

Before the Beginning

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Date: 15 December 2024

Preacher: Donald Smith

[0 : 0 0] Let's pray for God's help with them as we come to his word together. Father, we thank you so much for your word. We thank you that you are a God who speaks and has spoken to us through it and has spoken to us through your Son.

We pray now that you would speak to each and every one of us gathered here this morning, that we together might grow in our knowledge and love of you. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Well, children, adults, by all means, answer this question too. When do you think Christmastime begins? When does Christmastime begin?

Maybe, yes. Sorry? Christmas Day. That is a patience. I like that. That is good, yes. That is a very patient attitude towards Christmas.

Don't believe it until it's actually here. What about maybe when the Christmas tree grows up? Have you guys got Christmas trees up in your house? Yeah? A few nods around the Christmas tree.

[1 : 0 3] That's a pretty good sign, isn't it, that Christmastime is near or has come? Maybe you think Christmastime begins when the school holidays begin. Maybe that's a bit late in the day. Maybe you think Christmastime begins when the first chocolates popped out the advent calendar.

That's a good sign, isn't it? The countdown really begins then. People have lots of different ideas, don't they, of when Christmastime begins. If you went by Christmas decorations in the shops, I think Christmastime began sometime in September or something ridiculous.

It seems to get a few days earlier every year, doesn't it? We all have different ideas of when Christmas season begins. But I wonder, I wonder what you would say if I asked you when the real Christmas story began.

When did the real Christmas story begin? Every Christmas we remember, don't we, the story of the birth of Jesus, who was born more than 2,000 years ago.

That's a long time, isn't it? More than 2,000 years ago. We've had a few readings from the Christmas story this morning. We've heard about Mary giving birth to Jesus, the angels proclaiming the birth of a saviour to the people.

[2 : 1 5] Now, Jesus' birth would be a good guess, I think. But the story started a bit before that, didn't it? We heard a bit about that this morning. What would Joshua and Daniel read for us?

Right at the beginning of the service, they read from us from Luke chapter 1, didn't they? When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her she was going to be pregnant and give birth to a baby boy.

So Christmas time begins at least, doesn't it, nine months before the day Jesus was born in a manger. There's a great campaign for next year, March the 25th. Pop up the Christmas tree.

Get your parents to get you nine months' worth of Advent calendars. It's genius if your neighbours think you're mad. Point them to Luke 131 and it'll all make perfect sense to them. So maybe the real Christmas story began 2024 years and nine months ago.

Now that would be a really good guess. But what I want to show you this morning is that the Christmas story really began even longer ago than that.

[3 : 22] This morning we are going to be thinking about what happened before the beginning. Before the beginning of the Christmas story we're familiar with.

And in fact, before the beginning of everything. Because John begins his Christmas story when? Just look there at those first three words of John chapter 1.

In the beginning. Over the next few Sundays, finishing on New Year's Day, we as a church are going to be thinking about the Christmas story from the perspective of John's gospel.

We're going to look at those 18 verses we read just a moment ago. And we're going to start this morning with just the first three of those verses. But I imagine when we read it together just a minute ago, for most of us, what John tells us there isn't probably what we usually have in our minds, is it?

When we think about the beginning of Christmas. We usually think, don't we, of angels bringing messages of Bethlehem and inn and some stables.

[4 : 34] Of little baby Jesus lying in a manger, shepherds out in their fields, wise men coming with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. That's what most of us will have in our minds when we think of the Christmas story.

And that is all good and right. Those are exactly the things that Luke and Matthew tell us about in their accounts of the gospel.

But John, right, John wants us to take a step back. In fact, John wants us to take literally as many steps back as you possibly can.

And hopefully this morning we'll see how helpful John's starting place is to our understanding of what Christmas is all about. So let's have a look at these first three verses of John's gospel together.

And hopefully at the end, you'll have three things to help you better understand what is happening in that stable in Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago. And we're going to begin by looking at just the first six words.

[5 : 41] Right, look down there in your back. What was the first six words that John writes for us there? In the beginning was the word.

In the beginning was the word. Now, I don't know about you. I love a good origin story. I wonder, do any of you like superheroes?

A few nods. Yes. Who's your favorite superhero? No one's volunteering any options. That's all right. Yes. Spider-Man.

Great shout. I love Spider-Man too. Spider-Man's wonderful, isn't he? I'll be honest. I don't have a particular favorite superhero. But when it comes to superhero films, almost without fail, right, it's the first film in a series that's always my favorite.

So the first Spider-Man film is my favorite of the Spider-Man films. I'll be honest. The first two examples that came to my head when I was thinking about this were Iron Man and Batman Begins. Now, I had the depressing realization this morning that the more recent of those two came out 16 years ago.

[6 : 49] So, I don't know. Are you familiar with... Have you seen Iron Man? No? Oh, no. You can let me know afterwards a more relevant example. Okay. But, right, what I love about these stories, isn't it, is that they take us right back to the beginning of these characters.

Don't we? Back to a time when Batman wasn't Batman. It was just Bruce Wayne. Back to a time when Iron Man didn't exist and Tony Stark was just Tony Stark. Well, if Bethlehem in a manger was all we knew about Jesus, and if that's where we thought the Christmas story began, we might think, right, that the stable next to the inn was where Jesus began.

And that the Gospels were kind of like a superhero film and tell us, don't they, about this journey that a young boy goes on to become something. A great teacher and a miracle worker later in life. But John wants us to know, right, straight away that Jesus, and this is really important for us to understand, Jesus is not like that at all.

Jesus is not a superhero with an origin story because Jesus has no origin story. Jesus didn't start off as a normal person and later in life become something amazing.

Because from before the very beginning, Jesus was. That's pretty amazing, isn't it? In the beginning was the words.

[8 : 23] Now, John uses a slightly odd name for Jesus there, doesn't he? He calls Jesus the words. And he does that to give us a clue, I think, about who Jesus is and who he's going to show him to be through the rest of his Gospel.

We'll see this more clear in a moment. But God's words, right, in the Old Testament, what John's audience would have been familiar with, God's word was his revelation of himself in creation and in salvation.

God's word is how he communicates himself to his people, how he makes himself known. And so John uses this rather odd-sounding name right at the start of his book to explain to his audience who they can expect Jesus to be.

So the word is Jesus. And that means in the very beginning, Jesus already was. John deliberately starts his book with pretty much exactly the same language that the whole Bible begins with.

Right, if you took your Bible and you turn to page one and read the first verse of the first chapter of Genesis, you would read, In the beginning, God.

[9 : 38] And then John comes along, doesn't he, and says, In the beginning was the word. He is saying to his readers, Just as sure as you can be that God has existed from before the beginning of time, so too can you be sure that Jesus existed always.

There was never a time when Jesus did not exist. Sometimes in superhero films we get flashbacks to a point in our hero's life where they were very different to what they were present.

The film brings us back maybe five years ago, maybe like 50 years ago or something. And we see a very different person, don't we? No sign of our superhero yet.

But if you were making a film about Jesus, you could flashback a hundred years. And the same Jesus would be there as has always been.

If you wanted to find out where he began, you could try going back 2,000 years, 20,000 years. You go back 2 million years. You could go back to before the beginning of the universe.

[10 : 43] Jesus. The word was. Before there was time, there was Jesus. Before people existed, there was Jesus.

Before the earth was shaped, before there was mountains and oceans, there was Jesus. Before the stars appeared in the sky, the word was. Jesus did not come into existence in Bethlehem.

That is not where his story began. Because his story has no beginning. What does that mean for us this Christmas?

Well, it means, doesn't it? Remembering that the child in the manger is no ordinary child who became a super ordinary person. No, from the very beginning, he is the eternal word of God who existed before time began.

Christmas isn't just a nice story about some unusual birth of someone who would become something he was not. It is the eternal word stepping into time and space for us.

[11 : 49] I really encourage you this Christmas to take time to reflect on that. On the eternity of Jesus. Maybe before you open your presents on Christmas morning.

Take a moment to remember. We celebrate, don't we, this day. And we enjoy all the good things that come with it. Because the one who was before all things and who will be for all eternity.

He was born in a manger so that he could save you. So straight away, within six words, John tells us something about the when of Jesus.

When did Jesus begin? Jesus never began. Because in the beginning was the word. And that leads to a very natural next question, doesn't it? Who?

Who on earth is this word? None of us have existed from before time, have we? So who is this Jesus that John is telling us about? Well, the good news is that John doesn't make us wait for the answer.

[12 : 57] Just look at what he says there in the rest of verse one. The word was with God. And the word was God.

Probably, I reckon, the most mind-blowing beginning to a book that's ever been written. Because this word always was, even before the beginning, we might well have assumed something impressive.

In fact, it only really leaves us with two options. Either the word was with God, because we know, don't we, from Genesis one, that in the beginning, God's.

Or maybe John is telling us the word is God's. So which is it, we ask? Was the word with God? Or was the word actually God?

Look at the rest of verse one and see if you can figure out the answer. Both. Right? Jesus tells us, John tells us, the word was both mind-blowing and mind-boggling.

[14 : 06] I don't think anyone would particularly thank me for a detour into Greek grammar this morning. But let me just summarize this for us. Right? In saying the word was with God, John is actually telling us something about the closeness of their relationship.

Okay, when we use the word with, we don't necessarily mean that much by it, do we? I could say, I was at the bus stop with a student or with somebody's granny.

That doesn't mean I actually knew them, does it? It just means I happened to be next to them. But the specific language John uses here tells us that the word did not just exist alongside God, but was in a personal relationship with God.

And we learn, don't we, from what we read later on in the rest of John's gospel, that there is no closer relationship than the one between the Son of God and the Father, between Jesus and God.

So the word was with God in the beginning. Not in that they just happened to be next to each other, but in the sense that they knew each other far better and loved each other far more than even the closer relationships we've ever had or ever will have.

[15 : 22] But then John kind of drops something of a bombshell, doesn't he? As if what's gone before wasn't mind-blowing enough. And, he writes, and the word was God.

The word was God. So the word, Jesus, was with God, and Jesus was himself God.

God. There's an incredible truth to dwell on this Christmas. And it can. It can stretch our minds, can't it? To a very limit. In fact, it probably goes beyond that.

I wonder if you've ever found yourself in class. Maybe have you ever had to do any tests in, like, maths or something? Never a good day, is it? But maybe when you're doing a test, maybe students can sympathize this in exams very recently, right?

That there's a question or a problem comes up, and, man, you just cannot figure out the answer to it. Well, I think that's probably a bit like how all our brains are with what John is describing to us here.

[16 : 29] He says it to us pretty plainly, doesn't he? That the word was with God and the word was God. This is pointing us to what we call the Trinity. That God is three persons in one.

So there is only one God. But there are three persons in the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and all three are equally God, not just part of God, but God.

Now, that might confuse us, but that's okay. I had a look at an advanced higher maths paper from a couple of years ago.

That's not how I spend my spare time. It was for something, I promise. But most of it, right, I couldn't even read. Okay, here's a couple of the questions from it. Express, try and get ahead of this, express Z equals one plus the root of three I in polar form.

Any suggestions? I don't even know where to begin. Another one, hence, or otherwise, I don't know what that's supposed to mean, show that Z cubed is real.

[17 : 37] Any ideas? Absolutely not. I can't get my head around that at all. Now, I know I can't get my head around that.

I don't know what that means. I don't know how it works. But I also know, right, that just because I can't wrap my head around it, it doesn't mean, does it, that it therefore can't be right.

It just means my brain isn't smart enough yet to understand it. Well, that's kind of, I think, like what it should be when we think of the word was with God and the word was God.

That is true. It is right. Maybe our brains aren't smart enough yet to make sense of it perfectly, but just because we can't understand it fully doesn't make it any less true.

And so Jesus was in the beginning. He was, and he was with God, and he was God. And that means that what we celebrate at Christmas, isn't it, is not only the birth of an eternal person, someone who's lived for a very, very, very long time, it is the coming of God himself.

[19 : 00] The second person of the Trinity taking on flesh, becoming like you and me. The baby in the manger is no ordinary baby.

He is the almighty God. The king of kings. When you look at a nice little nativity scene on your mantelpiece at home, don't let the simplicity fool you.

The little child in the manger is the eternal God who came to dwell among us. So this Christmas, let us worship Jesus for who he truly is.

He's not just a wise teacher, is he, or a moral example. He's not just someone who made a bit of a difference in the world, but rather God himself come to rescue us from our sin.

And then thirdly, and very briefly, we see that the world was made through the words. Let's look at verse 3 there with me. John writes, All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

[20 : 19] All things were made through him. I think that's something just worth dwelling on a moment, isn't it?

All things in here, that's quite impressive. All things in this city, man, that's a lot of things. All things in this world, all things in this universe.

Every star in the sky. Do you know how many stars are in the sky? This is my favorite fact.

I might have told you before. I'm going to shamelessly tell you again. Scientists estimate that there are, there's what, one million, million, million, million stars in the universe.

One million, million, that's 24 zeros. 24 zeros. Jesus, they were all made through him. Let me just try and put that in some kind of perspective.

[21 : 24] I wonder, have you, have you ever picked up a handful of sand? Right? You've probably done that. I'm guessing most of us have been to a beach in our lives, haven't we? Have you ever started trying to count the grains of sand?

I mean, that's, that's, that's not a great day in the summer holidays, is it? That's not how we like to spend our time. If you did, you'd be there for a long time, wouldn't you? Every grain of sand in your hands would take a long, long, long time to count.

There are something like a million, right, a million times more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand in the whole world.

stars. That's a lot of stars. Point is, when we think of Jesus, God, as the creator, look to the heavens and be blown away by who this Jesus is.

Every single one of them was made through Jesus. Every blade of grass, every ocean wave, every human being, everyone in your class, everything about them, every hair on their head, everything was made through Jesus.

[22 : 44] Everything exists because Jesus, the word, brought it into being. That's really mind-blowing, isn't it, when you start thinking about what's happening at Christmas?

the one through whom all things were created, the scope of which we cannot possibly get our heads around, took on flesh, the little baby in Mary's womb.

Mary's womb was made through him. The creator of the whole universe became a tiny part of his creation.

The one who made the stars was born under the stars. The one who formed the mountains was laid in a lowly manger. The one who breathed life into humankind, took on human flesh himself and breathed out air.

So this Christmas, as you look at the beauty of the Christmas lights, the decorations we see, the snow-covered landscapes, even as you take in all the wonder of creation as you look up to the skies, remember, Jesus made it all and he existed before it all and yet, he humbled himself to become one of us.

[24 : 07] The creator stepped into his creation because he loved us and he wants to save us. So John's opening words, they take us back.

Before the beginning, before the beginning of where we usually think the Christmas story begins, we go back beyond Bethlehem, we go back to eternity and here we see, don't we, here we see that Christmas is not just about a baby in a manger, it is about the eternal word of God stepping into time and space for us and he did it all in order to save us from our sin.

When the angel appears to Joseph, we read this in Matthew, he says, as straightforward as can be, he says, Mary will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.

the word who always was, the word who was with God and was God, the word who may all things were made through, that is the one who was born in Bethlehem on Christmas morning and he became that baby so that he could save you and he will save you when we put our trust not in ourselves, not in the good things we've done, but in Jesus alone.

He will save you not when you become good enough for him, but when you admit you're not good enough and that you need him. the eternal word of God to save you.

[26 : 05] So let's not just celebrate Christmas this year, but put our trust in the person that Christmas is all about. Jesus did not begin in Bethlehem, he always has been and always will be.

He is with God and he is God. He didn't begin in Bethlehem, but he was born in Bethlehem for you and for me.

Let's pray before we sing together. Thank you.