

God's Brightest Idea  
John 1:1-18  
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Preached January 4, 2015 at San José, Costa Rica

Well, 2014 has come and gone, and with it, the candidates for the 2014 Darwin Awards. Maybe you've heard of this award, named in honor of Charles Darwin, the father of evolution. The annual Darwin Awards commemorate those who improve our gene pool by removing themselves from it, in other words, whose bright ideas weren't quite bright enough, and who lost their lives by making really bad choices. There are a number of nominees in any given year, and some of them not suitable for church, but there is one I can share from 2012 about poor Mr. Gary Banning. Gary was at a friend's apartment when he spotted a salsa jar on a kitchen shelf, containing a mystery fluid. Thinking that it was an alcoholic beverage, he helped himself to a sizeable swig, only to find out it was the gasoline his friend kept there to clean the motor oil off his mechanic's hands! Naturally enough, he immediately spit out the offending liquid, some of which inevitably landed on his clothes. But then, to calm his shaken nerves, Gary lit himself a cigarette. And whoosh! Because gas plus flame equals combustion. Firefighters responded to calls reporting a fire in the apartment, and found a badly burned man sitting on a charred carpet. The following morning, Gasoline Gary died at the UNC Burn Center in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Have you ever had a really bright idea? The kind that made it seem like a light bulb had appeared over your head like in the cartoons? One that was going to make you rich, or make your life easier? If it wasn't you, almost everyone has at least one friend or relative who always seems to have an endless supply of the "get rich quick" variety of these ideas. Of course, they never work out, but they keep people broke and running around in circles for years. Last week, I told you about one of my bright ideas which turned out to not be quite-so-bright, my attempt to climb a mountain in Greece with a heavy pack at noon on a sunny day in July. Thanks to the Albanians and their mules, I didn't end up as a Darwin Award nominee, but I could have. Most of our bright ideas aren't dangerous, but some of them are, and we survive those only thanks to the grace of God. Thankfully, most of our bright ideas just stay as bright ideas when we come to our senses and realize they aren't really worth putting into action.

God had a bright idea once. And it "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." Of course, God has had plenty of bright ideas through the years, but the incarnation is the brightest, and John is proclaiming it with the language of light. This "prologue" to the Gospel of John, this opening statement, is declaring the big picture of what God has done in Jesus Christ, how in the fullness of time, in other words, when the time was just right in the divine imagination, God flipped the switch of grace and brought light to the whole world in the person of Jesus. For

John, and for us, it's the world's eureka moment. It's faith's "Big Bang." It's an epiphany, to use today's theme. Jesus Christ, God made flesh, come into the world to save it, that "to all who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...[those] who were born of the will of God."

"In the beginning was the Word," John says, and the word we translate as "Word," is the Greek word Logos, from which we get our compound words like theology, or sociology or psychology, the study of, or the speaking about, various things. Theology is talk about God. The word "logos" had in its background in the Greek thought of its time the concept of wisdom. The philosophy of the Stoics considered the logos the organizing principle of the universe, and the wise person tried to live in harmony with the wisdom of the logos. It's not really a stretch at all then to describe the logos as a kind of "bright idea," and so John is telling us that Christ's coming into the world was God's bright idea put into action on earth as it was in heaven. That bright idea was there "in the beginning," organized the universe, and brought it into being, and now God has made it explicitly and abundantly known to us. There is no escaping or ignoring God's bright idea, any more than you can escape or ignore the light of day. You can try to hide from the light of day, but you can't wish it away, you can't deny its existence. That is what John wants to tell us, that God has, once and for all, made God's love and grace simply inescapable.

A lot of our human bright ideas since then have been how to avoid the unavoidable, how to hide from the light or defeat the light, since the light makes it hard for us to do whatever we want. John talks about that a little later when he says, “And this is judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.” We might not like to think of ourselves as “evil,” a word we’d rather reserve for the Hitlers and the Idi Amin’s of the world, but that’s what we are, and just as guilty, even if our evil deeds are done on a different scale. When we are living for ourselves, for our own comfort or protection, the bright ideas we generate on our own are the ones that find us looking for caves or dark corners in bars, and that sometimes find us in that darkness that is six feet underground. Our bright ideas usually have to do with getting ahead, or saving ourselves, or somehow avoiding cooperating with the grace that has come into the world. I’m not talking about spitting gasoline on yourself and then lighting a cigarette. I’m talking about thinking that we can outwit death or mother nature or another person, or trying to get away with manipulating the system to get what we want, or avoiding responsibility for keeping the poor poor, or gobbling up the biggest piece of the pie for ourselves, or any of the other countless ways we reject the light and practice our sin in the darkness.

But occasionally we come up with bright ideas that correspond to God's bright idea and we find ourselves blessed beyond measure and experience the world in a new light. When we embrace the light, our bright ideas bring even more light into our lives and into the world, and that changes things. I always hesitate to use examples of famous people and the heroes of the faith because it makes it seem like they are the only ones who have these bright ideas. But those heroes of the faith are really just ordinary people like us who decided to live in the light, and where would we be without them? Where would we be if Rosa Parks hadn't had her bright idea to not move to the back of her segregated bus? Where would we be if Corrie Ten Boom and her family hadn't had their bright idea to make her home a hiding place for Jews during World War 2? Where would we be if the Apostle Paul hadn't had his bright idea to take the Gospel to the Gentiles? Where would we be if the founders of ECF hadn't had their bright idea to start a church here on the west side of town? Where would we be if each one of us hadn't had the bright idea to come to church tonight? Or play the piano, or sing, or pray, or teach Sunday School, or preach?

In 1985, I was living on my own in Atlanta. I'd dropped out of college and was working at a gas station, realizing my bright idea of sleeping in on Sunday mornings instead of going to church. That was back in the day when businesses actually closed on Sundays! Every morning on the way to work, however, I would pass by this beautiful Presbyterian Church and as the weeks passed, I found myself

more and more looking forward to that moment of my morning commute. There was just something really appealing about that church. It was set back off the street a little, and it was on a lovely wooded lot, and it looked so peaceful. Well, each passing day contributed something to flip a switch in my brain or heart, and in December, I had the bright idea to make a New Year's Resolution to go back to church, to that church, to Providence Presbyterian Church. I guess I wasn't the brightest bulb early in 1986, because I didn't start going to church right away in January. It actually took me until Palm Sunday, but once I entered Jerusalem with Jesus, I never left. A lot of bright ideas contributed to getting me to that place on that date, and I am grateful for every one of them.

Back in the eighteenth century, the English preacher Julius Bates wrote that "It is said that [the great Reformer Martin] Luther was a man of one idea, and that idea — Jesus. But it does not mean, I suppose, that he had no other ideas in his mind. This would be false to fact. It means, I conceive, that Jesus was the one idea of his mind from which all others emanated; the same as the trunk of a tree is one, but gives life and growth to scores of branches, hundreds and thousands of buds and leaves; just as great tradesman has one idea, his trade, but that divides and works out into a thousand ideas of ways and means of promoting his trade... He who wishes to fulfill his mission in this world must be a man of one idea." Jesus is still that one idea to which we must hold: God's brightest idea, the one that has inspired the bright ideas of so many others, including those that led me back to

church. You never know whose life you might bless with your bright ideas, the ones that flow from that one brightest idea.

Jesus himself had a bright idea when he sat down with his disciples for that last supper together. It was a bright idea because he took a common, everyday activity and used it to focus us on the one bright idea that really matters, Jesus himself. What did he say? “Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, remember me.” And so, every time we eat and drink, we have a chance to respond to that commandment, that invitation. Every meal can be a liturgy of praise, thanksgiving, and remembrance of the grace that came into the world. Every meal is an opportunity to bask in the light, rather than hide in the darkness. Every meal can be a moment to ponder what divine bright idea to put into action. Tonight, as you approach the table for this meal together with your brothers and sisters, let me invite you to let God inspire in you your next bright idea, the one you will use to bless the people around you, and this world into which Christ came as its brightest light. Amen.