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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/25/2012, Christmas Morning  
Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 98, Hebrews 1:1-4, John 1:1-14

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with  
God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1, KJV)

Let me tell you right off the bat where I am heading in this sermon. I am  
aiming toward a happy Christmas saying by Martin Luther. It goes this way:

Mary bore the child, took it to her breast and nursed it, and  
the Father in heaven has his Son, lying in the manger and  
the mother's lap.<sup>1</sup>

"This is our theology," Luther says. This is what we believe and preach. The  
very Son of God lies in Mary's arms, nursing and content like other babies.

So, that is where I am heading. Now let me enjoy setting the stage a bit for  
this lovely saying of Luther's.

## **REMEMBERING PASTOR CHARLES TREXLER**

Come the Christmas morning liturgy, I nearly always find myself thinking  
of dear Pastor Charles Trexler, of blessed memory. Pastor Trexler loved  
Christmas, especially the Christmas morning Gospel Reading from St. John  
Chapter 1. I am sure that he also loved last evening's Christmas Eve reading  
from St. Luke Chapter 2. Who does not love the story of the birth of Christ in  
the manger and of the angels singing to the shepherds abiding in the field by  
night keeping watch over their flocks? I believe it is the most cheerful and  
important story this world has known. But this is Christmas morning, and  
Pastor Trexler was always content to leave the manger and shepherds for a  
while and to turn to the more mysterious teaching of St. John 1.

If you look at St. John the Evangelist here in our reredos, you will see an  
eagle sitting there at his feet. It is his symbol. Each of the evangelists has his own  
symbol. Mark's symbol, for example, is the lion, because it starts with John the  
Baptist preaching like a mighty lion roaring. But John's symbol is the eagle, and  
most fittingly so, for the eagle is high flying and has a large perspective on

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon on the Afternoon of Christmas Day, Luke 2:1-14, December 25, 1530, Luther  
Works 51:213.

things, and ancient people had this notion about the eagle that it could gaze straight into the sun.<sup>2</sup> That is what St. John seems to be doing in this morning's reading. He is treading where angels fear to go, gazing right into the sun, traveling distances in time and space we can scarcely imagine. He is taking us all the way back to the "beginning":

In the beginning was the Word... (John 1:1, KJV)

The patristic fathers loved to make a distinction within this short phrase, and to delight in each part. The first part goes this way:

In the beginning...

The second part is the little verb, "was."

Those ancient preachers use to happily lose themselves imagining that time so long ago: In the *beginning*. And then, something even more wonderful: the little word "was." Go all the way back to the beginning—wonders and wonders that it is: the beginning. But already, St. John says, the Word *was!*

The fourth century bishop Hilary of Poitiers<sup>3</sup>, for example, enjoyed contemplating the phrase "in the beginning":

He [St. John] ranges backward over the spaces of time, centuries are left behind, and ages are cancelled. Fix in your mind what date you will for this "beginning"; you miss the mark, for even then he of whom we are speaking "was." Survey the universe; note well what is written of it: "In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth." This word *beginning* fixes the moment of creation; you can assign its date to an event that is definitely stated to have happened "in the beginning." But this fisherman of mine [he means St. John the Evangelist], unlettered and unread, is untrammelled by time, undaunted by its immensity; he pierces beyond the beginning. For his "was" has no limit of time and no commencement; the uncreated Word "was in the beginning." (Hilary of Poitiers: *On the Trinity*)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four\\_Evangelists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Evangelists)

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilary\\_of\\_Poitiers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilary_of_Poitiers)

<sup>4</sup> John 1-10, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Vol. 4a. Edited by Joel C. Elowsky (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 2006.) page 7.

Likewise with us more modern, more scientific people. Let us range back over time, over the years, over the centuries, over the millennia. “Centuries are left behind,” empires rise and fall, species come and go. There are the cave men and women, there the mighty dinosaurs. We see stars being born and dying, constellations forming and dissolving. We travel back in time all the way to the Big Bang, even to the very moment before the Big Bang began, and this fisherman friend of ours says, “Even then, the Word *was!*”

Again, St. John Chrysostom admits that the mind is overmatched trying to imagine “the beginning.” Yet let the mind wander as far back in time as it will, till it is almost dizzy, still the Word “was”:

As when our ship is near shore and cities and ports pass in view before us that on the open sea vanish and leave nothing to fix the eye on, so the Evangelist here takes us with him in flight above the created world leaving the eye to gaze upon emptiness and an unlimited expanse... Indeed, this expression, “was in the beginning,” is expressive of eternal and infinite being. (Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John 2:9*)<sup>5</sup>

And so it is that if we could fashion ourselves some great time machine, like in science fiction movies, and speed back to the beginning, even there we would meet the Word.

## **NOW, AHEAD TO BETHLEHEM**

Now, speed ahead again, from the beginning all the way through the ages and millennia to the holy manger in Bethlehem. What do we find? We find this Word, this eternal Word who was in the beginning, nursing at Mary’s breast and falling asleep in her arms, as many a newborn has fallen asleep in mother’s arms. Let Spurgeon help express the wonder of this all:

Oh! what is that I see? Oh! world of wonders, what is that I see? The Eternal of ages, whose hair is white like wool, as white as snow, becomes an infant. Can it be? Ye angels, are ye not astonished?... Oh wonder of wonders! Manger of Bethlehem, thou hast miracles poured into thee. This is a sight that surpasses all others. Talk ye of the sun, moon, and stars; consider ye the heavens, the work of

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<sup>5</sup> John 1-10, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Vol. 4a. Edited by Joel C. Elowsky (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 2006.) page 7.

God's fingers, the moon and the stars that he hath ordained;  
but all the wonders of the universe shrink into nothing,  
when we come to the mystery of the incarnation of the  
Lord Jesus Christ. (Spurgeon, "His Name—Wonderful,"  
sermon preached September 19, 1858, in London)

And so now we are ready again for Luther's happy saying from the start of  
this sermon:

Mary bore the child, took it to her breast and nursed it, and  
the Father in heaven has his Son, lying in the manger and  
the mother's lap.<sup>6</sup>

Think nothing small-minded, says, Chrysostom, when thinking about  
Christmas:

Think not, therefore, it is of small things thou art hearing,  
when thou hearest of this birth, but rouse up thy mind, and  
straightway tremble, being told that God hath come upon  
earth. For so marvellous was this, and beyond expectation,  
that because of these things the very angels formed a choir,  
and on behalf of the world offered up their praise for  
them...Hearing these things, arise, and surmise nothing  
low... (Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew 1:1)

## WHY?

Why did Jesus do it? Why did the Word who was in the beginning become a  
little baby in Mary's arms? I'll let the familiar words of the Nicene Creed give  
us the explanation:

*For us and for our salvation* he came down from heaven; by  
the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the  
virgin Mary, and was made man.

That is why he did it: He became "incarnate from the virgin Mary" not to  
amaze us, or to dismay us, but to save us.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sermon on the Afternoon of Christmas Day, Luke 2:1-14, December 25, 1530, Luther  
Works 51:213.

<sup>7</sup> "...for His purpose was to save, not to dismay." (Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew 1:1)

## IN HIM WAS LOVE

In this morning's reading, St. John teaches that this Baby in the arms of Mary is the same One who is our Maker:

<sup>3</sup>All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. <sup>4</sup>In him was life; and the life was the light of men. (John 1:3-4, RSV)

It is fully in the theology and spirit of John's Gospel to add this saying too concerning the Word made flesh: In him was *love*. In this Babe there was life, and light, and love.

When we think about the horrors in Connecticut, at least we can remember the love of Jesus for those little ones. The eternal truth of things is much as the Sunday School song puts it:

Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world  
Red or yellow, black or white  
They are precious in his sight.  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Aye, and he loves the *big* children too. He loves me, he loves you. This One who got off to a good start in life, nursing and sleeping peaceful in the arms of his loving mother, Mary, grew up to love others, to love without limitation, to love to the last beat of his heart on the cross, to his triumph over death and that cross, to love us still, world without end. To him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.