

Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas Day) 2022: "In the Beginning Was the Word...."  
John 1:1-18  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"In the beginning was the Word...."

"Words count," is a frequent mantra in our house. I drive Pastor Mark crazy, but I can't help it. I grew up with a Dad who was chief of the grammar police ☺. He'd ask, "So, who went to the movies?" I'd answer, "Oh, just Marty and me." "'Marty and **me**'? Don't you mean Marty and **I**?" I raised Kristiane with the same linguistic precision. She rolled her eyes just like my sisters and I did when corrected. Someday I imagine she'll carry on her grandpa's legacy with her own kids. It's in her genes!

"In the beginning was the Word...."

Just after Thanksgiving there was a very interesting article in the paper about "the oldest full, decipherable sentence ever found in an early alphabetic script."<sup>1</sup> In other words, archeologists discovered the first meaningful sentence composed of letters, not symbols or hieroglyphics or pictograms like the ancient Egyptians used. You might guess they found the inscription on a tomb or a monument or even on a vase or inscribed inside a ring. Oh, no, they found it on a comb, a very old comb, a 3,700-year-old ivory comb, with tiny, tiny teeth. Any guesses what the comb was used for? After a lot of study and a little guess work the sleuth linguists came up with this message:

"May this tusk root out the lice of the hair and the beard."

It's humbling for humanity, isn't it, that the first alphabet message we know of has to do with – lice??!

"In the beginning was the Word...."

When "the Word" is spelled with a capital W, most of us think of it as the Bible, the spoken and written Word of God. The promise in Isaiah is that the Word of God is like rain: it will never

fall from heaven to earth and return again to heaven without watering the ground and bearing fruit (Isaiah 55:11). God's Word is fertile. God's Word is lifegiving. As rain sinks into the soil, God's Word sinks into the **soul**. We believe that the Word of God is "a means of grace," a divine channel through which God's love flows into our lives, transforming them, shaping us more and more into little Christs, who once was the Babe of Bethlehem and is now the gloriously Risen Lord!

So here's a Christmas mystery related to the Word with a capital W. On Thursday the parsonage doorbell rang and it was one of our church friends. He told me he had something to give me that he had found in a dumpster. Here it is [wooden box inscribed with cross and HOLY BIBLE]. Inside the cover we have a painting of our risen Lord flanked by angels and lilies, and we also have a white leather-bound Bible, the Peace of Mind Protestant Edition, King James Version. It looks brand new, unused. There are added extras, like lovely color plates of various Biblical scenes and a concordance in the back, a dictionary-like list of words with accompanying citations about where to find them in the Bible. There's also a family register to record births, deaths, marriages and military service. All blank. Nobody has added words to this copy of the Word.

This Bible has taken quite a journey. By God's grace it has ended up in this sanctuary, with us, this morning. Why? And what route has it taken? I can't find a copyright, so we don't know how old it is, but an inscription on the back tells us it started out as a gift of the International Union of Electrical Workers AFL-CIO, Local 401. I Googled it and found out that Local closed in 2003, but it was based in Edison and represented workers at a Frigidaire appliance factory. 'Must've been pretty long ago that someone in union leadership thought it was a good idea to give all the members a Bible. Our best guess might be that this box sat unopened on somebody's bookshelf or in the attic. It was a work remembrance, not a daily lifeline, not a source of comfort or holy inspiration or spiritual challenge. It just was. And then the person died. A family member

or close friend was charged with emptying the home of the deceased. And a sense of urgency or efficiency reigned, and whatever was deemed of no value was thrown out. Into a dumpster. All we know about the unknown person who left it on the shelf unopened and the unidentified person who pitched it into the trash is: for such as these, for these precise people, Christ was born, died and rose. Just like our friend with the keen eye and faith-filled heart who saved it from the landfill. The Father's Gift of a Savior is for everyone. Whether or not the Gift is accepted is up to us.

*<sup>10</sup>He was in the world,  
the world was there through him,  
yet the world didn't even notice...  
<sup>12</sup>But whoever did want him,  
who believed he was who he claimed  
and would do what he said,  
he made to be their true selves,  
their child-of-God selves.... (John 1:10, 12, The Message)*

I love Martin Luther's description of the Bible. He said the Bible is the manger that holds the Christ Child. **Most important of all, the Word of God is Jesus, the living Word of God.** We don't worship a book; we worship the One whom the book proclaims. The living Word of God was first spoken aloud at Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. The first "word" of this living Word was a newborn cry, sounding a lot like the barn kittens in whose stable-home he was born. He would grow up to speak beautiful words, blazing words, comforting words, challenging words.

We find some of the loveliest words in all of Scripture in today's Christmas morning Gospel, the prologue, the "before words," to St. John's Gospel. They are words to take to heart, words to memorize by heart, words that can make even the darkest places bright, words that can ignite a spark of hope in the most desperate of circumstances, in the most despairing heart:

*<sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... <sup>14</sup>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... <sup>16</sup>From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.... <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. (John 1)*

The Son is the living Word of God because He tells us who the Father is. Not just His words but His actions describe to us who our Father in Heaven is. This morning we feast on Jesus' gift of Himself in the Sacrament. As surely as Mary nursed her newborn Child, Jesus nurtures and nourishes us in Holy Communion, yet another "means of grace," yet another divine channel through which God's love flows into our lives. *"This is my Body. This is my Blood."* Precious words indeed.

Someone has said **we** are the only Bible some people will ever read. What message are people hearing from us? What assumptions are they making about our God from the way **we** speak and act? St. Francis of Assisi expressed our Christian calling simply but eloquently: "Preach the Gospel. If necessary, use words." Words count. But actions count more.

Back to the Christmas mystery of the Bible: **why** did the Holy Spirit inspire our church friend a) to look in the dumpster in the first place, b) to retrieve this Bible box with its special contents, and c) to bring it to me? Where is it headed next? Who needs the Christ for Whom it serves as a manger? For whom has God prepared this blessing? Perhaps you're the one. If so, it's yours for the taking and keeping! Or maybe you're the one now inspired to take your Bible off the shelf, reading it and loving it till it's ragged. After all, the Christmas story is just the **beginning** of the Greatest Story Ever Told.... And it's all the continuation of a story that began long before. It's a story that begins, *"In the beginning...."* (Genesis 1:1) Amen

<sup>1</sup>Oliver Whang, "Words From the Past: Root Out Lice," *NY Times* (Nov. 29, '22), D4.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham