

***Even Now—Something Waits to be Born  
...In the Image of God***

*John 1:1-14*

Do you know the word *ineffable*? It's the kind of word that I usually scan over when I read it in a book. I think I have some idea of what it means, but I'm not quite sure, and I don't want to stop long enough to find a dictionary. Finally I looked it up. *Ineffable*: It means something that can't be expressed or described in words. Something with so much power, that it cannot be spoken. *Ineffable*.

Religious, spiritual experiences are often ineffable. We just don't have words for what has happened inside of us. Do you know that feeling? You are moved—to tears, maybe to action. You get an insight that makes perfect sense, something so powerful that it makes meaning out of everything else. You know it deep down inside, as clearly as you know anything in your life. But when you try to describe it to someone else, you just can't find the words for it. It makes us feel tongue-tied, inarticulate. It isn't a failure; it's just that kind of experience. It's beyond words, ineffable. It happened to John Wesley, who had enough words inside of him to start the whole Methodist movement. Once, years after he was ordained as a priest, he had a moment when he knew God's presence so surely that it turned his life around, made him stop doubting his faith the way he had his whole life up till then. But when he tried to describe that experience, all he could say was, "I felt my heart strangely warmed."

It can happen in other contexts too. Have you ever tried to describe why you love your child, or your spouse? I remember a moment—one moment—in my life when I was so moved by love for another person that I couldn't find one more way to say it. I'd used up all the words I had; nothing quite captured what I felt. Finally: "*I am you*," I said. That's not true literally, of course; we're never completely the same as another person, no matter how much we love them. It wouldn't even be healthy to do that. I know that. I knew it then. But I had no other words to express what I was feeling. And when I remember that moment, now decades ago, I can still remember how I felt, how it feels to love someone that much.

An *ineffable* experience is what the Gospel writer John is trying to describe in the first chapter of his story of Jesus' life. Unlike his colleagues Matthew and Luke, John tells no story of Jesus' birth. There's no manger, or angels. No adoring shepherds, or wise men from the East. For John, the details of how or when or where Jesus came to be weren't so important. What seems critical to John—what he wanted us to understand before we know anything else about Jesus' life, is that everything—*everything*—has changed. That someone was here, a person who lived and died, like normal. But this person was different.

So different, that after him, nothing is the same. In this first chapter of his gospel, John is saying, "I can't really explain it. But it's as if I wasn't even alive until I knew him. As if *nothing* was alive until he came. *Everything* is different now. As if real life—life that makes sense—has just begun. It's like the whole story of creation has to be told again.

*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.*

We hear—we are supposed to hear—in those words an echo of the creation story, the first chapter of Genesis. “In the beginning...was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

There is just no other way to explain this ineffable thing.

You can get a little twisted up if you try to analyze those words as if they come from a textbook. Jesus is the Creator, there beside God from the very beginning.

No, wait: maybe Jesus is the *Word*, what God meant when he said, “Let there be light...and...plants and...and animals...and humans.

Maybe Jesus is the *light* that was created way back then; light that has risen like the sun on this earth every day since.

Or maybe Jesus is the human God had in mind when he set out to create something in his own image.

Which is it? What is the true thing John is trying to tell us with all of these images that are wrapped into the beautiful words of his first chapter? The answer is: *yes*. Yes. Every one of the pictures these words draw tells us something about who John knew Jesus to be. Every one of those explanations—and all of them together—is still not enough to describe what has happened. There are no words to explain fully that God himself has been here. With John. With us.

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory...  
From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*

The Greek verb that John used, that’s translated into English “lived among us”, is actually a little more colorful than that. It means something more like pitching a tent, moving in. God took up residence with humanity. “Moved into the neighborhood,” Eugene Peterson translated it. The life of Jesus means that God chose—chooses—to leave the safety and comfort of some distant corner of the universe, and comes to live here. Not just to appear for long enough to make an announcement. To *live*. Inside this sanctuary. Outside this sanctuary, under the eaves, where people who have no other place to go take shelter from rain and cold. In warehouses with building code violations. In the chaos of Aleppo. In your apartment, in your messy family.

My friend Jordan makes a sort of game for himself in trying every day to make someone’s day—to do something for another person that’s unexpected, that will take a regular day, or maybe even a bad day, and make it good.

A few months ago Jordan was having breakfast at a restaurant, and seven men were sitting at a table near him. Jordan finished his meal and as he left, he paid the check for that other table, without saying a word to them. The next time Jordan came back to the restaurant, the staff at the

restaurant couldn't wait to talk to him. The seven men at that table, when they realized their check had been paid, gathered all their money together--\$200—and they left it as a tip. The wait staff shared it with the busboys and the cooks. And still there was money left over—all day long they surprised other customers by buying their breakfast.

I'm not suggesting Jordan is Jesus. I'm not even suggesting we all should be like Jordan.

But I want to be one of those guys who knows his breakfast was paid for, out of the blue. Let us see when grace comes. Because when you have received something that feels like grace, it changes you. It changes what you are capable of doing, how you give yourself away. It changes everything.

That's the experience John is trying to describe.

Now, John says, I see. See it with me, he says: God isn't some disembodied spirit that watches, or judges, or even sympathizes, as we worry and lose our way and struggle. This God is personal. This God is *in* human life—in *your* life—in a way that is close-up and intimate and long-term. This story is as much about giving us a new picture of God as it is about who Jesus was.

You might say that God's love for us, for creation, is *ineffable*. God couldn't say it adequately in any other way—not in nature, or the Bible, or voices of angels. To become human himself is the only way God had to communicate it fully. *I am you*, God says, totally at a loss for words. In a way that God could not express in any other way, God speaks love by coming to live this life with us. God has been us. God *is* us.

In this *Word* of God that is Jesus, God is also saying, "I want you to know me. This is who I am." When God is human we can see who he is in a way we never have quite been able to understand before. That this God is someone who heals, and forgives, and gathers up the people no one else wants. Who knows personally what it feels like to live through betrayal, pain, humiliation, the fear of death. Who prays for the people who hurt him. And who keeps coming back for us, no matter how far we wander away.

Theologians have argued for centuries—and Christians are still all over the map—about who Jesus actually was. Was Jesus God, or was he the Son of God, or a person who was like God, or what? John is clear. The answer is: *Yes*. In this one human life we see God, present, real—a God who *gets* family and friends and work and holidays and the challenge of remembering what's important and what's not.

Jesus is like God. Jesus *is* God. It doesn't really matter how you say it, or what makes sense in your head. What matters—what will change everything—is knowing that this story is still being written, as true today as it was then John tried haltingly to put it into words. God is—has always been—like Jesus. Here, from birth to death. In it for the long term. Fully engaged in this life. In your life. So in love with his creation—with you—that there really are no words for it.

And that changes *everything*.