

## **WIZARD OR WOLFE?**

**John 1:1-5, 10-14**

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Famous lines from a famous movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. As Dorothy dreams of going back to Kansas, going back to live on the family farm with her Uncle Henry and Auntie Em, she first bids farewell to her new friends – the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Lion. Next, she carefully closes her eyes, taps the heels of her ruby red slippers together three times, and says to herself, "There is no place like home. There is no place like home. There is no place like home." And Dorothy discovers herself back in her bed on the Kansas farm. Dorothy goes home to a warm welcome.

In comparison, Thomas Wolfe wrote a famous novel entitled *You Can't Go Home Again*, published posthumously in 1940. Wolfe's point, of course, was you might be able to physically return to the place of your birth, but nothing and no one, including yourself, will be the same. The "home" of your memory no longer exists.

The Wizard or Wolfe? Who has it right? Can you go home again? Or not.

We come to one of the most powerful passages in all of scripture. And every time I've preached it through the years, I find a new sermon that I had not seen before. These opening verses, the prologue to the fourth Gospel, are so packed with meaning that we could do an entire sermon series from John 1 alone.

It begins with rhythm – hymnic, to be sure. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. And all things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it" (vs. 1-5).

With so many Greeks in the church (most likely a majority by now), John could not simply say, "The Messiah has come." The other Gospel writers have already said that. Did not Luke declare, "For unto us is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord"? Christ means Messiah. Luke had already let them know the Jewish Messiah was here.

In complementary fashion, completing the message of the other evangelists, John gives us another angle. Throughout his prologue, he sets up the career of the Incarnate Word in simple, powerful phrases – "The light shines in the darkness," "became flesh and dwelt among us," "full of grace and truth," "declaring the Father," some "did not receive Him," but others were "born of God."

John disarms his readers when he opens with, "In the beginning was the Word."

But when John speaks of "the Word," he is taking us far beyond the meaning it has for us in general. He's a Hebrew speaking to his own people, and, for them, the Word had unique power. For these people, there was a precious quality, a living reality, about words, so they were used sparingly. The Semitic root for "word," *dabar*, also meant "thing," "affair," "Event," or "action." A word spoken was a happening. Once it had been uttered, it could not be torn from the event that it evoked. Thus, when Isaac had blessed Jacob and then later discovered that Jacob had cleverly stolen his twin brother Esau's blessing, Isaac could not recall his words of blessing, even though Esau pleaded with his aged father to do so. The words had gone forth and the blessing stood.

And when this word was spoken by God, all creation came into being. "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). And He also spoke at the climax of the creation event, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness....' So God created man in His own image (male and female)..." (Genesis 1:26-27).

It is the Word that called Abraham to leave his familiar, safe surroundings for the insecurity of a far away country to become the father of a mighty people. Generations later, this same Word broke the shackles of Egyptian bondage, as Moses spoke for God and declared, "Let My people go."

So when John says, "In the beginning was the Word," we understand the Word of God is a creative, cosmic, potent proclamation.

And it's not just Hebrews to whom He speaks. He speaks to Greeks, as well. As far back as 560 BC – Old Testament times – Heraclitus asked if there was anything permanent and lasting in the flux of constant change that was all about. His answer was the *Logos*, which is the Greek designation right here for Word. Later, Stoics held that *Logos* was the "mind of God," the eternal principle of order in the universe which takes the chaos of the world and makes it a cosmos. If John had just started by saying "The Messiah is here," it would have meant nothing to the Greeks who were not even looking for a messiah. But when he says "In the beginning was the *Logos*, the Word," it opened the door for them to hear the gospel. Using one word, *Logos*, John bridges the cultures of the Greeks and the Hebrews – a simple concept that had profound meaning for them both.

The Word has always been here – "In the beginning..." Echoes of Genesis 1, to be sure. But the Word does not dwell in isolation. The Word was *with* God. And the Word *was* God. John is not just saying the Word was divine; John is saying what Thomas will later utter in this very same Gospel when he looks at Jesus, the crucified and resurrected Jesus: "My Lord and my God." That's the true identity of the Word.

To make it more clear, he claims that this Word was co-creator of the cosmos with God – that amazing relationship between the Word and the Father, who were together, in calling forth creation. God is the source, but the Word is the one through whom God creates the world.

Paul puts it this way (Colossians 1:16), "For by Him [meaning Jesus] all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him."

And He was light (vs. 5, 9). He was a light shining in the dark world, a broken, fallen world. The creation had gone bad with a single sin; at the source of the fall – Adam.

John 1:14 must be one of the most beautiful verses in all of scripture. "And the Word became flesh" (this creative Word that was God put on skin) and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth."

We need a God with skin on, a God who has faced what we face, who has feared what we fear. Jesus knows your pain today. He knows your hurt, your disappointments. You're tired and weary today, just worn out – Jesus knows what it feels like to be worn out. And today, if you're wrestling with the temptation of sin – Jesus knows what it means to be tempted, to be told you can just turn the rocks into bread. And, He knows what it feels like to weep beside the tomb of a dear friend.

And when the Word put on flesh, He *dwelt* among us. It's the word for putting up one's tent. Tabernacling. Like the tabernacle of ancient Israel – God in their midst. Jesus came and put up His tent; He cast His lot with us.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us – God with skin. Jesus didn't remain at the headquarters in heaven, receiving reports of the world's suffering from below and shouting a few encouraging words to us from a safe distance. No, He left heaven itself and came down to us in the front line trenches – right down to where we live. He came down to where we worry about all of life, where we contend with our anxieties and feelings of emptiness and futility, to where we sin and suffer, and to where we must finally die, as He died. **As Helmut Thielicke has said, "There is nothing He did not endure with us. He understands everything." (quoted in *The Book of Jesus*, edited by Calvin Miller)**

He had to become a man to die for men. To die for you, he had to become a human to bear human sin – your sin and my sin. That's the power of a God with skin on.

As we ponder John's prologue, the first thing I want you to see is

## **I. God goes home.**

Look at verse 10:

"He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him."

We've all seen those heart-warming videos of dramatic homecomings of a returning soldier from the battlefield. The scene often takes place at a school. Children are sitting in the classroom, listening to the teacher, when – suddenly – there is a knock at the door and everyone's eyes swing to the door, expecting to see someone boring or ordinary, like a principal or another teacher. There is a moment of confusion because no one seems to know who this uniformed stranger in the doorway is. And then, suddenly, there is a cry of recognition and a child, the soldier's child, springs out of her desk and flies into open arms of her loving father. You can't even imagine a video where the little girl acts as if she doesn't know him, rejects her father in uniform, harshly brushes him aside to continue with her history lesson.

But that's what happens to Jesus. Somehow, Jesus' own creation, the ones who came into being through Him (v. 3), did not know Him and did not respond to Him. Jesus came, but there was no loving response. The welcoming shout and joyous embrace never materialized for Jesus. Jesus arrived, but the hearts of His creation were closed. The door of their spirits was slammed shut in Jesus' face. "And the world did not know Him" (v. 10).

Home ought to be a good word, a great word. Laura Ingalls Wilder once said, "Home is the nicest word there is."

## **II. God is unwelcomed by the world, even unrecognized by His own people.**

God goes home in the Bethlehem Baby – sending His Son, who finds no welcome. Maybe Thomas Wolfe is right, maybe "you can't go home again."

When John says, "and the world did not know Him," there is a subtle shift in the use of "world." It no longer simply means creation; now a sense of indifference, ignorance, and alienation is introduced. Specifically, humanity is the topic at hand. He is Light, and humanity dwells in darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend Him.

This darkness, as Roger Fredrikson says, "does not consist of isolated acts of ignorance and unbelief here and there, but an organized, cosmic unwillingness to recognize the Light. The music has become strange and dissonant." Though God's first creative words were, "Let there be light," the chaos has chosen darkness.

Is there any tennis player greater than Roger Federer? Twenty time Grand Slam champion, eight time winner of Wimbledon. He was in London, had a couple of hours to kill before his departure, so he and a companion thought they would run out to have tea at Wimbledon. Federer admits he'd never been at Wimbledon when the tournament was not on. The eight-time winner at Wimbledon drives up to the gate where guests are usually welcomed, where one would arrive and then go up to get tea. He gets out, tells his companion he will have a word with the security lady. "I got this; no worries." But he didn't have it.

Federer approached the member of security asking if he could enter, only to be questioned by the rule-enforcing guard. "Do you have a membership card?" Of course, all winners of Wimbledon are gifted with membership automatically; Federer has eight membership cards, but he didn't have any of them on hand at the time. He was visiting London. The lady objected: "No membership card, no entrance." It became all too clear that this was one security guard who was not going to give grace. After all, a rule is a rule. At Wimbledon, you can't let non-members in willy-nilly. There is decorum to be kept. The security guard refused to allow the Swiss star, one of the most recognizable faces in all of tennis, into the club. He even told her, "Lady, I won this tournament eight times. Please believe me; I'm a member. How can I get in?"

No tea for that tennis boy. Yes, the very king of the Wimbledon court, who had won the most prestigious event in tennis more than anyone else ever wasn't even allowed to have a cup of tea in

the club where he had been crowned king. Federer failed to convince the guard. (Chloe Merrell, 1/9/2022)

John even gets more specific. Not only did the world not know Him, but (look at v. 11), He came to His own – it's a word of domain; He came home – and those who were His own did not receive Him.

With the phrase, "He is not received by His own," the tragedy deepens. Yes, first He was in the world, and then, finally, in His own home town. You see, Jesus had not come as an outsider, but as One Who belonged. The phrase "to His own" is the same one used later in verse 19:27, when it says of the Apostle John, our author, that he takes Mary, the mother of Jesus, "to his own home." There is our Word – from the cross, He commits His mother to John and John takes "her home."

Here is the Messiah who came to His own particular people and dwelt among them. They are people who had prepared for His coming for centuries. They had been prepared by the prophets. Surely the ones longing for a Messiah would recognize their Savior.

"They did not receive Him." "Receive" is a relational word; it's an intimate word. He was not welcomed by His own in a tender, loving way.

Not only did they not receive him, they refused to understand Him. They became more and more suspicious and finally rejected Him, accused Him of being a child of the devil, and killed Him.

As Thomas Wolfe says, "You can't go home again."

They did not recognize Him nor receive Him.

There is a story that circulates about an Irish couple who were celebrating their anniversary in a fancy restaurant in Dublin. They look over and recognize Bono, the lead singer of U2, having dinner with a friend. They were big fans of Bono, so they talked about going over and saying hello and asking for photos. After all, it was their anniversary. Bono went to the restroom, so they decided to go ask his friend if Bono would be okay with a few photos, and his friend said yes. So Bono comes back and agrees. The couple stand next to Bono as his friend takes the photos. They finish their meal while Bono and his friend leave. When the couple goes to pay, but the restaurateur says their meal has already been paid for. They ask if Bono had paid for them, and the restaurant manager said, "No, but his good friend, Bruce Springsteen paid for you."

Bono they know, but when it came to The Boss, they are at a loss. Springsteen, who paid the price of their meal, was unfamiliar, unrecognized.

Sometimes – oh, yes, to be sure – sometimes some pretty famous people go unwelcomed and unrecognized, but never more so than the Son of God.

I want you to notice a final thing about these introductory words of John

### III. God finds a new family.

Look at verse 12

"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right [or the power] to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name."

These people (v. 13) are "born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." John will tell us in chapter 3 that these are the folks who are, in fact, born again.

"But there were some..." Are you part of that "some," are you part of those who recognize the Christ and declare His glory? Are you among those who both recognize Him and (v. 12) receive Him? There is Nicodemus in chapter 3. There is a woman at the well in chapter 4. There is a blind man in chapter 9. As we go through this Gospel, we'll meet the characters who become part of His kingdom. And to these, He gave grace. God is in the business of grace-giving. In fact, He calls them His children. Not His own, not His home folk, but others who received Him – they are adopted into the heavenly family to become children of God. These are the ones who believed. In fact, we are told they believe in His very name.

When Roger Federer couldn't get past the keeper of the gate, the woman at Wimbledon who took her job as security guard very seriously, he tried another entrance, where a fan immediately recognized him. The security guards were like, "Oh, my goodness, it's Mr. Federer. What are you doing here?" And they ushered him in. Roger Federer at Wimbledon. When King Roger, who had long ruled Wimbledon, walked in to have tea, they called out the chairman of the club and they chatted for an hour. He even popped by to see the coveted Wimbledon trophy that he had lifted eight times over his illustrious career.

The superstar admitted that he was still in a state of awe about his earlier encounter with the zealous guard and then admitted that a tacky thought had crossed his mind. "I ought to go over and give a wave. "Hey, I'm in, I'm in." But I didn't do it.

So, it is the Wizard or Wolfe? Is it Dorothy, who declares there is no place like home, tapping her ruby red slippers to arrive in Kansas, welcomed by family? Or is it the major American novelist of the 20th Century, Thomas Wolfe, who says you can't go home again? Which one really gets it?

They both have a bit of truth, don't they?

He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came unto His own (which translates home) – He came unto His own home, and those who were His home folk did not receive Him.

But before we make Wolfe the winner, let's look at verse 12. There were some who received Him, some whom He adopted to be His own children. God forms a new family when rejected by His own. They become the children of God. They are those who believe in His name. And they are born not of blood – they are born again by the will of God.

Just like Jesus – the Word – came and put up His tent among them, He does the same for us today. The Word that was in the beginning, the Word that spoke the creative command "Let there be light," the One who echoes Genesis in His very being, arrived then and arrives today in our own midst.

So the question comes to you. Are you among the some, the some who receive Him, believe Him, and welcome Him home? Or do you reject Him? The decision was theirs then. And today the decision is yours.

God wants to dwell with us. What will we do?

Can He come home with you?

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Sources used:

Roger L. Fredrickson, *Mastering the New Testament: John*

Homileticsonline (sermon title and Bono illustration)