



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Jesus and the New Year

John 1:1-14

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January 4, 2009

According to the *News and Observer*, the first names of the babies for 2009 in the Triangle were Dyana Williams at Duke Hospital and Camrin Pugh at Wake Med. A boy and girl born into a new year and given names to reflect their own individuality. In some recent studies, it has been suggested that a name might play a subconscious role in the choices we make in life.

New research suggests that people are influenced enough by their names that they will subconsciously gravitate toward objects and actions that *begin with their initials*. So, Cathy might prefer Coke while Peter would prefer Pepsi. Tim would favor Toyotas; Bradley would enjoy Beethoven; Sarah might become a soccer player, scoring as a striker or piling up saves as a goalie.

The notion that *life follows initials* seems half-cooked at best. But multiple studies by management researchers Leif Nelson and Joseph Simmons make a strong case, although we're not asking you to accept these findings. One reviewer wrote us saying, "This is totally weird." True. And it's our job to share it with you. But consider these findings:

A strikeout in baseball is signified by the letter K — dreaded by batters. Through nearly 100 years of data on Major League Baseball, players whose first or last name started with the letter K were slightly more likely to whiff at the plate. Those with K names struck out 18.8 percent of the time, compared with 17.2 percent for other players.

All of us wanted A's or B's on the report card, but students with C or D initials tended to have lower GPAs than students with other initials. This trend is exaggerated even further in C- and D-named students who like their initials. The same findings are shown another way as C- and D-initialed students go to lower-ranked law schools than their A- and B-initialed counterparts. It seems that students with C and D names are less averse to their namesake grades.

Readers of the sociology-meets-economy smash hit, *Freakonomics*, may recall the story of Robert Lane. He named one of his boys Winner and another Loser. Loser, or "Lou" to many coworkers, rode a prep school scholarship on to Lafayette College en route to becoming a detective and sergeant for the New York Police Department. Winner's claim to fame was only the size of his rap sheet — over 30 charges for trespassing, burglary, domestic violence and resisting arrest.<sup>1</sup>

So in some cases a name is more deterministic than in others.

As we begin a new year, let me suggest that the most important name for any Christian is Jesus. When all is said and done, what being a Christian is about is you and me being followers of Jesus.

As we enter a new year, I think it might be important to look at some of the names or descriptive words used to describe Jesus in John 1. John begins his gospel differently than the other synoptic gospels. Mark's gospel, thought to be the oldest, is the most concise and simplest in form. Matthew's gospel is geared toward a Jewish community with the goal of showing that Jesus was the promised Jewish Messiah. Luke's gospel is an orderly account written by an historian who begins the gospel in story form, introducing us to those who are a part of the Jesus story. However, John begins in a different place. John is not so much concerned with genealogy or stories of mangers and shepherds. John begins with a cosmic, universal, and eternal view. We might say John's gospel begins with a more philosophical tone. John, combating Gnosticism of his day, begins by preparing his readers to understand the uniqueness of Jesus as not only Messiah, but fully and completely God.

John's gospel gives us several descriptive words that inform us about the character of Jesus, God the Father, and what Jesus brings to our new year.

The first description of Jesus in John is “the Word.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The “Word” or “Logos” was a common theme in both Greek and Hebrew thinking. The Greek stoics spoke of the Logos as that which permeated an orderly universe. In Hebrew thinking, the Word was a creative force by which the world was formed and an orderly force which kept it together. However, John takes us one step further and personifies this force or Logos. It was not simply a power or a concept but a person – the Word became flesh. The Word, then, was that which was basic in the world. It was that which created the world and held the world together, and John’s claim is that this Word is Jesus, that he has always existed, has always been in relationship with God, and is God.

John makes claims about the Word: He – Jesus – preexisted with God. He was with God in the beginning. There were many stories in John’s day of how the gods were created, but in Christian thinking, God has always been. God preexisted before creation; Jesus preexisted before creation as well: in the beginning the Word was with God.

John writes, “The Word was God.” Interestingly, John is not suggesting that Jesus took God’s place. John is not trying to give God a new name. John’s choice of words is very interesting. John is not saying that Jesus takes the place of God but that Jesus is so totally and completely related to, and in essence with God in mind and heart, that when we know Jesus we know God. Jesus claimed, “If you really know me, you would know my Father as well. I and the Father are one. (John 14:7, 10:30)

What do these claims mean for our lives? William Barclay suggests two important truths that emerge from these claims. First, if Jesus has always been with God from the beginning and is in relationship fully with God, then that means God has always been like Jesus. God did not send Jesus to rescue his reputation. In the Old Testament, we have the continued revelation of the nature of God. We find a sometimes revengeful and judgmental God; however, as God revealed more of his character, we catch glimpses of God’s redemptive nature and unfailing love toward his creation. Jesus came to show us completely the nature of God. The point is not that God decided to change and sent Jesus to save his reputation; it is simply that Jesus became the fullness of the revelation of God’s true character which has always been. God has always been like Jesus – full of grace and truth.

Secondly, Barclay reminds us that because Jesus is fully and completely in relationship with God, then we will never know God more fully than what we know about God through the life of Jesus. If we are searching for

God, we will find Him fully and completely in Jesus.

New Year’s weekend is a sports fanatic’s dream. We get to watch football bowl games, college basketball, and the NFL playoffs. When reporters interview coaches before games, many times they say the same thing about the secret to winning: “We just need to be disciplined, not make mistakes, and just have good fundamentals.” Sometimes it is important to get back to basics. That is true in every area of our lives.

In our work, it is always good to reevaluate our performance. Are we doing what we are hired to do? Have we become sidetracked by a project, idea, or demand that is keeping us from doing what we were really hired to do and what is the most important task? In our relationships, it is also important to get back to basics. When we have our issues in marriage, we remember our vows and our original love for one another. When we have trouble with our children, we recall our calling to raise Godly children. Sometimes that means they will not like us for our parenting choice; therefore, it is important to get back to basics.

As we begin a new year, let me suggest that we get back to basics. We need to remember that in the beginning was Jesus. If we want to know God, we will get to know Jesus as revealed in God’s written word. Jesus must be before all things in our lives. Our lives must be ordered by his Lordship. Jesus was in the beginning. Is that where we find him in our lives as we begin a new year?

Another description for Jesus in John 1 is as creator. John did not use the word, but he did use the act of creation to describe Jesus. John wrote, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” (John 1:3) Some scholars suggest that the true reading would have an emphasis which would say “Not one single thing was created apart from Jesus.” Therefore, nothing except God exists apart from Jesus.

As we begin a new year, it is important to remember that Jesus is to be a part of the whole of our lives.

In his book, *The Jesus Way*, Eugene Peterson recalls that hiking in the mountains was a favorite family recreational activity when his sons were growing up. But when the boys reached adolescence, they became impatient with the slow pace of their parents on the ascent and would rush ahead. “For them,” wrote Peterson, “the trail, the way, was reduced to one thing and one thing only: the way to the top of the mountain. They set out with all deliberate speed to conquer (their verb of choice) the mountain, get to the peak, write their names in the metal box containing the names of successful climbers. They always took a couple of pictures to document their feat. And then, reeking with boredom, they

waited for their slowpoke parents who were carrying the lunch. ‘What took you so long? ... We’ve been waiting for *hours!*’”

Peterson gives this explanation, “What *did* take us so long? Well, there was a lot to see, to savor, to absorb, to enjoy: a mountain goat posing regally on a cliff, a blue-fringed gentian to look at again for the first time, the wind-sculpted trunk of an ancient white-bark pine, a water ouzel playing in a waterfall, the nectarine that we relished as we sat and took in the next range of mountains that had just come into view ... *Way* for us was far more than a way to get to the top. It was a way of being present to everything on the way ...” He recalls a line by Robert Pirsig: “To live only for some future goals is shallow. It’s the sides of the mountain which sustain life, not the top. Here’s where things grow. But of course, without the top you can’t have the sides. It’s the top that *defines* the sides.”

Peterson recalls that Dorothy Day loved to quote St. Catherine: “All the way to heaven is heaven, because he had said, ‘I am the Way.’”<sup>2</sup>

We live too much of life without seeing Jesus along the way. We place Jesus in our worship compartment but fail to take the time to notice Jesus is alive and well and working at our work, in our school, in our homes, and at our play. Jesus must find a place this year in every area of our lives.

A third description about Jesus is a combination of the words “life and light.” Jesus would say “I am the way the truth and the life.” He would also say “I am the light of the world.” So, Jesus is the life. But what does John mean by the word “life?” He meant the opposite of destruction. The word “life” reminds us that in Jesus we truly have life. When John used the word “life”, he was not simply speaking of the duration of life but also the quality of life. The life John spoke of is eternal life that is in duration, but the word means more than duration – it means a god-like life. It is a life filled with the quality of life that only God can bring. Because it is a god-like life, it is eternal because God is eternal.

We know, even in this world, the difference between life and truly living. Those of us with aging parents are well aware of the difference between a life that is simply a statement of duration and one that has quality. Most of us would not choose duration if there was no quality of life.

John says that in Jesus there is real life; it is not only characterized by duration or eternity, but also by quality of life, which is the presence of God.

I want to remind us that we don’t have to be sick to have our lives reduced to merely enduring. There are many

of us who might look back on the past few years and suddenly realize we have been enduring time and not really living. John wants us to know that life – real life – is found in a relationship with God through Jesus.

The other word in this combined description is “light.” Jesus is the light which has come into the darkness; he is the light of men and women. John was telling us that Jesus brings the qualities of purpose, guidance and revelation to our lives. The light in Scripture was that which ordered chaos. In creation God said, “Let there be light.” It was the light that ordered chaos in creation; the light that Jesus brings to our lives gives our lives purpose and order; the light brings guidance. We are told to walk in the light. In other words we are to be guided by Jesus in our lives. The light brings revelation. The light searches our lives so that we might see ourselves as we truly are and seek God’s forgiveness and God’s way.

As we begin a new year, let us be reminded that Jesus is the life and the light. Jesus will bring purpose and guidance to our lives this year, if we choose to follow him.

There is one last word – title – about Jesus from John 1, and that is the term “the one and only.” He used this term to describe Jesus. It is a unique term. It is translated in the King James Version as “the only begotten” and means “unique and special.” There is no one who has ever lived that is like Jesus. He is the unique son of God who shows us completely the grace, truth, and fullness of God.

A recent *Washington Post* article indicated how the Southern Baptist Convention is losing ground for the third straight year. There are several reasons indicated for this decline in the United States: the three-decade old internal strife which has zapped the energy of many clergy and churches, changing demographics and sociology according the Wake Forest Dean of Religion and History, Professor Bill Leonard, and the demographics – of the south in particular – are trending away from mainline denominations. A troubled brand is another reason offered: the SBC has become too closely related with the Republican Party and national politics. Another reason, according to the writer, is the message of Jesus as the only way of salvation. According to the writer’s polling numbers, over 52% of Americans believe in many ways to heaven and, most shocking is, that 35% of evangelicals – which traditionally means those who believe in the necessity of Jesus for salvation – now believe that there are many ways to heaven.<sup>3</sup>

Let me suggest the decline is not that we have not jumped on the universalism bandwagon and gone along with the majority. The implication of the writer is that if we will simply give up the conviction of Jesus as the way, the truth and life then we will attract more people.

Instead, let me suggest that the problem is just the opposite: we have lost the conviction that Jesus is the One and Only. Mainline Christianity in America has lost the conviction that apart from Jesus, there is no salvation. Once we become convinced that Jesus is not the unique and one and only son of God, then we lose our impetus to share Christ. If we are all going to the same place just by different paths, then what do we have to offer?

I know that in our culture it sounds judgmental and unloving to suggest that Jesus is the One and Only Son of God and that salvation comes through him; yet, these are not my words, but it is the word of God to us. To proclaim Jesus as the way of salvation is not unloving, it is the most loving thing we can do. The words "one and only" appear in John only a few chapters later. When a religious man named Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, seeking the truth of God, it was then that Jesus said "For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten, or one and only, son that whoever would believe in him will not perish but have everlasting life."

As we begin a new year, I want to encourage you to share with others that Jesus is the One and Only of God, and through him you can find forgiveness and salvation.

As we begin a new year, let me encourage you to consider John's descriptive words about Jesus.

- \* He is the word.
- \* He is the beginning of everything.
- \* He is creator of all things – find Jesus in everything you do.
- \* He is the life and light – real life is found in relationship to him.
- \* He is the one and only – there is no other name given under heaven by which we might be saved.

Maybe John is telling us make the words of Jeremy Camp our prayer for 2009.

*In the morning, when I rise  
In the morning, when I rise  
In the morning when I rise.  
Give me Jesus.*

*When I am alone,  
When I am alone,  
When I am alone,  
Give me Jesus.*

*When I come to die,  
When I come to die,  
When I come to die,  
Give me Jesus.*

*Give me Jesus,  
Give me Jesus.  
You can have all this world,  
Just give me Jesus.<sup>4</sup>*

Jesus...now that's the name to begin 2009. ♦

<sup>1</sup>Homiletics, Jan.-Feb. 2009, pp. 14-15.

<sup>2</sup>Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus Is the Way* (Grand Rapids Mi., Eerdmans Publishing, 2007) pp. 40-41.

<sup>3</sup>David Waters, "Southern Baptist Decline and God's Bottom Line" (*Washington Post*, December 22, 2008)

<sup>4</sup>Jeremy Camp. "Give Me Jesus" *Beyond Measure*. BEC Recordings. 2006.

