

First Sunday after Christmas Day
December 27, 2009

The Rev. Canon Marianne Borg

Today we hear the prologue to John's Gospel. The prologue in John's Gospel was actually a hymn. These words that we heard were set to music. And it seems as though the author of the Gospel of John felt that to set this beginning part of the Gospel in music better communicated the message of these opening words. And I'm gonna return to that in a moment, the fact that John's prologue is a hymn, is a song. But first I want to say a little something about the language "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God". I think it's not uncommon for many of us to assume that that word "Word" means Jesus. In the beginning was Jesus and Jesus was with God and Jesus was God. But I want to bring to your attention that that word "Word" is actually the word for "Wisdom" - for "Wisdom". In the Greek the word "Logos" is translated "Wisdom" or "Word" but it actually means "Wisdom"; it's the masculine pronoun for the word for "Wisdom". And the word "Sophia", also a Greek word is the feminine form of "Wisdom". But the text begins "In the beginning was Wisdom and Wisdom was with God and Wisdom was God. There's a passage in Proverbs that says that "Wisdom" was in the very beginning even before God created the heavens and the earth. Wisdom is something intrinsic in the nature and goodness and wonder of God. That there's something about the beauty and the sense of unfolding and even benevolent in the movement towards justice and peace that is all part of the wisdom that is God and that that Wisdom has been there from the very beginning. The Gospel of John here also reminds us that no one has ever seen God - no one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son that is close to the Father's heart who has made Him known. So what we learn in this Gospel is that Jesus is the embodiment of what we can see of God in a human life. He is the disclosure, he is the revelation, and he is what God in the flesh, incarnated looks like. We can see what we can see of God in Jesus in a human life. So when this text says "In the beginning was the Word -- in the beginning was Wisdom and Wisdom was with God and all things came into being through this Wisdom. Our Eucharistic prayer that we'll hear in just a little bit talks about "We thank you O God for the goodness and love which you have made known to us in creation, in the calling of Israel to be your people, in your Word spoken through the prophets, in the Wisdom that you have spoken to us in the prophets and above all in the Word and the Wisdom made flesh, Jesus, your Son. And I suggest that this Wisdom, we not only see in Jesus and Jesus is the full embodiment of this Wisdom of God, but that we can also know this in our own being, in our own life, in our own flesh we also come to know of the presence of God in the lives of others. This is part of the message of the incarnation. God comes to us even in the flesh and God is known in our own lives, in our humanity. I think when we read this passage and think of Jesus as being the Word, it sort of opens up a number of conundrums. My husband who taught undergraduates for years in religious studies told me of a student who said to him "Well, you know Jesus as a first century Jew, he knew that the world was round and my husband said "Well, explain, how can that be, a first century Mediterranean Jew. How could he know that the world was round? Everybody else thought it was flat. Well he said, he

was in the beginning with God. He was there when God created the earth. He was there to see it. Wow! I think when we tend to think of Jesus as “there in the beginning” that we then think not only does he know that the world is round, but that he could probably jump tall buildings in a single bound, or he could know all of the right answers to jeopardy or whatever. It makes him kinda this omniscient omnipresent character of sorts, but Jesus, the first century man was fully human. He knows of our nature and in his own flesh, in his humanity he came to know of the power and presence of God come what may. In growing up, in the joys and sorrows and disappointments of childhood and adulthood, in the journeys that we make through the wilderness, to life, to death and beyond, Jesus is the embodiment of what can be seen of God in a human life. That is true for him; Jesus also shows us what is true for us. I want to return to this notion that the Gospel of John’s prologue was set to music, that it is a hymn, that the message of the prologue is best communicated through music and song. I ran across a phrase a couple of years ago. It’s a musical term called *cantus firmus*. I had never heard of *cantus firmus* and so I looked it up and this is what *cantus firmus*, the musical term means: a melody that has to be firm and clear, well crafted and defined so that contra pontal parts can be added to it or so that other voices can be added to it. *Cantus firmus*, a pre-existing melody that runs through and forms the basis of polyphonic composition. A fixed Psalm or the common organizing principle upon which two or more voices, independent and interdependent, are added. *Cantus firmus*. In the beginning – *cantus firmus* -- a firm, clear, well-crafted, defined organizing principle. Sounds like Wisdom to me – to which other melodies of life provide counter point. It is also said that one can move along with *cantus firmus* and can embrace the rich polyphony of life. When there is that strong fixed common organizing principle that is clear firm crafted design we can experience the fullness of sound of music of our lives of all the varieties of voices because that thread, that consistency, that continual is there. It is also said nothing calamitous can happen as long as the *cantus firmus* is kept going. And God’s kingdom will have no end. *Cantus firmus*. I suggest that in John writing his prologue and setting it to music that perhaps even though that phrase *cantus firmus* didn’t come up until centuries later that the understanding of this melody that has this firm and clear and crafted and seamless and beautifully organizing principle, that even the author of John’s Gospel understood that principle in music and chose to set this hymn to music as an illustration of his very point. In the beginning was a Wisdom, a *cantus firmus*, that in the beginning was this sense of beauty and hopefulness and unfolding light and that come what may amidst all of the sounds, discords and cacophony that might interrupt our life, that there is a *cantus firmus*. If there are some of us who wonder amidst the struggles and discord and disharmonies and conflicts in our own lives; if there are some of us who wonder where has God been in all of that, where is that *cantus firmus*, where has God been? I encourage you to cry out and ask “Where have You been?” And I suggest that you will hear a Word or Wisdom or a Sound or a Voice or that *What Is* will be sung to you and that when you ask “Where have You been?” that what you will is the Word: “I never left you” – “I never left you”. “I was with you in the beginning; I am with you now; I will be with you forever; I never left you”. I suggest that this is the message of Christmas. “I am with you. I am with you always”. This is Christmas; Christmas that lasts forever.