

If you are befuddled by this passage, do not despair, you aren't the only one.

This scripture lesson has developed a sort of reputation.

It's seen as being inaccessible and wordy (pun intended).

We know it as the one about the words.

The Word was God, and God was the Word, and the Word was in and all around God and nothing came into being without the Word, and so on and so forth.

It goes in circles and it can be hard to understand the meaning behind the text.

It's written in a poetic way, but it's not always appreciated as poetry.

This passage emphasizes newness, a new start, a new beginning.

The opening words have such gravitas, "In the beginning was the word..."

It brings us back to the first sentence in the book of Genesis, which says,

"In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the Earth..."

The writer wants us, the readers or hearers, to know that we have turned a page in the history book and this is the beginning of a new chapter, in which the Earth has fundamentally changed.

**That** was the time before Jesus, **this** is the time of Jesus and humanity will never be the same again.

The writer of this Gospel seamlessly connects the Word to several different elements, in this brief passage.

So at first, we hear about the connection between the Word and God, which are two inseparable forces.

Then we hear about the Word and creation, *“<sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”*

This also harkens back to the beginning of Genesis in which God created light and darkness on the first day of creation.

So after we hear about the power of light, we’re told about John who testifies to the true light, which will enlighten everyone.

Then, the Gospel writer begins to universalize the message a bit more, and we hear about the Word and the world, that the world came into being through the Word but the world did not know him and the Word’s own people did not accept him.

Now at this point, it’s still ambiguous as to whether the “Word” that the Gospel writer refers to is Jesus, the human, or God, the disembodied, preeminent force for good in the universe.

Well, in this next section, that's clarified, as verse 14 says, *"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."*

So, the Word is defined as Jesus, and then we hear a beautifully intimate description of the relationship between God and Jesus.

As John says, <sup>18</sup>*"No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."*

And in addition to describing Jesus' relationship with God, John articulates his own relationship with Jesus, as he says, *"This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'"*

Maybe John the Baptist might better be known as John the Witness or John the Faithful.

He has a lot of courage to preach and teach and prophesy about someone who was coming but who wasn't yet among them.

Now, if you are doing the math, you know that Elizabeth was pregnant with John at the same time Mary was pregnant with Jesus, so they had to have been about the same age.

However, John began his public ministry several years before Jesus did, so when he preached that the one who was greater than him was coming, his followers were most likely not familiar with Jesus... yet.

But John believed so strongly in who Jesus was, what he would do, and what he was capable of, that John did all he could to prepare his followers, with no regard for his own social standing or reputation.

He was cast off as being out of touch and delusional, the priests didn't like what he said about this Messiah who was to come, so they ignored him, and yet he kept on preaching.

To stick to one's commitments or convictions in the face of scrutiny and backlash takes an incredible strength of faith, or belief, in that which you are proclaiming.

John had such a strong belief in God, and the person that Jesus was, that nothing else mattered.

In fact, the word "believe" appears 98 times in the Gospel of John, and it's never as a noun.

It's always as a verb.

John tells us all he thinks that we need to know in order to *believe* that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing in him leads to abundant and eternal life.

And yet, for all his optimism and conviction in the future, John doesn't shy away from naming the fact that our reality is often dismal.

For example, he says, "*the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.*"

Why do we have to say that the darkness won't overcome the light?

Because it's part of our reality.

Darkness exists in our lives and in our world, John names that and says, and yet, the light is still brighter.

After Jesus enters the world, John tells us that "the world did not know him" and "his own people did not accept him."

John knew it wasn't a smooth and easy path, that people would doubt, disbelieve and try to sabotage Jesus' message, and yet, *"to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."*

Again, as one theologian puts it, *"This gospel reaches beyond the stars, but pain and disappointment very much tie it to this earth."* (Carey, Greg. "A World of Hope and Disappointment," Odyssey Networks).

John names the darkness, but doesn't end there, people might not know or accept Jesus, but those who do, will be born of the will of God.

So, what does this mean for those of us who have faith, who believe?

How can we live into the will of God?

John is saying that for us to have full lives, we have to testify to the light by taking it off the pages of the Bible, and giving it legs and carrying it around with us throughout this hurting world.

Now this is a new year, an appropriate time to reflect on the year on gone by and possibly commit to changes in the new year, some people make resolutions, others deplore them.

Regardless, this is a fitting time to take a pause and think about how we can make sure we're living our lives on the straight and narrow in accordance with our understanding of God's will for us.

In other words, are we living authentically as Christ-following believers?

Now for those who are feeling a little despondent, I feel you.

The media stories and general anxiety in the air can make it hard for us to believe that the light will overcome the darkness.

However, what the media so often fails to tell us is of the abundant love and goodness in the world, the ways that we are actually improving.

I did some research about the changes in our world between January 1, 2015 and January 1, 2016, and I will tell you, it's not all gloom and destruction.

For example, the New Horizons space probe that was launched by NASA on January 19, 2006, it finally reached it's destination, 9 years later, and sent us photos confirming that Pluto is indeed a bona fide planet with 5 moons.

That's a pretty amazing discovery in our solar system.

Another incredible scientific discovery was that Mars most likely has water on it at certain times of year, which has sparked conversation about whether Mars could really support life.

Or, if science isn't your thing, maybe you'll remember 2015 as being the year in which same-sex marriage became legal across all 50 states.

A remarkable landmark civil rights moment in the history of our nation.

In religious news, the Church of England, which was founded in the year 597, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and was merged with the Roman Catholic church for about a thousand years, well finally, in the year 2015, they ordained their first female bishop.

Yes, women have been able to become ordained priests since 1994, but the first female to become bishop just happened this year.

In the life of an institution that is 1,400 years old, that's a really big deal, and it bodes well for the role of women in the future of the church.

Or, if religion isn't your thing, then hopefully you'll appreciate the milestone moment in our worldwide efforts to combat climate change, which took place in Paris this past year.

One hundred and ninety five countries all made specific pledges to combat climate change and they agreed to come back together at regular intervals to reassess those commitments and make them more stringent, in line with technological advances.

This might not sound very influential, but in terms of the protection of the planet, it is.

And one thing that really amazed me about the year 2015 was that, according to the World Bank, extreme poverty fell below 10 percent for the world's population, for the first time ever.

About 700 million people now live in extreme poverty, down from almost 2 billion in 1990.

Extreme poverty is defined as less than living on \$1.90 per day.

Yes, 700 million people living in these conditions is deplorable, but we are headed in the right direction.

Sometimes it might be hard to see the light, it might feel like it's so dark that there's no way the light can bring any kind of illumination, but the truth is that the light is overcoming the darkness, and it's our job to be mirrors which reflect that light.

It's our responsibility to testify to the light by being integrally involved in making this world a little bit better, so that when I preach on January 1, 2017, yes, it is a Sunday, we can all reflect on the ways in which the world is that much better than it is today.

We are closing out the liturgical season of Christmas and moving into the season of Epiphany, which goes from now until the beginning of Lent.

The theme of Epiphany is all about light and how Jesus is the light of the world.



The seasons of Christmas and Epiphany both remind us of God's mystifying decision to become one of us, to take on our lot and our life that we might have hope, and to share our mortal life so that we might know how to be faithful amidst the darkness.

These are not merely seasons or celebrations or holidays.

They're reminders of the promises we've made, as believers who hopefully have the faith of John, to testify to the light every day of the year.

So, as you begin your new year, I invite you to live your life so that next year, on January 1, 2017, you lived a year of your life in such a way that made this world a little bit brighter.

Amen.

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