

# ONE WORD

December 25, 2011, at 11:05 a.m.

*(Christmas Day)*

by Rev. Jeremy Wester



## ST. PAUL'S

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**Texts:** Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12); John 1:1-14

## **John 1:1-14**

*<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

*<sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. <sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. <sup>14</sup>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.*

One Word makes all the difference. Our gospel passage today confronts us with John's beautiful and challenging description of the Word of God. The Word was in the beginning, the Word was with God. The Word was God. All things were created through the Word and that very same Word gives light and life to all the world. John's gospel goes on to narrate the story of Jesus Christ to illuminate and explore what this powerful statement means for our lives and our salvation. On Christmas day we remember the fullness of the Word coming into our lives, and we celebrate the promise and the hope we have through the Word of God. One Word makes all the difference.

In the prayer before the sermon, I hope you noticed that one word was changed. The prayer began as usual, "Let the words of my mouth," but when you joined in to pray, the word "my" became "our" each time: "and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight O Lord. Our strength and our redeemer." A

subtle change for sure, but one that highlights something we too often overlook; the gospel we proclaim, the Word of God whose birth we are here to celebrate, makes us one body in the Lord. We are no longer strangers and aliens, a room full of individual persons who happen to be saying the same words. We are one family in Christ, and as a body we verbalize this prayer together, hoping that God will speak to us and transform us all.

It may seem odd to think that one small word could make all that much difference. I don't really expect that by making the subtle switch you will now turn and see your neighbor in light of the perfect fellowship that God makes possible, but the way we talk and the words we use have more of an effect on our lives than we often notice. Sometimes, one word makes all the difference.

Perhaps it's so difficult to see because of how often we seem to quibble over insignificant words. I'm sure you've each witnessed something of the back and forth between those who say "Merry Christmas" and those who campaign for the more ambiguous "Happy Holidays." Songs have even been composed to advocate for one or the other, to argue either for witnessing to the reason for the season or for compassion through neutrality and political correctness. The debate seems louder each year, and I can't help but wonder in my head where it all went wrong. I'm not so much interested in taking one side or other as I am in pointing out that the words being debated are not actually all that different.

The very words we use to be more PC are only less offensive if you don't realize where they come from. It was popular for a while to replace Christ with the letter "X," X-mas instead of Christmas, as though that somehow made the holiday about something other than Jesus. But the letter X is the first letter of the Greek word for Christ. I hardly see how writing the short hand for Christ is any less offensive than spelling it out for someone.

And the word "holiday" comes from a practice of setting apart special days in the church calendar as holy. These "holy days" were significant and special for whole nations that revolved around the church calendar, and they lay the foundation for our present practice. We may or may not do anything special or holy on these "holy

days” except the wonderful practice of taking a day off from work. But that is where the term comes from.

Christmas to Xmas. Using shorthand doesn’t change who the day is about. Holy day to Holiday. The change from a long to a short “o” is not what makes the difference between Christian and secular. I don’t really take sides in this particular argument; I don’t think either “side” is actually right. I think both sides argue for one side of the coin or the other when the gospel we proclaim is part of a whole different currency. I think the reason we so often quibble over words is that we’ve lost sight of the Word that does change everything.

It didn’t happen overnight, and the process is so complex and varied that I don’t even begin to understand how we came to be where we are now. But for the sake of relating to the world at large, we as a church and a people have lost sight of that which is unique and beautiful and powerful in the Christian faith. Our lack of vision extends far beyond our language for the holiday season.

In the name of evangelism and tradition we sometimes overuse and abuse Christian words like “prayer” and “god.” Eventually these words become more significant as terms of secular common sense than transforming Christian witness. In the name of tolerance and inclusivity, we sometimes obscure the language of the faith for something more inviting or broad-minded or less offensive. Eventually many rightly question why they ought to bother with the church in the first place if it’s just a restatement of what they already know to be the case.

The beautiful and life-affirming proclamation of Christmas is that through the One Word of God, the whole world will never be the same. In Him and through Him all things were created, and Jesus Christ is the light and life of the whole world. One word changes everything. But that very statement sounds dangerous. One side of the church doesn’t want to leave anyone out who may not have heard the name. The other fears that there may be nothing left to enter into if no one is left out. And so we flip from one side to the other as a church. The lines are drawn and the quibbling over words ensues.

When I picture the situation in my mind, I see us all afloat in the oceans of life, tossed about by the waves and the chaos and struggling to find a way to stay afloat. One side would say Jesus is a life preserver, a bunch of floating rings tossed out into the sea and all you have to do is find one, grab hold, and float out the rest of your days. The other side might question the struggle altogether. Instead of finding a way to stay above water you must embrace that life is what it is, lay back and enjoy the ride. One extreme is offensive because life becomes more about the luck of being near a preserver than about the desire to swim; some are left to drown through no fault of their own. The other extreme is ineffective because there isn't much point in learning to swim or float if you're going to spend your whole life wet anyway.

Neither side of that coin is any better than the other, but the Bible points us toward a whole different currency. In the beginning was the Word. In the beginning, the earth was dark and chaotic; waters spanned the globe, and there was no light to combat the darkness. The Word is the light of all people. God spoke into the darkness and said, "Let there be light," and the darkness did not overcome the light. Through the Word, all things were created. God spoke and gathered up the waters to their place; God raised up the dry land upon which we now stand.

Our vision of the Word of God pales in comparison with the Bible's vision of reality, no matter which side of the coin we find ourselves on. Faith is not about whether or not we each receive a life preserver in the midst of the ocean. We quibble over words because we don't have the vision to see that, through Christ, God is able to raise up the dry land on which every living creature rests.

I don't pretend to know the fate of every person in this world or even any person in this room. Maybe someone would choose to stay in the ocean for fear of change or for arrogance or for who knows what other reason. But I do know that the Word of God does more than we can even imagine. As you are tossed about by the waves and sometimes feel like you're struggling just to stay afloat, you don't have to choose between searching for a life preserver or accepting that the water is all there is. One Word changed everything.

At least twice in my life I have been confronted by this stark reality. The first time came up during my final summer in Texas before going off to seminary. Sallie and I had been dating for a while, and the time came when I decided to propose marriage. She knew it was coming, so I had a great time figuring out how to make it a surprise. There was plenty of subtle manipulation in the days leading up to the actual proposal; several misdirections and phone calls made behind her back. We wound up at her parents' lake house, one of Sallie's favorite places in the world, with both sets of our parents as well as my brother and his now wife. Lots of fun and games and conversation were had during the day, until it was finally the right time for me to ask. The family had gone to bed, or so Sallie thought, and we took a walk down to the pier. Up to that point, I had total control of the situation and I had worked out every detail to the finest point. I was as sure as a man can be without a ring on her finger that she would say yes, but in the time it took for me to speak those words I had laid my whole self on the line. For a split second I was entirely powerless and my future was in her hands. In that moment, one word changed everything.

The second confrontation occurred at that very same lake house just a few months later. We were back visiting; Sallie, me, and both sets of parents. The rest of us were sharing a nice breakfast on New Year's day when my dad came to the door and simply said one word, "Karan." He'd said my mom's name a thousand times before. I didn't think anything of it as my Mom excused herself and went to see what he needed in the other room. I've heard him say her name in moments of concern, and anger, and compassion, and love. I've heard it on holidays, and birthdays, and Tuesdays, and every day in between. But hearing him say her name that one morning will forever be seared in my mind. A few moments later, my Mom came back to the breakfast room and said that they thought my Dad was having a heart attack and we needed to leave immediately for the hospital. I've never been so scared or driven so quickly and carefully in my life. We managed to meet an ambulance in the nearest small town, and my dad was airlifted to the hospital. I'm so thankful that the doctors were able to save his life so he could be here to share this

Christmas with us today, and I'll never again take for granted the time and the memories we share. In that moment, one word changed everything.

You might think it was something my wife or my Dad said that changed my life. But their words were only significant because of the Word who makes our lives and relationships possible. The love that makes marriage possible has far less to do with any decision we make than with God's decision to radically immerse Himself in our lives on that first Christmas morning. The bond between a father and a son has far less to do with our willingness to face the nearness of death than with God's willingness to confront our imperfections through His death on the cross. Whether we're concerned with technical theological terms or popular seasonal greetings, the words we use matter because the God we worship lives. Our words are either an aid or hindrance to seeing the living God, the One Word Who changed everything.

This morning we will come forward to take holy communion, to remember and celebrate on this most holy day that One Word changed everything. As we come to receive the body and blood of Christ, we recite the familiar words of the communion liturgy in order to refocus our eyes upon Christ. We speak these words to direct our gaze toward the dry land that God has placed before us. And we don't come alone; no one in this room is alone. This meal of grace reminds us that we are one body in Christ. One word is the difference in our life together. One Word is the difference between love and hate, between light and darkness, between life and death. One Word is the difference between a room full of persons saying the words of a prayer and the gathering of a people refocusing their eyes upon the Lord of life. One Word makes all the difference. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.