the Word [λόγος],
and the Word was *with* God,
and *God* was the Word.

For John, God and Jesus were the same. And 'the Word became flesh and lived among us.' This is new stuff. Sirach taught us that Wisdom took up residence in Jerusalem, in the Temple, but no one had ever suggested that God might dwell among us. For King David, God lived in a tent. Mostly, people imagined God lived in heaven, but John describes something more.

In literal Greek, verse five, the last verse in the prologue, reads: 'The light in the darkness shines, and the darkness did not *grasp* it' or *extinguish* it.

If it's completely dark, and the light shines, the darkness is dispelled and goes away, and the darkness doesn't know what hit it. In John's view, Jesus is the light of all people, and even though there will be dark forces arrayed against him, they don't yet know that they have already lost.

And when John wrote, "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being," he might have been inspired by Sirach and by Proverbs.

In Sirach, Wisdom tells us that "Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be" (Sirach 24:9).

In Proverbs, Wisdom says, “The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be.”¹ It seems clear that everything begins with God.

That’s the prologue. In a sense, it serves as John’s version of Jesus’ nativity story. The Gospel proper begins with John the Baptist. An early 8th century manuscript said to belong to St. Cuthbert, an Anglo-Saxon monk, includes a significant gap after verse five to show that verse 6 is the beginning of a new paragraph.²

Sixty years ago, a scholar named John Robinson observed that ‘the effect of reading too much on the Fourth Gospel is to make one feel either that everything has been said about it that could conceivably be said or that it really does not matter what one says, for one is just as likely to be right as anyone else.’³

Taken as a whole, today’s reading describes the origin of the Christ, the Son of God, and it’s the central claim of John’s Gospel. There are echoes of Genesis here, adopted and adapted to describe the person, nature, and role of Jesus and the salvation – the light and the life – that came into being through him.

Yet John the Baptist keeps popping up, in verses five and 15 and again in verses 19-23. Why, when the rest of this opening section talks about the Word, the light, and the life? We’ll get to that.

John the Evangelist, the author of this Gospel, and his congregation had a prickly relationship with the local religious authorities and their conflict is sometimes revealed here and throughout the Gospel, as when John writes that Jesus’ own people did not accept him. By that, he meant some but not all Jews. He could just as easily have said some but not all Gentiles. He just wanted to zing those with whom he disagreed.

John also contradicts Exodus 24:9-10 when he says that no one has ever seen God. Moses was unavailable for comment, you might say.

John intends to expand his congregation’s understanding of Jesus and to do that, he sides with them against their opponents and he’s not afraid to adjust Scripture to fit the story, which, along the way, he tells in an entirely new and unique way.

He said the Word became flesh and lived among us. Unlike Luke, John doesn’t tell us how this is possible. We’re left to speculate what it might mean for us that God dwells among us.

The darkness mentioned by John can take many forms: war; devastation, natural or man-made; greed; oppression; depression; helplessness; grief; you name it. None of it can overcome the light of God's eternal Word, but it sure can bring you down.

All things may have come into being through Jesus, but the world did not know him. Maybe we've been in darkness for too long and our eyes need to adjust in the light.

Living in the darkness means not seeing what needs to be seen, and that can be limiting, close-minded, and maybe a little fearful. Living in the light means we can see and understand everything going on around us, even if it's not pretty or comforting, and it makes us want to turn away.

We can choose one or the other. It's not enough that God became known to us through the incarnation of Jesus. It's not enough that God lived and walked among us. God wants us to know why this was done. The world still resists knowing God. Do we want Jesus to dispel the darkness, to give us life, or are we okay with not knowing him?

Deciding to live in the light as a faith community can be challenging. It means calling attention to things that others might not want to see. It means standing together in the light, filling in the gaps wherever we find them. It means choosing to come to the Table as we are, warts and all, as welcome guests of Jesus ready to receive the gifts of grace and truth.

Without naming him, the Evangelist reveals Jesus' identity, introduces his mission to do God's work, and introduces the idea of salvation for all who follow Jesus. 'What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of *all* people.'

There is a strong theme of life and light and salvation in John's Gospel. Any artist will tell you that light creates warmth and brings out all the details and color in what we see. If you want to see more of anything, add light.

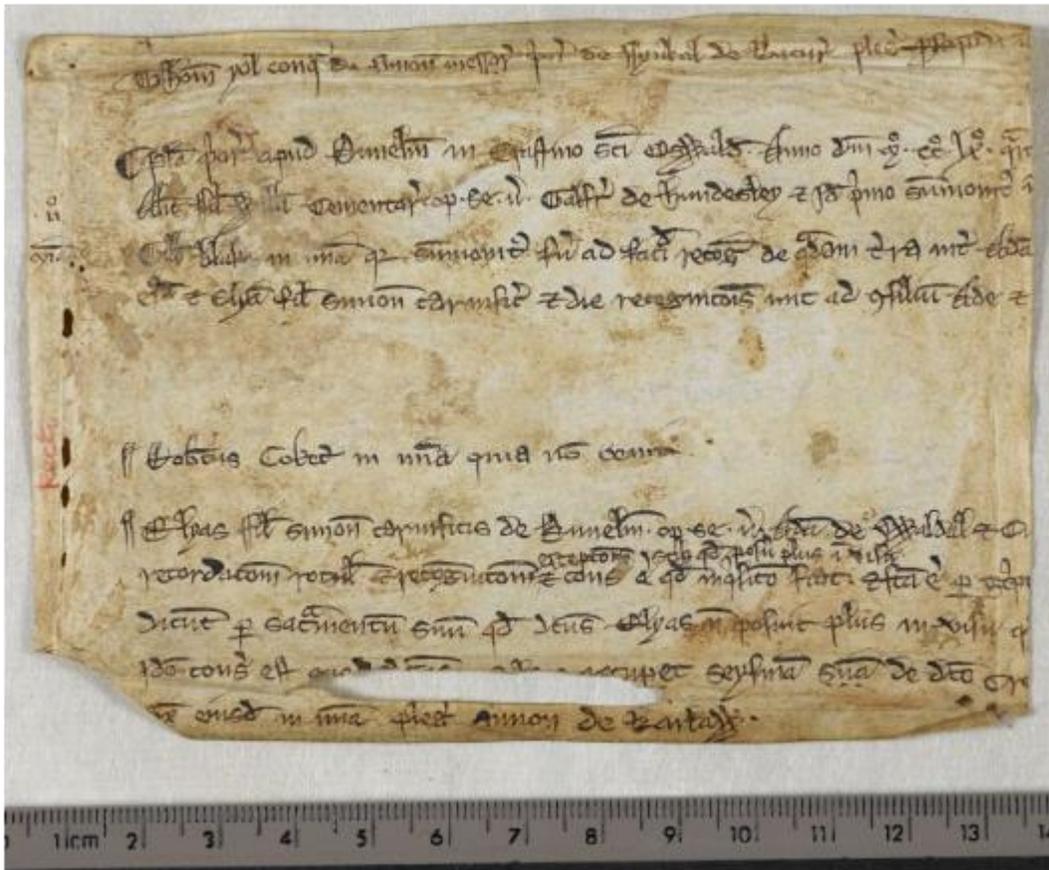
So, why does John the Baptist keep popping up in the Evangelist's prologue? First, the Evangelist wants us to understand the Baptist's secondary role. He wants us to understand that it is the Baptist who points toward Jesus. Like John, we are called to point away from ourselves and toward the one who is at the center, the *logos*.

In Sirach, Wisdom sought a resting place and found it, in the Temple.

Knowing what we know now, may Jesus find a resting place in each of us.

Amen.

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The St. Cuthbert Gospel (formerly known as the Stonyhurst Gospel) retains its original binding and is the oldest intact European book. Made in the early 8th century, the manuscript contains a copy of the Gospel of John.

http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_89000

¹ Proverbs 8:22-23, NIV

² Boer, Martinus C.de. "The Original Prologue to the Gospel of John." *New Testament Studies*, vol. 61, no. 4, Oct. 2015, pp. 451.

³ J. A. T. Robinson 'The Relation of the Prologue to the Gospel of St John ', in id., *Twelve More New Testament Studies* (London: SCM, 1984).