“The Word was God at the Beginning” by Rev. Dr. Rick Newswanger

Symbols can communicate a lot in a few words: the United States is often depicted as an eagle, Russia as a bear, England as a bulldog, liberty as a lady with a torch, justice as a woman with scales and a blindfold. We also have God depicted in Christian art as the sun, a dove, a flame, a potter, a shepherd, and a king (among other things). Even the best of these images can help us, but all of them are inaccurate if you take them too far. The “Lord is my shepherd” in the way that he keeps me from going astray or he leads me to green pastures, but the Lord is not shepherding me to sell at the marketplace or to slaughter me. Every bit of imagery has its limits and can become ridiculous if pushed too far. Jesus is the only true king (in the sense that a king is supposed to be better than common people), but he is neither a political leader nor a conqueror or figurehead. Jesus is so much better than any king that the world has produced, that the word “king” seems almost like an insult when applied to him.

Symbols and metaphors are fine, but they can be stretched too far… America is an eagle in many ways, but it does not literally perch in a tree.

This time of year we have all sorts of special images of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Visions of sugarplums may dance in someone’s head, but most of us think of stars, snow, trees, lights, fireplaces, wreaths, choirs of angels, loving parents, and a beautiful baby. But there are other images we think of this time of year, like calling Jesus the “Word” of God.

When the Gospel of John was written down in the first century, the writer made a clear effort to connect the first words to a much older Bible passage. Here are the two passages:

Genesis 1:1-5 (Originally composed in Hebrew, many centuries before Christ).

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

John 1:1-5 (Originally written in Greek between 50 and 100 AD).

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

To get the main point from these two passages, let’s look at the first words of each one: “In the beginning, God…” and “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

The point that John is going to make is that Jesus is the Word of God, and that he has always had the identity of God, even at the beginning of all things. John isn’t saying that Jesus is a great man or a great prophet, but he is saying that God eventually meets us as Jesus, in Jesus, or through Jesus.

John was also saying this for his non-Jewish Greek audience. By identifying Jesus as the “Word” of God, he is saying that Jesus is specifically the law and wisdom of God made into a person. For a non-Christian Greek, it was a way of understanding Jesus as something eternal, because the spirit of God’s law and wisdom cannot be separated from God.

What does this mean for us? It is the idea that Jesus was always part of God’s plan for humanity. The idea is also that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can’t be separated into three gods.

One old description of this is to say that in Genesis 1, God creates by speaking: “Let there be light, and there was light.” But you cannot separate the speaker, the breath, or the Word that is spoken. By speaking the Word, God becomes the speaker (the creator), the Word likewise isn’t real without someone to speak it and the breath used to speak it… and the breath can’t exist without the speaker and it cannot speak without words. It is still an image that can be pushed out of shape to the point of heresy, but Genesis one contains a helpful image of the Trinity: God speaks with God’s breath or wind (an old image for Spirit) to speak God’ Word… God is one, God is three, and God is one.

On Christmas Eve of 1968, the American Spacecraft Apollo 8 was orbiting the moon with three astronauts. In a broadcast to earth, they should pictures of the Earth rising above the lunar landscape and they read from the first chapter of Genesis. They used this biblical image of God as the one who speaks things into reality. The astronauts then wished the people of Earth “a merry Christmas and a happy new year!” It was a brilliant message of hope to the world at the close of a particularly terrible year.

The main points for us are simple:

-Sometimes it makes sense to restart with old beginnings

-God’s loving plan has always included Jesus as our Savior.

-God is many things to us, but God is always “One” and the source of all that is good.

So, this Christmas, look for light and you will see it, look for the good Word and you will hear it.