

John 1: a Midrash

Today's gospel is a midrash on the creation story from Genesis and also on some passages from Proverbs. A midrash is a form of commentary that is often playful and non-linear, more poetry than prose. The Talmud describes midrash as "The hammer that wakes to shining light, the sparks that slumber in the rock." The image is of a hammer striking a stone creating sparks. So, in the spirit of midrash, we will offer our own midrash. A playful and poetic look at this most poetic of passages.

Male: (Big voice) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Female: I don't think it needs to be like that. I am thinking it was more like, (softly) "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Bill: Ok, right away it is getting a bit crowded. In the beginning. Like the first beginning right? Its just God, right? Just God and chaos and darkness and the void...

M: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth

F: was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind... no, while the **breath** of God swept over the face of the waters."

B: When we are in Guatemala we stay on the shore of Lake Atitlan. This beautiful lake surrounded by volcanoes, 900 feet deep. It is stunning. And the Popol Vuh, which is the Mayan creation story, puts it like this:

M: "This is the story of when all is silent and placid."

F: "All is silent and calm. Hushed and empty is the womb of the sky."

B: I love that phrase, "The womb of the sky."

M: "All alone the sky exists. The face of the earth has not yet appeared. Alone lies the expanse of the sea, along with the womb of the sky."

F: "All is at rest. Nothing stirs. All is languid... tranquil... all lies calm and silent in the darkness... in the night."

B: I can't quit thinking of that lake, at night, before there was anything... before there was anything! And the first thing to arrive, really, are words...

M: "In the beginning WAS the Word."

F: "In the beginning was the WORD."

B: But not just any word... and not just words piled on each other. Not just words jumbled together. But THE Word, Logos, Wisdom, Sophia, the word that brings order out of chaos, the word that makes SENSE of the universe, the word that creates the story that makes it all have a purpose... the PLOT that holds it all together.

M: "This Word was in the beginning with God. Without the Word nothing could be created, without the word, nothing could come into being."

B: Have you ever had the experience of finding a word that described what you were feeling perfectly, when, up to that point, you couldn't really describe your feelings? Your feelings had just been this mishmash of stuff in your gut and whenever someone asked you what was wrong all you could say was, "I don't know" because the words weren't there? And then you were given the word, the right word, and suddenly, it all snapped into focus, the world was created in that instant because now you could describe your feelings.

When I was a kid that word, for me, was "ambivalent." Oh, I wasn't sure if I wanted to go to camp or not, not sure if I wanted to join the baseball team or not. But now I had a name for it. I was AMBIVALENT! I could say it and it was all clear. I would ask people to ask me how I felt about something just so I could say, "I am ambivalent." I would make up stuff just so I could say I was ambivalent about it. I wanted to be ambivalent about everything and I wanted everyone else to be ambivalent too. And then, when I became an adolescent, I discovered the word, ennui, which, of course I had originally pronounced En-U-I. But once I found out what that meant, I was ennui about everything.

M: For me it was heinous.

F: For me it was epiphany.

B: And without the right word, without THE word it is just a bunch of stuff, a bunch of unfocused emotions, a bunch of disorganized raw material. Genesis, the Gospel of John and the Popol Vuh all play with this notion of the Word that organizes and gives shape to the world and the light that gives life to it all. In the Popol Vuh it says,

F: "At Creation came the word... in the darkness, in the night. The gods talked together. They thought and they pondered. They reached an accord, bringing together their words and their thoughts, then they gave birth..."

M: And in the Gospel we read, "The Word was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

F: "The gods gave birth beneath the light, they gave birth to humanity... together

they conceived light and life.”

M: Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

F: “And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.”

“And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

B: A few weeks ago, on the first Sunday of Advent, I offered the image that, at the beginning of Advent, Christmas felt like a very distant candle, barely visible in the distance. And while I thought it was an image that seemed hopeful enough, one person commented, “I kept looking for the candle, but it kept going out.” One of the challenges we face in the church is how to keep the story alive and fresh and LIVE it in the cycle of the year, to claim the light, to experience it being born as if it were the first time, and yes, also to claim the darkness, to wonder if the darkness just might overtake us.

With all the various groups of youth I work with we try to close our gatherings with an Evening Prayer service we have taken from the New Zealand Book of Prayer. In it, we pray, “It is night, after a long day...”

M: “What has been done has been done.”

B: “It is night after a long day.”

F: “What has not been done has not been done.”

B: “The night is dark.”

M: “Let our fears of the darkness of the world rest in you.”

B: “The night is dark.”

F: “Let our fears of our own darkness rest in you.”

B: We still deal in basic elements: light/dark... fear/hope.

F: But I want to return to the beginning...

B: Which beginning?

F: The very beginning... listen to this:

“God created **me** at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.

Ages ago **I** was set up,

at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

M: Who are you?

F: Wisdom... I was there at the beginning. Wisdom, Sophia, there, making sure it all went according to plan, heck, I HAD the plan. Without me, none of this would have happened. It was a collaborative work, it HAD to be a collaborative work. It is how we work best.

M: According to...?

F: Proverbs... chapter 8... verses 22-31 if you must know.

B: As I said... it was crowded at the beginning. But we haven't gotten to my favorite part of the gospel yet and before we do, we need to put John the Baptist in his rightful place.

M: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

F: But John was NOT the light.

B: No, he wasn't THE light, but he testified to the light.

F: He wasn't THE word, he wasn't the light, but he POINTED to the light, he pointed to the word.

B: Ok, now that John in his place... the Gospel continues...

M: "He was in the..."

F: Who?

M: He, the Word, Logos...

F: or Sophia...

M: OK... "She was in the world, and the world came into being through her; yet the world did not know her. She came to what was her own, and her own people did not accept her. But to all who received her, who believed in her name, she gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of humans, but of God."

F: Her **own** people did not accept her.

B: How is it that we become so estranged from whom and from what we are made that we no longer even recognize our own substance? How is it that we become so distant from our origins that we no longer even know from what we are made? How is it that we no longer recognize that essential part of ourselves?

M: (Pause) Is that a rhetorical question?

B: Well do you have an answer?

M: Actually... no... well... I mean... what was the question?

F: Sorry, I was reading ahead...

B: But here is my favorite part...

M: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us..."

F: "The Word became flesh and lived among us..."

B: The Word, this infinite, amorphous, nebulous concept. This magnificent wisdom, this ubiquitous Sophia, this PLOT that gives shape and form and purpose to the narrative in which we live, this... this... THING!

M: Way to dig deep and come up with the right word. How ironic is that? It's a sermon about the WORD, and when it's all on the line, it's a big swing... And a miss.

B: OK, how do I communicate what this is about...

M: Not with the word, "THING"

B: OK, but this is **the** point. The central point of Christianity, this hub around which it all revolves is this fundamentally incommunicable point that GOD, the WORD, that which is the source of ALL THINGS is somehow fully present, enfleshed, in this very human, very fragile, very vulnerable, human being... this baby, who woke up every day, got hungry, was nursed, who had aches and pains, dreams and disappointments, acne and dirty fingernails. The Creator of the Universe was here, in this child...

M: And she lived **among** us...

F: And he lived among **us**...

B: And the Word lived among us...

M: Amen

F: Amen

B: Amen

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