

WHO IS THIS BABY: THE WORD

The Gospel of John does not begin with shepherds or wise men, Mary or Joseph, a star or an innkeeper. Instead, John begins with words to mirror the opening words of Genesis. “In the beginning was the Word.” For John, the story of Jesus did not begin on Christmas Day when Mary gave birth to her firstborn son. Rather, John takes us back to the very beginning when Jesus was with God and co-creator of all of the earth before us.

And the name John gives to Jesus is “Word.” The Greek used here is “Logos,” which has a whole range of meanings. To discuss them in depth would be better suited to Bible study than to a Sunday morning message. For our purposes this morning, suffice to say what John is trying to convey by naming Jesus as “the Word” is the simple idea that Jesus’ purpose was to communicate: to tell of the love of God.

So this morning, I think our time is best served here by simply telling the story of Jesus: Not just of a baby in the manger, but of the Word of God. And that Word can best be told in a very long but good story shared by Walter Wangerin Jr. in his book, *The Manger is Empty*.

In the 1980s, Walter was the pastor of a church in which his 7-year-old daughter Mary was a member of the children’s choir. A few days before Christmas, the children went caroling to the shut-ins, stopping last at the hospital to see Odessa Williams. The children had never met Odessa, and her thin shriveled body made all of them very nervous. They stood awkwardly as she slept, trying not to touch anything in the room.

Walter whispered to the children, “Sing.” As the children continued to stand mutely, he asked, “Did you lose your voices? Do you think she won’t like it?”

Mary was bold enough to answer, “We think she won’t hear.”

Walter continued to coax them until finally, they began singing the most pathetic version of *Away in the Manger* that you could imagine. But as they did so, they relaxed in hearing the familiar words. And Odessa opened her eyes, and the children smiled at the light in her eyes.

Then, Odessa frowned. Not frowning in anger, but rather frowning in concentration, frowning with her eyes shut -- if anything frowning in fierce pleasure. The children began singing even better and bolder, finishing with *Silent Night*. In the middle of this song, Odessa's began to direct the children, her long fingers pointing the way, until the soloist sang higher and braver than ever before.

As soon as the music was over, Odessa began to preach. "Oh, children -- you my choir," she whispered. "Oh, choir -- you my children for sure. An' listen to me. You the bes', babies. You the absolute best."

The children stood enraptured as their new friend continued. "You know there's always an empty seat in the front row of people when they come to hear you sing. Know what that empty space is? It's me. Cause I alluz been with you, children. An whenever you sing, I'm going to be with you still. An you know how I can say such a mackulous thing? Why, cause we in Jesus. Babies, babies, we be in the hand of Jesus, old ones, young ones, us and you together. Jesus, he hold us in his hand, and ain' no one goin' to snatch us out. Jesus, he don't never let one of us go. Never. Not ever."

Tears rolled down the faces of the children, who crowded in to pat the arms of Odessa as she now lay quietly. And Mary's eyes glistened in love.

Two days later, Odessa died. For the funeral home to get everything arranged before it and the cemetery closed for a few days, Walter agreed to conduct Odessa's funeral the morning

of Christmas Eve. Walter knew this would triple his work as a pastor, and it was in the mindset of a pastor instead of a father that he casually mentioned during lunch that Miz Williams had died and her service would be the next day. Walter scarcely noticed Mary stopped eating.

He rose from the table to go back to work when Mary asked, “Dad?” Actually, she had to say “Dad” 3 times before she could get his attention. He turned and asked, “Mary, what?”

“Is it going to snow tomorrow?”

“What? I don’t know. How should I know?”

Mary continued in a small voice, “It shouldn’t snow.”

Mary always wanted a white Christmas, so her statement confused Walter a little. When Mary added that she wanted to go to Odessa’s funeral, Walter figured she was just thinking about what she would wear, and thought no more about it.

Christmas Eve, Walter met the mourners coming to pay their respects. About 10 minutes before the service, his wife arrived with Mary. Walter went forward with her to the open casket and watched as Mary hesitantly reached in as if to touch Odessa’s fingers. Instead, Mary bent in and pressed her cheek to Odessa’s fingers. Then she abruptly pulled back.

“Dad!” she hissed. “It’s going to snow, and Miz Williams is so cold. They can’t put Miz Williams in the grave today. It’s going to snow on her grave. It’s going to snow on Miz Williams. And Dad,” Mary continued as she sobbed, “it’s Christmas Eve.”

How do I comfort those tears, Walter thought. What do I say? He said nothing. He hugged Mary tightly before releasing her to go sit with her mother. He became the pastor again, preaching the funeral text and offering words of comfort. But Mary sat throughout the service with pinched lips and an unblinking stare.

Later they all met at the cemetery where Walter offered the final words of interment. And as they finished, Mary looked up to watch the first snowflakes coming down.

As soon as the service finished, the family went home. Christmas Eve was always the night of the children's pageant at Walter's church. This year, Mary had the lead part of Mary. Walter told his daughter they would get another person to play her part, but Mary insisted, "No, I'm Mary." So that evening, they returned to church driving through about an inch of fluffy snow that had accumulated since the funeral.

Behind the scene at church, children scurried to get dressed in their costumes and get one last word of instruction. Even in the chaos, Mary was subdued, wrapped in her own grief. The program began, and she stood center stage. In a whisper barely anyone could hear, she spoke the words from Luke Chapter 1, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." But she was not rejoicing. She was simply surviving.

The pageant continued. Some of the angels giggled, and adults grinned. Walter kept his eyes trained on Mary. If she broke into tears, he was prepared to run up on stage and rescue her. But Mary didn't cry.

Instead, as the shepherds began their scene, Mary did something unscripted. She reached into the manger. She lifted up the hand of the doll in diapers and then let it drop back into the straw. All at once, Mary jumped up, yanked the doll out by its toes, stood up and clumped down the chancel steps, the doll like a dishrag at her side. All around him, Walter heard parents gasping, but he couldn't move before Mary had disappeared in a room off the sanctuary.

Within seconds, Mary re-emerged carrying nothing at all. She returned to her place on stage and knelt by the manger. But Mary was transformed. Her face was radiant as she gazed

into the now empty manger. The congregation joined the children in singing, “Sleep in heavenly peace,” and the play was over.

On the way home, Walter and Mary sat in silence in the car. Then Mary said, “Dad, Jesus wasn’t in the manger. That wasn’t Jesus. That was a doll.” And Walter’s heart sank, thinking, “My daughter has become a realist.”

But Mary continued. “Dad, Jesus doesn’t have to be in the manger, does he? He can go back and forth. I mean, he came from heaven, he was borned right here, but then he went back to heaven again. Because he came and went he’s coming and going all the time, right?”

“Right,” Walter whispered, as he thought, teach me, my child.

“The manger is empty,” Mary said. And then more gravely she said, “Dad, Miz Williams’ box is empty too. I figured it out. We don’t have to worry about the snow. It’s only a doll in her box. It’s like a big doll, Dad, and we put it away today. I figured it out. If Jesus can cross, if Jesus can go across, then Miz Williams, she crossed the same way too, with Jesus.”

And then Mary asked, “Dad? Why are you crying?”

“Because I have nothing else to say,” said the pastor. “I haven’t had the words for some time now.”

“Don’t cry,” Mary responded. “I can talk for both of us.”¹

In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

¹ Walter Wangerin Jr., *The Manger is Empty: Stories in Time* (Harper San Francisco and Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), pp. 3-20.