

*In the Beginning**

John 1:1-5

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This is the beginning, where the story of Jesus starts as told to us by John.

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.

Once upon a time ... isn't that the way that all good stories begin? Yes, once upon a time there was a baby boy born in Bethlehem. This baby had a mother and a father. His parents didn't live in Bethlehem; they lived in a town about seven miles away. So when it was time for the baby to be born, these parents went to St. Luke's Hospital in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

That is the beginning of my story. Yes, once upon a time there was a baby born in Bethlehem ... Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. It's a great fact about my life whenever I play that game of introduction called "Two Truths and a Lie." No one ever guesses it's true that I was born in Bethlehem. But that is where my story begins.

But is that really the beginning of my story? Maybe the story really begins with the birth of a baby boy in Buffalo, New York. He was the youngest of three brothers who grew up in a small town called Derby, just outside of Buffalo, on the shores of Lake Erie. Not long after that, a baby girl was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. She had one older brother, and while they lived in a couple of different houses, they never left Cincinnati. This boy and this girl both grew up and went to Baldwin Wallace College in Berea, Ohio. They met one night as she was coming out of a dance and he was going in. Maybe that is the beginning of my story.

Or maybe it begins even before that. Because in the 1880's and 1890's, four teen-agers from Germany came to America with their families. None of them knew each other, but all of their families moved to Cincinnati. One of those teenagers was named Louise Lampe, and she got a job as a housekeeper for a Cincinnati family. At this family's home she met one of the other teenagers, Fredrick Hassebrock. Fredrick drove the family's carriage. They fell in love and were married and had eight children. The youngest was a girl named Helen – my grandmother.

The other two teenagers from Germany, Francis Boerger and Arthur Pomsel, also met once their families arrived in Cincinnati. They had four children, three girls and then thirteen years later a boy named Ernest – my grandfather. So maybe my story begins with those teenagers at the end of the nineteenth century.

But that would only be half of the beginning of my story. Johannes Reiych originally came from Germany and landed in Philadelphia in 1773. After four years as

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an indentured servant, he married Susanna Maria Entsingerin, whom he had met as they journeyed across the Atlantic on the same boat. Their great, great, great, great, great grandson was an only child – Adin, Jr. – my grandfather.

Then we'd need to go back even farther. Nathaniel Harwood came to America from England in 1658. He worked as a cordwainer, making shoes. He married a girl named Elizabeth, and it's not clear whether he met her in England or in the colonies. But, if I counted right, their great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great granddaughter was a triplet – Loraine – my grandmother.

Is that the beginning of my story? I don't know, because all of those ancestors had ancestors. So where does one's story begin? How far back would you go in order to get to "once upon a time ..."?

So, maybe it would be easier to talk about the beginning of our story. This is Homecoming after all, and we're celebrating not my history, but our history as a congregation. The beginning of our story together goes back to me answering a phone call in late June 2006. I was sitting in my office when the phone rang. I picked it up and said, "Hello, thank you for calling The Presbyterian Church of Lowell. This is Matt."

The voice on the other end of the line said, "Rev. Rich? My name is Nancy Jesup, and I am the chair of the PNC at First Presbyterian Church in Lumberton, NC. I was wondering if you would be interested in talking to me about our church and if so, if this is a good time to talk."

Yes, that may be the beginning of our story together, but the beginning really goes back much farther than that. It goes back to phone calls made to Sam Warner, Sam Shumate, Bob Sloop, and Bob Alexander. Before that it was probably letters or visits to Carl Matthews and George Moorehouse, and the 16 other pastors and stated supply preachers before them. The story could certainly be said to begin with John Alexander McAllister, who served as this church's clerk of session for 46 years in the late 1800's and early 1900's. But our story begins even before Mr. McAllister. For in June of 1854, a committee of Fayetteville Presbytery gathered with thirteen residents of Lumberton at the Court House to officially organize this church.

Is that where our story begins? Is that our "once upon a time ..."? We can go back farther. We can go back to the first Scots Presbyterian settlements in the Cape Fear Region in 1740. In 1755 Hugh McAden visited a portion of this territory and found many residents of the region with Presbyterian roots, but no pastor. So as John Alexander McAllister wrote in 1917, "[Mr. McAden] induced Rev. James Campbell, then laboring in Pennsylvania, to visit his countrymen in North Carolina. Mr. Campbell came in 1757, and besides other points preached at Raft Swamp near McPhaul's Mill. This is supposed to be Antioch and was the first Presbyterian Church in Robeson County" (*Proclaiming the Good News*, p. 4).

Yes, our story can certainly begin then – more than 250 years ago. But all those Presbyterian ancestors had Presbyterian ancestors in Scotland and Ireland. So where does this story begin? How far back must we go in order to get to "once upon a time?"

Well, as Christians, not just Presbyterians, we trace our roots all the way back to Jesus. And those who first set out to tell the story of Jesus had to begin somewhere. The Gospel of Mark, thought to be the earliest gospel in our scriptures begins, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). Mark starts

his story with John the Baptist's proclamation and Jesus' baptism as an adult. So, Mark begins with the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

The Gospel of Matthew, takes a step back. It begins, "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Matthew then, beginning with Abraham – the father of the Jewish people – traces the ancestors of Jesus to King David and then from King David to the deportation to Babylon and from Babylon to "Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born" (Matthew 1:1-16). For Matthew, the beginning of the story is Abraham.

For the Gospel of Luke, though, the story begins even farther back. After telling the story of John the Baptist's and Jesus' births, a story of Jesus visiting the temple at twelve years of age, and Jesus' baptism by John, Luke inserts his own genealogy. "Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph." Much like Matthew, Luke then traces the ancestors of Joseph back to David and then to Abraham. But Luke keeps going – he traces the ancestors of Jesus all the way back to "Seth, son of Adam, son of God" (Luke 3:23-38). Yes, for Luke, the beginning of the story is Adam – the first human being.

The Gospel of John, our text for this morning, finds its beginning back one step farther. Not beginning with the first human being, John begins, "In the beginning ..." And, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Yes, in the beginning, long before there was a child born in Bethlehem, or two college students meeting at a dance, or teenagers coming to America, or former indentured servants getting married, or a cordwainer disembarking in Boston, there was God. Long before there was a phone call to a potential pastor, a letter or a visit to hear someone preach, a Presbytery commission to organize a church, or Scottish Presbyterians settling in a new land, there was God. Long before early Christians began writing down what they knew and had been told about Jesus life, death, and resurrection; long before King David ever shepherded his first sheep; long before Abraham heard a call; and long before Adam took his first breath, there was God.

From the first to the last, from the alpha to the omega, from the beginning to the end, there is God. My story, your story, our story is the story of God's love, grace, and faithfulness to all generations. As we celebrate 155 years of ministry as First Presbyterian Church of Lumberton today, let us never forget that our story does not begin and it will not end with us. No, we are here only by the grace of God.