

Second Week of Advent. 2012. First Presbyterian Church of Allegan

Life "Zoe"

John 10:7-18

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. ^[a] They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

John 1:4

⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

On Friday, I went to work on my sermon at my favorite coffee shop. It is a combination Subway Sandwiches/ Biggby Coffee place with a strong wifi connection and comfortable chairs. As I was in line getting a breakfast sandwich, I got into a conversation with the young man behind the counter. His name is Vince, he was looking forward to the weekend. And then he paused and laughed and said, "I don't know why I am looking forward to it. I am broke, so I can't do anything. And I just got paid two days ago. -- After I bought groceries and paid my rent and put gas in my car, I got nothing left. "

As I sat down to write the sermon, Vince was right in my field of vision. He was working hard: baking bread, and putting extra olives on a sandwich for a man in a group of business people coming in with their papers and laptops in order to sit down and have a meeting just across from two women who were catching up on each other's lives. The TV was blaring out stories about Pearl Harbor veterans and unemployment hitting a four year low, while a man in shorts and tennis shoes (who looked like he just had a good workout at the gym), sat down with a toasted bagel and a cup of coffee to read the newspaper. --It all is simply just a normal day of normal people doing their normal things while living their normal life.

So when we read today in our scripture that Jesus came as "Life" and that this "Life" of Jesus is our "light". --When we hear in John 10 that Jesus came to give us "life to the full" or "life abundantly", we can only wonder what in the world that means. ---Did Jesus come to this world so that Vince could work for low wages at Subway? Did Jesus come into the world so that we can sit and drink our coffee and read our newspapers? Is the life that Jesus is speaking of given so that we can make a business deal that will lower costs and increase profits? -- Today we ask another huge question. --What is the meaning of "life?"

Let's rule out first what "Life" it isn't, in the context of our verse today. The Greek word used in the New Testament text here is the word "Zoe". (Which is commonly translated into English as "Life") -- In the last 20 years, Zoe has become quite a popular name for baby girls, rising in 2011 to #31 on the baby name frequency list. It is also the name of a popular female character on the TV show Sesame Street. But Zoe was not typically used as a proper name in the first Century. It was instead a term used by Philosophers such as Aristotle. And the daily activity and the daily happiness or career success of a person was also never referred to as "Life" by the Greek philosophers. For daily life they used a completely different word, "Bios" a term which was unfortunately and confusedly used

many centuries later as the prefix for our scientific term of "Biology" and more correctly used to create the word, "Biography."

But while the word Zoe may bring to our 21st Century minds a particular young girl, for the first Century educated Greek speaking people that this text was written to, Zoe meant something very different. When Greek philosophers used the word Zoe, they were most frequently talking about big existential questions. They were postulating about the existence of life, the beginning of life, and where life came from. Those classic Greek philosophers would put together massive theories of how all of life began from the elements of fire or water or from air. Modern commentators on these ancient Greek philosophical texts have suggested that we translate the word "Zoe" as "lifeforce" instead of plain "Life" to try to better understand what the authors meant. I think that is a helpful suggestion, and so I will try to use it for the rest of this sermon.

Even though we are many centuries from Aristotle's Philosophy, his definition and understanding of this lifeforce is still the basis for our Western understanding of it. For Aristotle, lifeforce was the animating force for a universal form or the design of something. --The lifeforce literally "brought it life." Aristotle defined this lifeforce to different degrees, assigning different levels of it to plants, animals and humans. -- Humans of

course, had the highest form of life force, due to their level of intellect and rationality. Humans also had a Psyche or a Soul that was the pattern for their life force. The life force within all living things was visible and could be studied because all things that live, in Aristotle's analysis do three things. They all grow, change and then decay. The life force could either be "in" something that would be considered alive or departed from something; the state when we would consider it dead.

In my living room, I recently declared something dead. I had a Schefflera plant growing in a pot there that had been struggling for years. At one time, in my former house, this plant had flourished. But now it apparently didn't like the light it received in this spot, and the cats particularly enjoyed batting it around and trying to climb on it. Month after month, this plant grew more yellow and droopy. It kept dropping leaves. Finally the other day, I checked on it again. It was simply a dead stick. A small tug on it the stem pulled it right away from its roots. So, I declared the plant officially dead, and started thinking about what new plant I would put in its pot instead.

Aristotle would have agreed with me that my plant was completely dead, but he also would probably remind me that even upon death a humans

Psyche or the Soul would still live on eternally with the life force of Zoe. For my plant, it's life and death would be all that there was, but for us, Aristotle argued for something more eternal for humans.

Given this contextual understanding of the life force of Zoe from Greek philosophy; the words here in John 1:4 carry actually huge theological payload.

Thayers Greek Lexicon translates John 1:4 this way: **In Jesus, (the Logos) life force was comprehended, and the life force, transfused from the Logos into created creatures was the light (or the rationality) of humans. (Because the life force of humans is self-conscious, and thus a fountain of self analytical intelligence springs up.)**

Wow. There is a lot there. Let's go through it piece by piece. Last week we talked about Jesus being the Logos. --The Logos being the very essence of reason, the source of which is God. This Logos, Jesus, the very conceptualization of the ideas of God becoming real --became human for us.

In today's scripture, we build on John's theology of Jesus being the rationality of God, the Logos coming into being in the universe and on earth as a massive universe defining event. According to John here, this Logos

was philosophically fundamental to our existence as humans. Because Jesus is the Logos, in Jesus, we as humans are able to share in this life force that animates us. We are able to grow, change and ultimately decay and die. And this life force that animates everything in this world, all of the plants and all of the animals, and all of us as humans is also what is given to us in a greater degree of rationality so that as humans we are able to comprehend and to think about this life force that animates us.

What John is saying here is not only that Jesus was present when God thought up the idea of creating the world before the beginning, but also that Jesus was that ability to reason, and Jesus WAS that life spark that started everything and that Jesus IS that life force exists in all living things.

Let's put this into our postmodern context. Most people and scientists today accept the theory of the "Big Bang", since the evidence for it is quite overwhelming. This is the theory that some 13.75 billion years ago, that all of the universe was condensed into a particularly dense and hot point somewhere in space time. This "somewhere" was a gravitational singularity, a space that was smaller than the normal wavelengths of particles that exist now could possibly occupy. Somehow the normal theories of general relativity and quantum mechanics worked in a way that

was **infinite and eternal** in this somewhere/ sometime pre-universe state. The Big Bang theory then describes the rapid expansion and cooling of this somewhere, exploding outward to become the universe that we know and live in and study today.

I believe the author of John would completely embrace this Big Bang theory of our beginnings. If the author of the Gospel of John was sitting in these pews today, I imagine that both the definition of quantum mechanics and general relativity would be used by him as examples of the Logos functioning in the Universe, and that the rapid expansion of all matter would be attributed to Jesus as the Zoe, the Liferforce, the animating spark that started it all.

In addition to the lifeforce that animates all of life, this John passage also carries along with it the eternal nature of the Greek concept of Zoe in humans. Not only is the Zoe the lifespark that started everything, it is the way in which humans experience eternal life in the spirit.

Strongs Bible Concordance explains Zoe this way:

2222 *zōē* – **life (physical and spiritual)**. **All life ([2222](#) /*zōē*)**, throughout the universe, is *derived* – i.e. it always (only) comes from and is sustained by **God's self-existent life**. The Lord *intimately shares* His gift of life with *people*,

creating each in *His image* which gives all the capacity to know His eternal life.

Or in other words, because all life comes from Jesus, it is fueled or kept going by Jesus who is God's rational thought come into reality. God shares this spark of eternal lifeforce with all of humanity, an eternal gift that we can know because we as humans are created in the image of God with the ability to think and to conceptualize and to understand it.

In conclusion, the concept of Life as it was understood in the first Century is not simply daily life as we know it. It is much more working for a minimum wage job, or taking out the trash or the phone call you make to your brother on his birthday. The Greek philosophical concept of Zoe often translated "Life" was the lifeforce that animates everything. It was fundamental to the study of the beginning of life itself. As Jesus came into the universe as the Logos, John also calls Jesus the Zoe, the lifeforce that gives us as humans our lifeforce. This Zoe gives us both our lifeforce in the present that we live into by choosing God's purposes for us, as well as our eternal life by our eternal soul being part of God's eternal lifeforce.

May we as God's disciples endeavor to live our lives into the fundamental and eternal nature of the lifeforce that we share with Jesus Christ. Amen.