

“Ashes Into Hope”

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John 1:1-5

Brady, a six-year-old boy who lives with his parents in Stapleton, Colorado just outside Denver, was losing his dad to colon cancer this past July. Brady and his dad Brandon were really close and they shared a lot in Brandon’s final days about doing something creative that hadn’t been done before to meet a felt need.

You see that is what hope is all about — standing for things that are not currently seen or experienced. This is central to the season of Advent and has been an anchor for people of faith throughout history who continually have painted a picture and cast a vision of what wasn’t yet, but might be — what couldn’t now be seen, but could be in the future.

This is hope.

On July 7 Brandon passed on. The next day, Brady opened up a lemonade stand at the end of the driveway outside his house and made up the best sign ever for a lemonade stand. It read “25 cents or best offer.”

Brady said that he and his dad came up with this plan before he died. Brady would make money from a lemonade stand so that he could take his mom out on a much needed date after his dad died.

Friends and neighbors came out to buy lemonade to support Brady, and soon a police officer stopped by, learned why Brady had opened up the lemonade stand and called in the reinforcements. At this point other first responders in firetrucks and police cars started rolling in. The whole neighborhood was out in the street with a renewed sense of community strength and hope.

On that very first day, Brady took in an amazing \$244, certainly enough to take his mom on a wonderful date that week.

Brady’s mother Amanda posted on Facebook that day, “My heart is bursting. I cannot even express the love I felt when our community wrapped us in their arms.”

Fitting for Advent, a neighbor named Mandi wrote on her Facebook page two days later ...

Sometimes in the midst of the worst tragedy, the most beautiful parts of humanity surface. When you witness it, it is the purist form of faith and hope - the definition of community.

The \$244 Brady raised on that day, was only the beginning.

The new creation filled with hope grew and a virtual lemonade stand was set up online through a GoFundMe page. Money started flowing in as people beyond their neighborhood were inspired by Brady's vision. The page is still up and has raised nearly \$57,000, as of this morning.

Brady and Amanda decided to use only a small portion of the money for dates, because they wanted to give back and share the hope. The bulk of donations are honoring the Palliative Care Team and Cancer Center at University of Colorado Anschutz, where Brady's father Brandon received care.

Brady's story reminds me how hope can rise up from the ashes of despair and loss, much like the ancient Greek story of the phoenix. The Greeks held that there was a mythical bird called the phoenix that dies in a combustion of flames after a long life. But then it is resurrected to a new life out of its ashes.

Hope can spring like that from the ashes of our lives.

The passage I will be reading today comes from the beginning of what we call the Gospel of John.

This, as well as the other gospels were originally written for everyone, not just leaders or the educated or elite of society. These stories were written for common people like you and me.

John wrote to reveal, as by the light of a lantern in the night, the true identity of a human being named Jesus — to reveal the profound and mystical nature, the God-nature of this man who had come for the sake of all people throughout the world.

John was painting a new picture that was a vision for a new kind of world filled with hope.

Notice that John begins by referring back to the beginning of all things as described in the Genesis passage you heard earlier.

READ JOHN 1:1-5

Notice the first verse "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

This Bible that we read is full of words, but these words are distinctly not the Word of God, although sometimes we talk about and think about this book that way. We have to be careful, because this can lead to idolatry, when we end up worshiping a book.

Instead, the “Word” that John is talking about here is not simply a collection of words inspired by a number of people and recorded on a scroll.

Later in verse 14 we learn that John says the Word he is talking about is the person of Jesus in the flesh.

But this seems strange when we think about it. How can a person be the Word? Aren’t the words someone speaks separate from the person who speaks them?

Let’s remember that John is using images to capture the nature of a mystery that is beyond words. He is stating something philosophical and poetic while including many layers of meaning and references to contemporary religion and philosophy.

We could think about it this way. An idea is the beginning point of the words someone speaks. Those words, if they are original, have an attachment to the essence of the one who speaks them. When the words that are spoken are true, they stand on their own and hold their own weight, while still being connected to the speaker.

We honor Einstein when we quote him saying,

Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.

Or John F. Kennedy when we quote him saying, “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.”

Sometimes when an author is being interviewed, the interviewer will reference the interviewee’s book and say “When I was reading **you**, I noticed ...”

The essence of a person is found in the original words they speak or write.

If God’s words always hold truth, then they also hold power to create — in God’s case, they have proven to create a whole world. We saw this in the Genesis passage when God spoke and as a result light and darkness, and the whole world came into being.

God speaks and things happen — God’s word creates the world because of the nature and the power held not just in those words, but the essence of the speaker.

The Word of God can be understood as the essence of God manifested as reality in the world.

The Word of God is so foundational that the prophet Isaiah said it is the

one thing that will last when everything else fades away.

The Word of God transcends time and space, and as Isaiah wrote, brings life, healing and hope to Israel and all of creation.

For the original readers of John's book, when they read of the Word, many would have also been thinking about God's Wisdom. These folk had been pondering for generations how God might be so great and powerful and at the same time close and intimate. They contemplated how God could be separate from the world and active within the world.

They thought of God's "word" and "wisdom" coming together in the Temple in Jerusalem where the presence of God was located among the people.

Others understood God's presence inherent in the Jewish Law, or Torah, which was given by God to Moses on the mountain in the wilderness. This Word from God held power as a guide for every aspect of the community's life.

The point that Jesus reaffirmed, was that the people were to follow the spirit of this Law, which was God, rather than the letter of the law which some religious leaders

had done and had become literalists or later fundamentalists.

This gives us a picture of God's Word being so much bigger and broader and deeper than a rule book, or the words of stories, captured by many different writers in the book we call the Bible.

The words we read or share point to the deeper reality of who God is for us and for the world.

We need to remember that we worship the one true God, not a collection of stories in a book.

There were also those outside of the Jewish faith at the time of John who talked about the "word" as a sort of deep rooted principle inherent in all the cosmos and inside each human being. When someone taps into it, the "word" would give their life meaning and purpose.

To me, this sounds a lot like "The Force" from the Star Wars movies. Perhaps John is filling in the gaps by saying that this abstract "force" is actually a person, and that person is Jesus.

John's picture was of one true God and also the one true Life.

The passage says that Life comes from God, and this Life was Light for all people.

Light is what illuminates a vision and hope for something new and different.

John talks about three synonyms. We have WORD and LIFE, and now LIGHT. All of these refer to Jesus.

Jesus is the Word for all people and all creation. Jesus is the Life for all people and all creation. And Jesus is also the Light for all people and all creation.

God's Word has become the Light of Life in the person of Jesus. Jesus shines out boldly, brightly, radiantly for the sake of **all** the world — including the part that denies and does not acknowledge God. The light literally is for all people, nobody excluded.

God is pursuing with intention and clarity those who are living in the darkness, to illuminate their lives with hope. Some call this God's great rescue mission — seeking out the lost to bring them home.

Can you see how John is casting a big, broad, and wide vision to bring all things under the umbrella that is God? God made it all (physical and spiritual), and God is caring for it all — that all might live with the

richness and vitality that God intended from the beginning.

That is the hope we hold this Advent season — like Brady holding out hope from the ashes of his father's death, that his mother might be cared for.

Even when we have lost sight of hope, God brings the light to our darkness! Even when our life seems in ashes, God's hope finds us and resurrects us as a phoenix giving us a new hope for a new future!