

The Life that is Light

John 1:1-18

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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A very Happy New Year to all in this first Sunday of 2026! I hope that the Christmas season has been a good one for you.

And of course, we are still technically in the Christmas season! Tomorrow is the twelfth and final day of the Christmas season—Epiphany is on Tuesday. So, if you're still hanging on to Christmas, aren't quite ready to let it go, you at least have some liturgical justification for this. ☺

A quick word about our 2026 Faith Questions sermon series. This will begin next Sunday, January 11, and with one exception will proceed until the first Sunday of Lent.

I'll be addressing five of your excellent questions this year and I'll have a kind of road map for that next Sunday. As usual, they cover an impressive range.

This Sunday, I decided to just do a kind of one-off first Sunday of the new year kind of sermon.

A new calendar year is usually a time full of good intentions. I'm going to lose that weight, kick that bad habit, make that change. New year, new me, and all that!

In my experience, it's rare that these intentions survive the end of January, but sometimes they do. I used to be full of disdain for New Year's resolutions but recently I've been trying to tamp down my cynicism.

As human beings, we seem to be wired for newness, for new hope, new possibilities, for change. The older I get, the more think we should never discourage any efforts in these directions.

Some decide to choose a word for the year. A word to anchor and orient our experiences, ideas, and aspirations for the next calendar year.

As luck—or Providence—would have it, the assigned gospel text for the first Sunday of 2026 is full of good words, any number of which could be up to the task.

The first chapter of John’s gospel is one of the most theologically dense chapters in all of Scripture, linking Jesus Christ back to the very creation of the world....

It contains some of my very favourite words—words like “grace” and “truth.”

But as I read this familiar passage this week, after hearing it on Christmas Eve, I was drawn to two words from verse 4.

“Life” and “light.”

[I]n him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

What might it mean to have *life* as a *light*? It makes more sense to switch things around, surely.

We need light *for* life. Light to show us the way, to illumine the path, to have clarity for the way ahead.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path (Psalm 119:105).

But life *itself* as a light? What might it mean to call *life* a *light* for all people?

There is much that could be said. But perhaps at the most basic level, it is to affirm that “life” is, ultimately, our destination and home.

This is a good thing to simply name out loud at the beginning of a new year.

One of the deepest of Christian convictions is that life is stronger and more real than death, no matter how things might appear from our limited vantage points and imaginations, no matter how things might be going at any given moment.

Life is what we were made for. At the beginning of all things was life. At the end, we believe, will be new life.

Our lives take place and find their meaning in the context of God's promise of life.

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What *kind* of a life could be described as a light?

During the Christmas season, we understandably focus on a specific life that invaded our world in a manger. We focus on the Incarnation, the dazzling truth that God became enfleshed, human. God became one of us.

This Sunday, on the first Sunday of 2026, our gospel reading invites us to look at the other side of the Jesus that we see at Christmas.

The great creeds of the church have always insisted that Jesus is “fully God and fully human.” Not half and half, not some kind of God-human hybrid. But *fully* God and *fully* human.

The opening sentences of John's gospel give us a window into the “fully God” part of Jesus identity and mission in the world.

It is one of the most theologically rich passages in all of Scripture—a passage that gives us a window into the meaning of Christmas, the identity of Jesus, and God's entire plan for the cosmos!

This morning, I simply want to drop down into a few areas of this text.

To do this, I want to look at the meaning of Christmas through an Epiphany question.

Epiphany is this coming Tuesday. This is the season in which the church has historically remembered and celebrated Jesus' revelation to the Magi—to the Gentiles.

I want to ask the question, *What did the wise men see?*

Or, perhaps more accurately, *What did the wise men expect to see?*

It's impossible to say with 100% accuracy, but I think it is safe to assume that they thought they were coming to celebrate the birth of a political ruler, the king of the Jews, as it says in Matthew 2.

Yes, it says that they gave the child their "worship", but we shouldn't rush to assume that this meant that they thought that Jesus was divine—at least not in the sense that that we do.

Pagan rulers often portrayed themselves, and demanded to be acknowledged as, "divine." On Roman currency, for example, was the inscription "Caesar is Lord." And Caesars often expected the worship of their subjects.

So, the magi may have been thinking along similar lines when they came to the manger.

And what did they see? They saw a baby, a human life, yes. A future ruler, in some sense. Yes. A king. Yes. The one whose arrival was being heralded by a star. Yes.

But did they know the whole story? Did they know what they were actually witnessing? I don't think they did. I don't think they *could* have.

I don't think anyone really knew, not even Mary, from whose womb Jesus came!

How could anyone believe that the Great I Am, God himself, had taken up residence in a baby boy? How could anyone know that this child was God's very self?!

This was such a radical departure from the script.

In both Matthew and Luke's narrative, we get the sense that the characters in the Christmas are kind of along for the ride—they are kind of bewildered, haltingly faithful passengers who are fortunate enough to be along for the ride as God does a new thing.

They say "yes" to what God is inviting them into—we saw this throughout our Advent series. But they only understand in bits and pieces, fragments.

The whole story will require a life and a death and a resurrection. And a promise. It will require other storytellers and witnesses to come along to explain what just happened!

Like John.

John tells us what the wise men saw, what Mary saw. And it is stunning, once we truly understand it.

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

In the beginning.

These three simple words are meant to call our attention way back to Genesis chapter 1 which begins with the same three words.

Three words that link Jesus' identity with the Creator himself.

Three words that signify to the reader that the God who spoke a world into being is now taking the story of creation in a new direction, creating something *new*.

The same God.

*The Word was with God, and the Word **was** God...*

The Greek word translated "Word" is *logos* and would have signified different things to Jewish and non-Jewish hearers.

(It is the word behind all our ologies, incidentally—theology, anthropology, sociology—words about God, words about human beings, words about social systems...)

For the Jews, *logos* could have referred to the Divine Speech that said, "let there be... and there was." It could have referred to the divine wisdom at the heart of all reality. It could have referred to the Torah itself, the Law that was to govern their life as a community.

For the non-Jew or the Greeks, *logos* would have referred to reason itself, or a rational principle or organizational structure behind all reality.

And John is saying that the *logos* is Jesus!

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...

For both Jews and Greeks, *logos* was a big word that described the governing laws behind all that is. It was an impersonal word. The *logos* did *not* refer to a flesh and blood vulnerable child born to bewildered parents in a small town in a feed trough!

It would have been scandalous to even say such a thing. The One behind all things, the structure and rationality that sustains and upholds all reality *became flesh*? Dwelt *among* us?

We have this wonderful moment of cultural engagement with both worldviews – John surprises both Jews and Greeks by insisting that the *logos* became flesh!

At the heart of reality, John insists, is a *person*, not a principle or a law.

In her commentary on this passage, Karoline Lewis puts it like this:

The dwelling of God is a deeply intimate, personal claim and assumes God's *commitment to* and *continuity with* God's people. Moreover, in the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, now God not only **goes** where God's people **go**, but **is** who they **are**.¹

Who could conceive of such a story?

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I want to look at just a few more parts of this passage.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...

Again, we hear echoes of the creation narrative in Genesis 1 where the Spirit of God hovered over the *darkness*, the formlessness, the void.

In Genesis 1 the darkness was no match for the creative power of God. The same is true in John 1.

The light shines...

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2303.

Perhaps this is why we love Christmas lights (I lit up my tree once last time this morning while I was finishing off this sermon!).

Perhaps during the darkest and coldest time of the year, we fill the darkness with colour and light and beauty as a tiny little sign that we believe what John is saying here, that we believe that the darkness, whether literal or metaphorical, has *not* and *cannot* overcome the light.

Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given...

Some translations render this text, “we have all received grace upon grace.” Either way, it points to the truth that Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the grace of God directed toward us in a final, definitive way.

God’s call of Abraham was grace... the Law was a gracious gift... God’s promise to restore a people in exile was grace... Grace, grace, and more grace.

At so many points in the biblical story, God could have washed his hands of his chosen people, of the human race, of creation in general.

But. Grace.

And now, in Jesus, in a baby boy born in straw and poverty, in the *logos* made flesh and dwelling among us... Grace upon grace.

Grace in *place* of grace. Grace as the truest picture of who God is.

Grace and *truth* made known by Jesus Christ.

Grace to remind us that the future does not depend upon us. Grace to remind us that God has already done enough, that all our frantic striving is needless, that our futures are safe with God.

Grace to remind us that the darkness did not overcome the light then—even though it tried, even though a murderous king Herod tried to snuff out the baby boy’s life, even though power-hungry religious and imperial systems tried to ignore and silence this man’s

teaching, even though fearful and confused human beings tried to snuff out the light on a Roman cross...

And the darkness will not overcome the light now.

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I began this sermon asking the question, *What did the wise men see?*

I want to conclude by asking another question. *What do **you** see? What do **we** see?*

As we make our way out of the Christmas season and head into 2026, do we see a world full of problems and crises and trouble of all kinds?

Or do we see a world upheld by the Word of God who was in the beginning, the one in whom all things were made?

Do we look at our own lives and see confusion and pain and uncertainty about what the year ahead will hold?

Or do we see the light that shines in the darkness, the light that the darkness can never overcome?

Do we look at the road ahead with worry and anxiety—for those in our family, our friends, our church, our nation, our world?

Or do we see the glory of the one and only Son, the one who has made his dwelling among us and has promised to never leave us or forsake us, to not leave us as orphans?

Do we look at this child in the manger and see God himself, the one in whom all history holds together?

Do we trust that the one in whom all things were made can be relied upon to lead things to a good future, even when things look dark?

What do you see?

So much depends on how we look and to whom we look.

At the outset of a New Year, my prayer is that we would be filled with gratitude, with hope, and with great joy because of what we and countless others throughout history have seen, however partially, however dimly, looking back at that manger.

The life that *was* and *is* the light of all people.

May this life be *your* light in the year ahead. May it be a lamp unto your feet, a light unto your path. May your story, wherever stage find yourself in it, find its meaning in this life.

May the life of Christ be your guide, your promise, your sure and enduring hope whatever lies ahead.

Amen.

