

## Beholding Salvation Held

A sermon on Luke 2:22-40 and John 1:1-5; 9-14

The Gospel according to John:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος,  
καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν,  
καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.  
Οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν.  
Πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο,  
καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ὃ γέγονεν.  
Ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν,  
καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων,  
καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει,  
καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.

...

Sorry - couldn't help myself. I'd best give you that in English. [John 1:1-5; 9-14]

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

John's Gospel starts off with a very cosmic, metaphysical, transcendent Christ.

That's actually my point in reading the Greek to you,

because even though the words and grammar are straightforward,

giving a translation that captures the **nuances**,

and the **double** or **triple meanings**,

and the **connotations** with ancient **philosophical** traditions -

all that is difficult to say the least

During the **Second Temple period** (500 BC - AD 70 )

- so that included Jesus' earthly lifetime -

many Jews held to what scholars now sometimes call  
the "**Two Powers of Heaven**" theology.

In simple terms,

this means that Jews were already thinking that a being,

often known as the **Wisdom** or **Word** of God,

**existed beside God the Father** from before the beginning,



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through whom God would **interact more directly** with human people.

This Wisdom or Word was just as God as God the Father, but yet distinct.

This understanding is summarized quite nicely in the prologue of John:

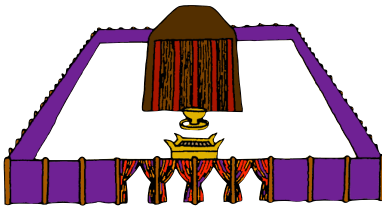
“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

To many a Second-Temple Jewish mindset, that was a perfectly valid statement.

The scandal came only in verse 14: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us”

To the minds of many - God simply wouldn't do that

-**Dwelling** sure - the word ἐσκήνωσεν literally means



“tented,” or “**tabernacled**”

that goes way back to the time of Moses

when the Hebrew people had a God-tent

that they brought with them on their wanderings

portable sacred space

-becoming flesh on the other hand was weird and potentially blasphemous

It is a bit mind bending for many of us now who often fall into assuming

that prior to Jesus' birth,

this Person we call the second person of the Trinity

simply did not exist.

Historically speaking, Christians have always taught that He is co-eternal with the Father -

that He was and is the eternal Word and Wisdom of the Father.

I'm sorry if that sounds weird to you,

but what John is doing is equating this human person of Jesus of Nazareth

with this “second power of heaven.”



Most people who saw Jesus weren't able to make that leap.

John points to the irony of this when he writes

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

He came to His own, but his own did not receive Him.”

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There were of course exceptions.

As exemplified in our first Gospel reading this morning -  
the one where Mary and Joseph take the baby Jesus to the Temple  
and they meet up with Simeon and Anna -

who both beheld more than just another infant being presented in the Temple.

Luke tells us that this story occurred when the days of her purification were completed -  
this refers to the practice wherein a mother and her newborn  
were excluded, or rather exempted,  
from ritual life until forty days after the birth.

(For this reason, this event is celebrated in many churches on February 2  
- the 40<sup>th</sup> day after Christmas - It's a holiday known as "Candlemas")



This fortieth day ritual the Holy Family go to the Temple is described in Exodus  
as a way of remembering the Passover when the firstborn of the Egyptians were killed.

It was a way of enacting the idea that children,  
especially first-born sons, ultimately belong to God.

It is also described more generally in Leviticus as occurring after a period of purification.

This was because during this forty-day period a mother was considered "unclean" -  
which again please remember is NOT a moral category.

It basically just means she is out of sorts.

Many of those "40 day/year" things in the Bible tend to reflect this idea  
of going through a time of chaos and upheaval,  
whether you're thinking about Noah's ark,

or wandering in the desert, or even Jesus being tempted in the desert.

These are times of chaos during which things hopefully get put in order.

Having a newborn is not much different.

Anyhow, on the 40<sup>th</sup> day, mother and child are presented at the Temple

Some Christian traditions carried over the practice

and still present mother and child in church for a blessing on the 40<sup>th</sup> day -

Catholics did this until recently (Vatican II 1962-1965),



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Orthodox still do, Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists too I think.  
Presbyterians not so much, though I'm sure there are exceptions

The tradition, then just as much as now, possibly more than now, was a joyous celebration.  
In those days there was no guarantee that mother

and especially the infant would survive those first forty days.

And now, it was time to reintegrate into the social and religious life of the larger community.

While parents naturally see their children differently than others,

Mary and Joseph must have had a different view of the baby Jesus

than most people in the Temple that day

- they had the benefit of having had pretty stunning revelation  
given to them by angels concerning this child.

Luke tells us about two people who were at the Temple that day  
who saw more than most in the baby Jesus.

What caught my attention in preparing this sermon was that this section is introduced with  
and BEHOLD! ἰδοὺ - interesting word

When Simeon hold Him and beholds Him, he says his eyes have seen the Salvation of the Lord.  
There's a level of wordplay here in that Jesus' name means salvation. But one doesn't get the

impression here that this was said as a joke or that this was  
something silly Simeon would say regarding any babe bearing the  
name Yeshua, or Joshua, or Jesus - all the same name.



“Behold” more than simply to see.

Behold etymology, related to beholden,

to give attention to something worthy of attention,

in a way, to be held,

to have your attention held by something worthy of it.

In the gospel reading, Jesus is not simply beheld, but held  
- held in the arms of Mary and Joseph, but also Simeon.

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Jesus - the Word of God who is God, who has been since before the beginning,  
the one who has the whole world in His hands  
Is held as an infant  
in all the vulnerability that goes along with that  
Not just a metaphysical philosophical concept,  
but a tangible, historical reality that can be held and not mere intellectually beheld.

Presumably other people might have held the baby Jesus  
at some time or another during his infancy,  
even more saw him,  
but how many Beheld him?

Luke treats these were noteworthy cases.

And it is still true that many miss what's most profound, most important

Both Simeon and Anna clearly had much practice in paying attention to God,  
watching for what He might be up to in the World

Simple psychological fact that you notice more of whatever you pay attention to

What is it that we behold?

That last verse I read from John ends with

“and we beheld His glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.”

May we too behold Christ ever more deeply in others, made in the image of God.

And in doing so, experience with Simeon,

the deep peace of knowing God's Salvation is here among us.

*Now to the One  
who by the power at work within us  
is able to do far more abundantly  
than all we can ask or imagine,  
to God be glory in the church  
and in Christ Jesus  
to all generations, forever and ever.  
Amen.*