

“Keep Listening”

John 1:1-9, John 1:10-18

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Revs. Tod & Ana Gobledale

Kirkland Congregational Church UCC

Pray with me. May the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of all our hearts, be acceptable to you, O God, our light and our life. Reveal your wisdom and grant us understanding. Amen.

The words echo across the plain. “You are all dead!” What is going on?...

Forty miles north of New York City, the Hudson River bends sharply. On the west bank, bluffs rise above the river. Atop these bluffs sit “the plains,” beautifully manicured lawns, playing fields and parade grounds. The U.S. Army maintains a post and presence at this spot along the Hudson River, since 1778. A collection of granite, gothic buildings marks the United States Military Academy informally known as... West Point. Who has been there?

Each July a new class of Cadets, plebes, enters the Academy. In rapid order they shift from ordinary life to Cadet life. Barbers shear long locks from heads. Quartermasters outfit the New Cadets with uniforms and equipment -- helmets, rifles, bayonets. Senior cadets, First-classmen--Firsties--whip the plebes into military bearing and shape. Training includes close order marching drill—all that lovely too-ing and fro-ing-- and bayonet drill, not so lovely.

Bayonet drill: Firsties split forty-man platoons in half. The two groups of plebes face off. Instructors stand on raised platforms and demonstrate bayonet moves: thrust, parry, rifle-butt strokes. Plebes then “shadow box” with one another. They charge back and forth across the plains at full-tilt. As if that were not enough, Firsties command, “Make noise!” The plebes scream at the top of their lungs, “R”-rated material, which I won’t repeat here. Imagine the din!

At the end of bayonet drill, plebes gather at the base of an instructor’s platform. The instructor looks down on the mass of sweating, pumped-up young men. He yells, “There are two kinds of bayonet fighters: the quick and the dead. What kind are you?”

“Quick, sir!” the plebes shout back .

“What kind?” he cries.

“Quick, sir!” shout the plebes.

“What kind?” his voice sounds doubtful.

“Quick, sir!” roar the plebes.

“You are all dead!... Dismissed.” *[pause]*

“You are all dead.” These words echo through the head of one plebe as he runs with his classmates to the barracks. The plebe changes uniforms. He hustles to the next formation, but, even in his busy day as a New Cadet, the words continue to carom through his mind. “You are dead.”

We’ll come back to West Point, but now let us journey into today’s scripture reading. Which book in the **Old** Testament do you think of when you hear the words, “In the beginning...?” ... Genesis. Genesis is the book that always comes first to my mind when I hear that phrase. “In the beginning...” So, it always comes as a surprise to read these same words at the onset of John’s gospel. John, who would have been familiar with Genesis, writes: *In the beginning -- was the Word...* Who, for John, is “the Word”? ...Jesus, Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Word.

In the beginning -- was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....

Last week during Scripture Crunching, KCC’s weekly Bible Study class, Van remarked on this opening passage of John. “In this gospel,” Van shared, “we have permission to interpret Jesus and the scriptures in new ways, ways appropriate to our time and our situation.” John’s gospel differs in several ways from the synoptic gospels, the parallel gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

One primary difference is that John depicts Jesus' relationship to God as divine, fully divine and only fully divine. John has been profoundly moved by Jesus, by Christ's teaching and healing, his life, death and resurrection. John interprets, or re-interprets, God's purpose and relationship to the world through the lens of Jesus. John wants his reader to see God in Jesus, in Jesus' ministry and mission. Writing nearly seventy years after Jesus' death, John boldly claims Christ's presence at creation. Setting his opening sentence parallel to "In the beginning God created," John writes, "In the beginning was the Word..." How can we interpret this proclamation of John appropriate for our time and our situation?

John, writing in Greek, uses the word *Logos* which in English translates as "Word." *Logos* also translates as "Reason or Reasoning." It is the root from which our word "logic" comes. From the beginning the *Logos—Reason--* was, and the *Logos, Reason* connects God and Creation. In the *Logos—Reason--* is life and light, order and goodness. Death and darkness, chaos and evil, will not overcome the life and light of the *Logos--Reason*. The *Logos*, the *Word*, the *Reason*.

One of the mysteries, one of the paradoxes of our faith is the Church's assertion that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. Sometimes I read this Gospel, John's gospel, and think the author would struggle with the idea that Jesus is "fully human," just as I struggle with the idea that Jesus is fully divine. I just do not see how that works. But then, faith includes mystery, doubt and a lack of understanding. If faith does not have these things, then it is not faith, but rather fact. As Van says, John gives us permission to interpret the scriptures and Jesus, the Word, the Logos, the Reason, in ways appropriate to our situation. Hence the saying, "Never place a period where God has placed a... comma." God is still... speaking.

"In the beginning was the Word," writes John. John connects the wisdom –of Jesus—his teachings, his practices, his values – with all of God's creation, even to the beginning of time. At creation, Logos – the Word, the Reason, revealed through Jesus – was present. And even though Jesus lived two thousand years ago, the meaning of who he is still breaks through to us today, on the other end of the timeline. Our task is to keep listening, and to be open to these epiphanies, these moments of Logos –in which God's Word, God's Reason, is revealed to us. God is still speaking...

A hymn I love opens:

*Once to every heart and nation comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side...*

Into everyone's life and into every community's corporate being comes a time to decide, to choose, what is right and what is wrong. Which side are you on? The hymn continues in the second verse:

New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth...

Time makes ancient, and not so ancient, "good" uncouth. Since the time of Jesus, the church has kept listening and had epiphanies, discovering heaps of once accepted things to be evil. To name a few: slavery, the oppression of women, anti-Semitism, racism, apartheid, the divine rights of monarchs and the noble class, environmental exploitation, homophobia... the list goes on.

Yet even when we "discover" that what was once "right" and acceptable is now wrong and unacceptable, we can still find ourselves back-sliding into old, convenient, bad behaviours.

Which brings us back to the story of that New Cadet at West Point.

What are the words of the First Classman, now caroming around in the New Cadet's head?... Yes, "You are all dead!" "You are dead." An insult to make the plebes push harder, be more aggressive, be tougher.

But instead of the desired effect, these words spark an epiphany. They, like a wake-up call for that plebe, remind him of other words:

In the beginning was the Word... What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

That light, like the best and brightest of stars, calls that young man to a new understanding, and to a new way of approaching the world around him. That way is not the way of the military and death. Rather, it is the way of the church and life.

*Once to every heart comes the moment to decide,
in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side.*

Like waking up, the plebe realizes where he is headed. He realizes that Logos, Reason, Christ, offers him this moment of decision. Which side is he on? For that Plebe, the way of West Point and the Army is not the way of the church and Jesus. The church offers meaning through living in love and acting with justice. Thirty six years ago, that Plebe clearly hears the Word that has been present since creation. He embraces his epiphany. He lays down his sword and shield by the riverside. He studies war no more. He turns to the way of life and light, to Logos, the Word, the Reason.

My life has never been the same.

Let us pray.

God, thank you for the Word that continues to speak into our lives. Help us keep listening. Thank you for your invitation to reason, your invitation to be peacemakers and advocates for justice. Thank you for the example Jesus puts before us, in life and death. Give us wisdom, inspiration and strength to stand and be counted as your faithful people in our thoughts and our deeds. Through Christ, Logos, the Word, the Reason, we pray. Amen.