

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Sarah Harrold

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



## The Sermon Text — John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He 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. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

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.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he 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 man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

## SERMON

Happy New Year! I hope that you all had an enjoyable weekend, whatever that may look like. New Years has always been an odd sort of experience for me... it seems strange to me that, just because it's the first of the year, I would somehow be more compelled to change my life than if it were the 247th day of the year. Nonetheless, I think it's a good excuse to look at life and assess what's going on, where I'm going, and why.

But this year over New Years, I was also preparing to preach, so my thoughts about the direction and purpose of life were combined with the scripture reading that we just heard. And I have to tell you, there were some pretty powerful promises and images and descriptions that came up. It would seem as though our God made a resolution at the very beginning, and that resolution was to bring LIFE into being. God – the God of the universe – made a resolution to bring life into being, and here we're told that we are a part of that. You are part of a resolution that was made not on a whim yesterday when God was feeling self-conscious about weight or work or habits – but you are part of a resolution that was made before time began. It would seem from the text today, that you are part of a resolution that is so close to the heart of God that, if this resolution were to fail or to dissolve, God would have to cease being God. It's huge. It's monumental. It's bigger than getting to the Rose Bowl, and I guarantee you that the outcome won't be the same. It's a resolution to bring about life – to bring about life for YOU – and we're in the middle of that process RIGHT NOW.

A bit overwhelming, no? We don't even know where to start with that. What is "life", after all? And most of the time we feel as though God is vague at best – how am I supposed to believe that there's this massive movement happening that I'm a part of? Besides the fact that I'm struggling just to put one foot in front of the other in life right now the way it is. To think that there's something MORE – it's too difficult.

It's easier to put life on auto-pilot than to actually take time to think through what it would mean if the God of the universe were on a mission and chose you to play a crucial role in it. It's so much easier in fact, that we tend not to think about it. So when we come to holidays like Christmas, when we celebrate a monumental point in the mission, instead of saying, "The Creator of the universe, the God who spoke through a burning bush and pillars of fire and smoke and hovers about the waters of the void is now physically in front of me in the form of a baby", we comment - as my friend says - "God comes and all we can say is, 'Look at the cute, vulnerable Deity!'". The thought that God is so passionate about this mission and about getting it right that he would actually manifest among us in tangible, concrete form is a bit too much for the brain to handle, so instead we focus on what we do know – the baby. We know babies. They sleep, they eat, they poop, they cry, and they sleep some more. Every once in a while they open their eyes and we dutifully smile and coo at them and then we go on our way. We know what to do with babies. What we don't know what to do with, is a powerful, massive, all-encompassing God who has decided on a resolution for this world and will do anything – anything – to bring it about. Even become one of us.

The book of John in the Bible is one of my favorites. There are all sorts of reasons for this, but one of them is that it gives us a framework for understanding this obsessive determination of God's to love this world and give it life. And then it goes on to tell us exactly how that life is being given and how you fit into it. It's an incredible book, really. And this morning, I'm going to take you through it.

It starts with: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." In the beginning was the Word. Was communication, speech, promise, potential, hope, relationship. In the beginning was the Word. "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." The essence of all that we have and are, is of God. "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. And the Word became flesh and lived among us." The Word became flesh and lived among us. God. Hope. Potential. Life. Became flesh and lived among us. What was always in existence and always among us became one of us to make life tangible.

This Eternal Life in human form was called Jesus and was born just as any other human. John tells us he grew up and found himself at the river one day, where he was baptized. God-

in-human-form was baptized; was called by name and displayed to the world as the son of God. We're not always the brightest creatures, us humans – he's baptized publicly so we know who we're dealing with when we see the rest of his life happening. We're given an interpretation lens.

Chapter 2: this Jesus continues life and ends up at a wedding where he turns water into wine. The guests are delighted, but he does miracles at this wedding so that you would take your own celebrations up a notch. So that you could have LIFE and allow yourself to enjoy the beauty of love.

Next Jesus is at the temple and becomes so filled with anger at how people are acting that he overturns tables. People had been selling animals and grain to be used in sacrifices. The act of sacrifice – of giving part of yourself to God – had been minimalized to simply giving some money as you walked in the door of the temple. Jesus overturns tables so that you would not be reduced to seeing your relationship with God as one solely of a money exchange. God now interacts with ALL of you again, not just your pocketbook.

Chapter 3: Nicodemus, a religious leader and intellectual, comes to Jesus at night to ask questions. He's curious, but the crowd he runs with doesn't approve of curiosity about Jesus, so he comes at night. He's a mixture of pride and defiance and earnest seeking and Jesus not only engages him but opens up the whole purpose to him – that we would have eternal life – life with the Eternal One. Jesus engages him so that the questions we're too afraid to ask out loud might also be met with compassion and grace and be broken open.

A Samaritan woman was at the well when we arrived at this village. She was part of a culture that hated us and we hated them. And besides that, she herself was no upstanding citizen. But she gave me a drink of water and I offered her life. I offered her life so that everyone could have it – those who are self-righteous and smug along with those who don't even know what God they're worshipping. I offered her life so that sinners and saints, parents and children, trailer-park and mansion-dwellers alike would have direct access to me.

A royal official then came to me because his son was deathly ill and he had heard I could work miracles. He wanted me to come with him immediately to save his son. But the point is not always physical health and this man needed saving more than his son. I told him to go on his way and his son would be healed; he had to leave in faith. I left him in a position of having nothing in life but his faith because that is what makes up true life. I left him in that position so that you who have families and jobs and homes and hopes and dreams and plans – would know true life through faith.

So then I came upon a man who had been crippled for 38 years and I healed him. It was on the Sabbath, which meant that doing work was punishable under law and healing was considered work. I did it anyway, so that you would know that sin is not deviating from a list of rules and life is not following a strict regimen. I did it so that you would experience life as integrity – life as anything that creates hope and love and faith – life as freedom.

I did many things – I fed thousands of people with just a few loaves, I walked on water, I healed a man blind from birth. I did these that you might know the power of God and that you – all of you – are precious and beautiful and meaningful to God. I

did it so that you would have the power to heal and multiply and command the earth as if you were God. I did it so that you would be ALIVE.

I released the adulterous woman so that you also would know the freedom you receive from your own sin when you release others of theirs.

I taught. Long discourses. I did it so you would understand. Walking around in a fog is not what I desire for you, but deep knowledge and connection with the God of Life. Now you have it.

I wept at Lazarus' death because he was my friend. I wept at his death just as I weep at yours. I wept because I am so connected to you that I can't help myself. We are in this world together – you and I – nothing can separate us.

I prayed for you so that you would know my deepest desires for you. And my deepest desires? They're that you would have the power of God in you and KNOW it.

I died because life does not always mean sunshine and flowers. There are real, destructive powers and forces and work. Sin is real. Death is real. Their effects are real. To be human is to die. But true life cannot be held by death. The evil in this world is nothing compared to my power. I am the life of the world – nothing came into being without me, which means that you are a part of me. So in my death, you also died. In my resurrection you also were brought back to life. Death cannot hold me. As people connected to me, death cannot hold you, either. Fear and sin are nothing compared to the grace and freedom you have in me.

And then I came back and showed myself to Thomas, who needed physical proof. I came resurrected, changed. But with scars in my wrists and side. I showed myself to him because while death has no hold, and while this world is beautiful, it is scarred. I showed myself so that you would have the ability to see me and the life I give in the wounded, confusing, and painful realities of this world. Because that is where I live most powerfully.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us and it was written down so that you hear it and believe and have life in his name.

It seems as though our God made a resolution at the very beginning to bring LIFE into being. A sort of life that's not about running on auto-pilot or confusion or complacency, but life that is abundant. Free. Overflowing. And characterized by an exceptionally intimate connection with this God through faith. Jesus' presence on earth was not God giving us a role model, but rather God literally transforming us from the inside out. It was God giving faith and life to us because we couldn't believe on our own.

God made a resolution to bring life into being. God has been faithful to this promise and will continue to be. The situations and characters John tells us about in this gospel are the same situations and characters that God meets us with today.

This year, regardless of the resolutions you made or didn't make, and regardless of your current circumstances, God will create life in you and use you to bring life to others because you are a part of this obsessive need to make this world alive.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year as you witness the possibilities that Life will bring. Amen. © 2011