

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of human will, but of God. ¹⁴ 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.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: Thanks be to God!

John 1:1-14

12/28/2025 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"Receive and Believe"

Rev. Amy Terhune

This morning, I'm going to begin in a strange place – with numbers. You've heard of a million, a billion, even a trillion, and maybe even a quadrillion or a quintillion. But how many of you have ever heard of a novemdecillion? Yes, it's a real number. It's 10 to the 60th power, or 10 with 60 zeroes behind it. It's a big, big number. Which may lead you wonder why in the world that matters this morning. Well, I'll tell you.

"Paul Davies in his book, *God and the New Physics*, notes that "had the big bang been just the slightest bit weaker, the cosmos would have soon fallen back on itself in a big crunch. On the other hand, had it been just the slightest bit stronger, the cosmic material would have dispersed so rapidly that galaxies would not have formed... If this balance had been off by 1 to a novemdecillion, we couldn't exist... To illustrate that another way, "Suppose," he says, "you wanted to fire a bullet at a one-inch target on the other side of the observable universe, 20 billion light-years away. Your aim would have to be accurate to that same 1 to a novemdecillion." [adapted from "Lighting the World" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

So you tell me: What are the odds that we hit 1 in a novemdecillion by chance? I don't even know how to calculate those odds. But what is impossible for humankind is child's play for God. The bigger our universe becomes, the bigger God gets. And yet, God comes. To this one little planet in the midst of a vast solar system, no doubt surrounded by other systems we don't even know about, in a universe that speaks about distance and time with numbers like novemdecillion, God comes to us. If you want to know what drives me to my knees at this time of year, that's what does it. The staggering reality that God, who threads a cosmic needle I can't begin to fathom in my brain, has come to us, to be one of us.

In the beginning was the word. That's how the prologue of John's gospel opens. Most scholars find it an odd way to begin a gospel. Rather than setting down a plain account of how things happened,

John gets theological. Many scholars believe he may have adapted an ancient hymn to fashion the prologue, but if that's true, its origins are lost in time. What we do know is that it mirrors the book of Genesis, even going so far as to begin with the same phrase: In the beginning. In the first chapter of Genesis, God speaks creation into being. And God said, "let there be light" and there was light, and God saw that it was good.... The sky, the seas, the stars and planets, the plantlife, the creatures of every kind, and even humankind made in God's image. All of it is spoken into existence. John pushes that to the next step. The Word becomes flesh. The one who spoke creation into being speaks himself into our story in a real and tangible way. The source of life itself become a life. Light shines in the darkness. Real light. Life-giving light. Not the manufactured light that contributes to light pollution in suburbs. Not the short-wavelength, high-energy blue light that comes from our screens and can actually block melatonin production and disrupt our circadian rhythms. But Sonlight (you can spell that either way). The kind that the planet and all we creatures need to be healthy and to thrive.

John doesn't have numbers like novemdecillion at his command, but he fully intends to draw from us the same kind of awe that the Creator of all things should somehow because a created being for a time. And yet, John reports, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him." Worse yet, he came to his own people, the ones he formed for himself, and they didn't get it. Maybe it was too big, too out there, too strange and wonderful to fathom. But shepherds got it. Magi from a distant land – they got it. Fishermen and tax collectors and zealots and harlots. They got it. All of which suggests, it's not really about being smart. It's about the heart.

King Duncan writes that "Anytime we get into subjects like the pre-existent Word, many of us may sit there with a glazed expression on our face. And I know I run the risk of sounding like a theology professor I once heard about. This professor was a man who simply could not express the truth of God in simple English. He did not mean to come across as stuffy and obscure. He just couldn't seem to help it.

"This deeply intellectual theology professor had a student from Africa, who had come to the US to get his M.Div. from an American seminary. While here, he came to love this theology professor even though the professor was hopeless in how he communicated the truths of the Christian faith.

"Later, when the young man returned home to Africa to begin his ministry, he found himself in something of a bind. The professor wanted to come to visit him. This pastor knew what would happen when the theology professor came. His congregation would want to hear this great theologian preach. Even worse, the theology professor would want to preach. What a nightmare, but there was no way for this young clergyman to graciously refuse the visit.

So the professor came to Africa and while there, he preached at the young man's church. The Sunday he preached, the professor took to the pulpit and his former student stood nearby to translate the sermon into his native Swahili. The professor began like this: "There are two great epistemological theories in the world today," he said ponderously. The young African pastor paused just a beat and translated with these words, "Let me tell you about my friend, Jesus." And so the sermon went. The professor expounded his views on epistemology in deep and ponderous language and the African pastor told the congregation more about his friend Jesus. All present agreed it was an amazing sermon. [from The Rev. Frank Logue, <http://kingofpeace.org/sermons2004-2005/sermon-041705.htm>.; as used in "The Word that Changed the World" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Jesus is the translation of God's love into human flesh. Jesus takes what is beyond human comprehension and lives it for all to see. John writes, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...". That particular verse has always struck me. We don't comprehend Jesus like a puzzle to be solved. We receive him as a gift. He comes to embody

God's presence. He comes to put into flesh what is beyond human words. And when we receive and believe, we find power that is beyond ourselves.

I was reading earlier this week about the wonderful actress Julie Andrews, who has been one of my all time favorites since I was a girl waiting to watch the annual showing of *The Sound of Music* on TV every spring. I had dozens of records of Julie Andrews – Camelot, My Fair Lady, Mary Poppins, Christmas Albums and Children's Albums, all alive with her wonderful, distinctive rich singing voice. But as you may know, she had surgery in 1997 to remove nodules on her vocal cords that were causing hoarseness on stage. Something in the surgery went wrong, and she wound up with scarring on her vocal cords that has forever silenced her beautiful singing voice. That voice was her identity, her trademark, her claim to fame. After the surgery, she spent a few years out of the limelight. Her late husband, Blake Edwards, wrote once about her grief and the terrible spiritual ordeal she went through after losing her ability to sing – something that had brought joy to herself and millions of others from the time she was a girl singing to her neighbors in the bomb shelters in London during WWII. She describes feeling like her throat had been cut, and later admitted to deep depression and anger with no outlet for those feelings. She considered a lawsuit, but ultimately chose not to go that route because she didn't want to be an angry, vindictive person or a victim in the eyes of the public. Hollywood tried to console her with lifetime achievement awards and honors, but that felt like she was being told that her life was over and past. So instead, she sought counseling, she gathered her family around her, she rediscovered her faith, and she poured herself into new opportunities – children's books, narration, acting, and art. Julie Andrews let go of what was no more and opened herself to receiving new inspiration and new gifts. She chose to believe the best of the world and of herself. She chose peace, love, and grace. She chose a higher road, only to discover that she still very much has a voice – one that has become known throughout the world for its kindness, decency, grace, and resilience.

I think her life is a beautiful parable for what God does with those who receive and believe. She found power beyond herself. And so can we. For many of us, there's a bit of a letdown after Christmas. The leftovers are stuffed in the fridge, the gifts are opened, visiting family is packing up to go home again, things get quiet as the year draws to a close. But just when I get to wondering if things will ever change, if 2026 will be any brighter, I remember there was a 1 to a novemdecillion chance of creation in the first place. And when we receive Jesus in our lives and believe in Jesus with all our being, we find cause to move forward with purpose. Jesus empowers us to let our light shine, to reflect his light into the world around us. I think Howard Thurman said it best in his poem "The Work of Christmas" when he wrote:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among the people,
To make music in the heart.

May it be so. Amen.