

One of the ancient church fathers, Clement of Alexandria, called John's gospel the spiritual gospel. He contrasted the spiritual nature of John's Jesus, especially here in the prologue, with the more earthy depictions of Jesus in the other three.

But that argument just doesn't hold water. There are lots of problems with that so-called spiritual label. The biggest one is that the word spiritual means something different to the Greeks...and to us...than it did to Jesus and the Jewish people he rose out of.

We think of spiritual as a contrast to physical. In our minds we think things are either spiritual or physical. We separate spiritual from physical in our own bodies.

If we make John's gospel primarily spiritual, then it's an all too easy step to decide spiritual is somehow superior to physical. A heresy called Gnosticism preached just that.

Gnosticism arose in the second century among those who refused to believe that God would become truly human...that being an actual flesh and blood human being would have been unbecoming of a god. Gnosticism teaches that the goal of faith is to free the spiritual from the physical...to escape.

Gnosticism may go by other names now, but it is alive and well every time we think of our spirits and our bodies as somehow separate and that the goal of faith is to have the spirit escape.

What John's gospel does instead is show us how deeply embedded the spiritual is *in* the physical – they are inseparable. In spite of its reputation as a spiritual gospel, John will not let us separate the spiritual from the physical. This makes it a favorite in Celtic Christian belief which emphasizes the presence of God in all of creation.

And it starts right here...in the beginning.

John's first words draw us back to the very beginning. John uses the word logos for Jesus. Since we aren't Greek speakers, in English it's translated as Word. But it means more than just spoken words or words on a page.

All of God's creative power...all of the images of this beautiful creation God was making...God's very essence...is packed into that Logos. The logos comes from deep within the mind and heart of God and comes out as a wind from God that blows over the waters of creation...as a voice that says Let there be...and there was.

The first incarnation – the first time the spiritual was embedded in the physical - happened when God's eternal logos filled the heavens and earth with light and life.

Now John writes, that Cosmic, all-powerful creator, ruler of heaven and earth enters creation in the same way all humans do...in the messy, bloody, wet journey through a woman's body and out into the world. God's eternal logos, God's essence, is embodied in this very real little baby.

And in that moment...that moment when the eternal word became flesh and dwelled among us, heaven came to earth. To dwell, of all places, with us. With the very creatures who God loves so deeply, but who have caused God such heartache.

At this moment that cosmic eternal logos isn't just vaguely everywhere. He came into a very concrete time and place with real parents in a particular home where there was no place in the guest room, and the manger where the animals slept became his first bed.

Of course, John never tells that story. But when the word became flesh, it happened the same physical way it did for you and me.

Life...human life...physical, earthy life are what the incarnation of God is all about.

Most if not all of the themes of John's gospel are laid out here in what is called the prologue.

Light shining into darkness...seeing...dwelling...witness...belief...grace...truth...life.

Above all is life...abundant life...eternal life. John uses the phrase eternal life far more often than any other book of the Bible.

Since eternal life is so important in John's gospel, we had better get straight what he means right from the start.

The biggest travesty of Christian belief about eternal life in our time is the belief that it's what happens after we die. But that is not primarily what John – nor any of the other authors of the New Testament mean. It's not primarily what Jesus meant.

Eternal life instead is what Jesus brings us by drawing us to tap deeply into a relationship with God...to tap into the source of life that was breathed into all of creation from the very beginning.

Through Jesus we have access to the same relationship with God that Jesus has. Jesus is how we come to know God. That's eternal life. And it doesn't end when we die.

John's gospel gives us a glimpse into the deep intimacy between God the parent and God the son. And even more remarkable than that? John draws us into that same intimate relationship.

The last verse of this passage is key. John writes, it is God the son who is close to the Father's breast who has made God known. The word translated as heart in our version isn't actually the Greek word for heart. It's the word for bosom or breast. The King James version uses bosom.

Later in history, the word breast became associated more with sexuality than nurture and nourishment and the word morphed into heart in later translations. But breast is more accurate.

This is a very intimate, even maternal image of God the parent and God the son. That throws our modern-day sensibilities for a loop.

But that is the kind of relationship Jesus invites us into...that is eternal life. Life in which God's very essence...the eternal life of God...dwells.

And that logos of God...that very essence of God doesn't just dwell in the human creation. That logos invites us into a relationship with all of God's creation.

The poet Mary Oliver has lots of famous and popular poems. Perhaps one of the most famous is Summer Day. The last lines are probably her most famous...

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

It's one of those verses that gets put on memes and posters.

But the earlier parts of the poem are just as beautiful:

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean —
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down —
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?

Summer day is a poem that, like John's prologue, invites us to sink deeply into the eternal life of the creator...in the poem we do that through one of the most unassuming...and frankly annoying...creatures. A grasshopper.

When we sink deeply into the abundant life in all God's creation...when we pay attention...as Mary Oliver says...we begin to get a taste of eternal life.

Diving deeply into the created world...human and non-human...won't allow us to put our faith only in some so-called spiritual realm. The spiritual realm is here, embedded in the physical...the trees, the flowers, the birds and reptiles and mammals and even the grasshopper. The spiritual realm is here, embedded in our fellow human beings.

Eternal life came to earth, embedded in a vulnerable human baby. Eternal life is here, embedded in an intimate relationship with a nurturing God...a God whose love for us is so great that God wants that relationship with us to last for all eternity.