

*Starting Out Right, John 1*  
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Happy New Year! Already we are three days into it. Perhaps you have already made a list of your resolutions. Like mine, yours might include getting fit; losing a little weight; making new career goals. Whatever it is, you know it's important to start your year out right.

How you start is really important because it sets your path, your goals. Great novels will begin with a sentence that sets the trajectory for the whole book. Here are a few that caught my eye:

"There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it." (C.S.

Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*)

"If you are interested in reading stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book." *The Bad Beginning* by Lemony Snicket

"In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing." Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

From the get-go, you get an idea of where this book is heading. It sets the path; it punts the story. It's the same for you as you begin the new year. So, I wonder: what will be your first sentence this year? What will set you off on the right path?

In our Gospel reading today, you heard John set the trajectory for his book. He does it differently from the other three Gospel writers. Each writer had in mind his own audience, his own particular message. Each one tells the truth about Jesus, but in different ways. Both Luke and Matthew begin with genealogies. Luke, in particular, sets the historical context. Mark, the earliest Gospel (and the shortest), moves directly into Jesus' adult ministry. But John does none of these things. It's not that John doesn't care about history but that he is aiming to answer the key questions, "Who?" and "Why?" And so he begins with a cosmic view.

I'd like to take a look at the start that John makes, because he lays out some important themes that he later develops throughout the book. I'd like to pick up on a few key themes. These are important for you and me today, as we start our New Year right.

We begin at the very beginning. The first few words, and every Jewish reader is hooked. This is epic language. "*In the beginning...*" John says. In everyone's mind, they finish that sentence: "...*God created the heavens and the earth.*" The first sentence of the Bible. The very first act of history.

Every Jew would recognize that sentence, just as today, you would recognize the first sentences of some great novels. ("It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," from *A Tale of Two Cities*." Or from *Moby Dick*: "Call me Ishmael.") First sentences are important. John knows that. He works with it. He enlarges on it with a surprising twist: *In the beginning*, he says, *was this Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God.* He goes on to show that everything was created through the Word. And on the most basic level, that's true, isn't it? God spoke creation into being. (He didn't wave a magic wand, or anything like that.) He simply uttered the word, "Light," and there was light. But John, again, works with his audience, expanding on the concept of "word," showing that this Word is a Person. *And the Word was with*

*God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.* It soon becomes clear that Jesus is the Word.

Jesus, too, used the spoken word. He spoke, and things happened. Jesus spoke, and food was multiplied, so that thousands of people ate and were filled – with food left over. He spoke, and the blind could see; the deaf could hear. He spoke and the sick were healed. He spoke, "Lazarus, come out!" and the dead rose to life. Perhaps most amazing of all, Jesus spoke, "Your sins are forgiven" – and they were. My friends, only God can forgive sins. Only God can speak and it happens. Jesus is the living, breathing Word of God.

Jesus is the Creating God; he is also the Redeeming God. John makes this clear from the beginning. He tells us, Jesus is *full of grace and truth*. He spoke the truth, and he uttered it with authority; people were amazed at his teaching. He was gracious to all he met, but more than that: he was full of grace – filled with grace – to the point of giving up his life for us, on a cross. That's grace! This was God's plan, right from the beginning. This is what John is driving at, from the get-go.

In order to grasp all John was saying in those very short, introductory verses, you need to understand a little of the back story. You see, people in John's time did not expect God to be gracious. The gods and goddesses of the ancient world were capricious. They were like nasty landlords, to whom you needed to pay your rent on time. Far from being a source of comfort, they were a source of trouble. So you needed to pay your rent -- making all the appropriate sacrifices at the right times -- not in the hope that the gods would pay you a visit, but dreading that they might. When we lived in Tanzania we began to understand this mindset. Africans typically believe in the ancestors, those they call the "living dead." Even though they might include your grandmother, the ancestors were not benevolent beings. If you didn't make the right sacrifices, they might stunt your crops or even kill your children. They, like the ancient gods, were feared. How different is the God of the Bible! He is a gracious God. And he came to save (John tells us), not to condemn.

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.* When Jesus came to this earth as a human being, he came to dwell with us. He did not come as a visitor. He was not a tourist. Rather, he came as a resident. The biblical term, "dwell," gives the sense of "pitching a tent." Jesus pitched his tent with us, with all the grubbiness that tenting involves. You know? You have to make your fire before you can make your coffee. You have to carry the water and chop your wood. It's not easy. And Jesus joined us in the struggle, even to the point of suffering and dying for us. Jesus was no tourist. He enters your world as a fellow tenter. That's how much God loves you.

God loves this world, even knowing that many in the world would reject him. John says, ... *though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.* John shows us, from the beginning, who *we* are. Some reject Jesus. Some receive him. In his book, John shows both. Those who rejected him included the crowds, the Jewish leaders, the "world." People who did not believe that Jesus was who he said he was, either walked away or took steps to kill him. And

then, there were those who received him: his disciples and others. Nicodemus, who came seeking him by night; the Samaritan woman at the well; the blind man in the Temple; Mary and Martha and Lazarus; the women at the empty tomb. To all those who receive him, John said, he gives the gift of eternal life.

It makes a difference how you start. So what about you? How will you begin your year of 2016? What kind of trajectory will you set? Will your New Year's resolutions only be a matter of losing weight, getting fit, setting career goals (as important as they may be)? Or will you begin with Christ? Where you begin will set your path; and it will determine your outcome.

It starts inside of you. When Jesus came to earth, he came to dwell in your heart. In a sense, Bethlehem is your "heart," your center of being. That's where Jesus comes, that's where he is born. And that's where he takes up residence. The purpose of Jesus' coming is to engage the very center of your existence. It's part of God's gigantic maneuver to enter into this world. He starts by entering into your heart. God makes you a citizen of his Kingdom, enlarging that Kingdom on earth, one person at a time.

God gets traction with his great maneuver with those who receive Jesus as the Word of God. It is spread person to person. Not by nation, culture or civilization. He came, not for the conquest of nations, but for the redeeming of individuals. It's a critical move. That's what is going to go the distance. For you to receive. For you to share. Reaching out to the next guy. Person to person, sharing the Good News. Unless God succeeds in that maneuver, both Bethlehem and Calvary have failed.

Those who attended the recent class on *Prayer* will remember Philip Yancey's story about the fall of the Berlin Wall. Do you know the back story? It all started as a Tuesday night prayer meeting in a church in Leipzig, Christians lighting candles in support of peace. First hundreds, then thousands of people were attracted to the movement, and soon the supporters spilled out of doors and into the streets. The movement spread, city to city. Night after night the peace-marchers grew until finally they attacked the Berlin wall – with hammers, with whatever they had. My friends, it was a movement that started one by one, each with just a candle. Each with just a prayer. And God grew that movement, just as today, he grows his Kingdom. One day he will finally tear down the wall of sin and the final barrier that separates us from himself – he will bring the curtain down on this earth and start a new story. A fantastic story; one that has no end.

Beginnings are important. But so is the rest of the story. So one final thought. In a novel, you typically find 5 parts: an introduction, rising action, climax, falling action and conclusion. Ever notice that in the Bible, there are only four? There is the introduction: God's creation of the universe and of you and me, made to live with him forever. There is the rising action as the enemy lures us away from God with doubt, fear and false promises. God sets into place a rescue plan, kept alive by the prophets. There is the climax when Jesus' appears on earth, come to implement that rescue on the cross. There is the falling action as he establishes a new rule on earth, which he calls his Kingdom.

But the falling action is not complete; there is no conclusion – yet. The sweep of the story continues. You and I are part of the falling action, the spread of his Kingdom. The focus of

God's intention to draw all people to himself. You are called to be a reconciler – helping each person you know to recover that relationship with God. Each one is your brother or sister. Every phase and activity of your life needs to be related to God's Kingdom-work. This is now the purpose of your life.

Who knows how God will use you in 2016? The first step is to receive Jesus as God's Word in your life. But it doesn't stop there. You need to join the story! You are part of that great cast of characters; and you have a unique role to play. Only you can do it. How are you going to play that part? Who is in your sphere of influence? Who is around you that you can reach out to with truth and grace? Who do you know that really doesn't understand that Jesus is the living Word of God – perhaps you can help set the story straight. We need to be living out the Story, because God is not done yet – the curtain has not yet fallen – and God has written you into the plot.

A lot depends on starting out right. Happy New Year.