

Holy Faith Jim Gordon 1Christmas Day 2018 Isaiah 61:10-62.3
Psalm 147:13-21 Galations 3:23-25; 4:4-7 John 1:1-18

In the name of God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit Amen.

Many of you know that when I left the church as a teen-ager, I turned my mind toward Eastern traditions. The first book I read was the Tao Te Ching, the founding text of Taoism, traditionally said to be written by one Lao Tzu in the 6th century before Christ, about the time Nebuchadnezzar II was sacking Jerusalem and carrying the Jews into captivity in Babylon.

There is genius in this text that I appreciate and, in fact, the older I get and the more I drink deeply of the wisdom of the Bible, the more I understand the wisdom of the Tao Te Ching. C.S Lewis in his work *The Abolition of Man*, wrote of the Tao as a natural law, and I think that's right. It's as though Lao Tzu had some understanding of the concepts that Christ would expound upon six centuries later in terms of the right way to live. But what attracted me as a teen-ager wasn't the book's wisdom as much as it was its mysticism.

A short sample:

“In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired. In the pursuit of Tao, every day something is dropped. Less and less is done Until non-action is achieved. When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.”

Now, my thinking I had to go East for mysticism is pretty down silly, is it not, considering the number of Christian mystics in the history of the church, and the sheer amount of mysticism in the Scriptures — including the centerpiece of the Gospels — the Eucharist.

I mean, let me ask: Does anyone here understand precisely how when Fr. Robin celebrates at the altar in a few minutes the wine and bread will become the body and blood of Christ or, even if you prefer, the Real Presence of Christ? Because if you do, I'd like you to explain it to me.

Another place in the Gospels chock full of mysticism is today's Gospel reading, the first 18 verses of the Gospel of John. You want mysticism? Just try the first verse:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

On hearing that, the first thing you might think of is Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And, in fact, that, indeed, is the first thing wants us to think of.

Past that, what's the message? We orthodox believers have a certain take on it — the verse makes clear that Jesus, the Word or, in Greek, the Logos, is identical to the Creator, and thus begins to establish the concept of the Trinity, where God is one being in three distinct persons.

But the language is mystical enough to guarantee that it's far from the only interpretation. In fact, it's a mystical enough statement to allow its use as a meditative prayer, or in a Zen koan, if you will. A koan is defined as "a paradoxical anecdote or riddle, used to demonstrate the inadequacy of logical reasoning and to provoke enlightenment."

I can't think of a richer statement to carry around with you for the course of a day or week or longer than "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What do we mean by "the beginning?" What do we mean by "the Word"? What do we mean by "God"? So, there are these questions, but koan work isn't an exercise in reasoning. You don't puzzle out the answer; you repeat the koan, live with the koan until its truth, its meaning, sinks deep into your being. Someone once described a koan as a red hot iron ball that in your throat that you can neither swallow nor disgorge. Now, no, that doesn't sound like too much fun, but working on a statement this way — especially something as rich as the first verse of John — can be very rewarding.

I don't recommend trying this while you're driving or, as they say, operating other heavy equipment. But when you're sitting quietly or praying the rosary or even when lying down to rest or sleep, you might give it a try: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Now, there's another line worth taking in and — I was going to say pondering, but that sounds too rational — also in the first paragraph of John: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

Here, again, we have a line that resonates with the beginning of Genesis; in this case, verse 3 of Chapter 1 where after we hear that darkness was upon the face of the deep, we read, "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."

As John makes clear, Jesus the Word is the light; he's associated with light throughout John's Gospel, as in Chapter 8, verse 12 when Jesus says, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

But what I think is worth thinking about — or to take the koan approach, NOT to think about but to *experience*, is the idea that the darkness has not overcome the light; the darkness has not overcome the light. That's not always an easy belief — and it is a bedrock belief of our faith — in a world where not only do bad things happen all over the globe, but because of instant communications we often know about bad things happening as they are happening.

It is easy to get discouraged, but discouragement is fatal to our faith. Regardless of how things look at any given time, we hold onto the belief that in the end, God wins. Which means that we, the people of God, win.

So I offer this second line, another ultimate truth from John's prologue, to spend time with, just sitting quietly, or with beads in hand, or as we lie down to rest: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

And I offer a question along with that line, that belief, that faith — for traditional pondering and praying, for each of us: Whenever it seems

that darkness is advancing and the cause of Christ retreating, as it can seem, even in the Christmas season, what can I — as part of the body of Christ in this world — do this day — to keep the darkness at bay and Christ's light shining?

Amen.

John 1:1-18

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 were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. **4** In him was life, ^[a] and the life was the light of men. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. **7** He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. **8** He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.

9 The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. **10** He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. **11** He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. **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 nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

14 **And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth;** we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. **15** (John bore witness to him, and cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'") **16** **And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon**

grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only Son, ^[b] who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.