Good morning, and Happy New Year. I know that greeting is normal for the first Sunday in the new calendar year, but it feels like it has a deeper meaning this year, doesn’t it? Around New Years, many of us look back at the previous year, and for some, the previous 12 months may have been difficult. Maybe you lost a loved one. Maybe you suffered from a serious illness, or found financial trouble at the loss of a job. Some of you may have experienced the end of a troubling marriage, lost relationships with friends or family because of divisiveness, or maybe you just experienced despair due to the chaos of 2020. While many of us many not have experienced such extreme difficulties, I think this past year was the first one in a while where most people could probably claim some level of difficulty, and a hope for a better 2021. So, I hope these next few minutes can lead us towards a more hopeful place as we begin this new year.

I’d like to thank Dr. Somerville as well as the rest of the staff and the congregation here for the privilege of being able to speak this morning. My name is Justin Pierson, and for the past several months, I’ve been the pastoral resident. While I have immensely enjoyed my experience so far, I am a bit saddened that have not been able to meet more of you in person, so if we haven’t met before, I hope that we can do so safely in the next few months. My wife, Tori, and I have been a part of First Baptist life for the past four years, so although this position is new to me, the church community is not, and we are grateful for all of the friends we have made in this community during
the past few years. Those friendships are one of the highlights of the past few years, and the inability to see many of you was one of the difficult parts of 2020.

I was watching a special the other day on Netflix that was a fake documentary about the events that took place in 2020. Although it was satirical and comical, it was amazing how many things happened this past year, some so dramatic and absurd that the punchlines for the jokes almost wrote themselves. Much of what happened last year would have been major events in any normal year, yet have been forgotten due to craziness of 2020. The year started with global tensions between opposing countries, then quickly led to historical wildfires in Australia, the outbreak of the coronavirus and its subsequent spread throughout the entire world, then a summer with a historic number of hurricanes, an awakening to the continued racism in America and the protests for police accountability, followed by the removal of confederate statues, an impeachment trial followed by an even more divisive election season, Earthquakes in Croatia, a continuing refugee crisis in Europe, a massive explosion in Beirut, Lebanon, historic wildfires in California, all on top of lockdowns, social distancing, mask wearing, and the emergence of a vaccine, all in less than a year. Lord help us, we need some light in this dark world.

Which is why I think it is so fitting for our passage today to be from John 1 in which John talks about Christ as a light in the darkness. It may seem odd to focus on this passage during the Christmas season, for John does not even mention the traditional birth narrative. Matthew’s gospel gives an account of Jesus’ birth but does not mention the shepherds. It focuses on Mary and Joseph and the arrival of the magi, which we celebrate on Epiphany on January 6. Luke’s gospel mentions the shepherds
and the heavenly host but not the magi, and Mark does not mention the birth of Jesus at all, but rather jumps straight to Jesus’ Baptism. Yet, John focuses on a different kind of birth of Jesus. At first, it may seem a bit more reflective, intellectual, or distant, for it focuses more on Jesus as the incarnation rather than Jesus’ entrance into the world as a baby. But with a closer look, this passage in John may be the most hopeful birth narrative of all, and may be a fitting way to enter into 2021.

John begins by saying, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” We hear these words uttered often in our Christian communities, but I wonder how many of us really understand their significance. How does the Word relate to God’s love for God’s creation, and how does it affect God’s relation to us?

In the English language, the word “Word,” with a capital W, can be confusing, for it does not really encompass what it means theologically. We hold up the Bible in worship and say, “Behold the Word of the Lord,” or we say that God spoke a word and the Earth was created. We talk about Jesus’ last words on the cross, and we desire to hear a word from the Lord during our times of prayer and meditations, but none of these are the same as what John is describing when he says that Jesus is the Word of God. All of the instances of the word “Word” that I just used are related but none have the same significance as Jesus as the Word.

It will help to look at the Greek, in which this passage was originally written. The word used here is Logos, L-O-G-O-S, which technically does means word, but with a deeper meaning and richer context. It’s first important to realize that logos is not only found in the bible but also in a variety of religions and philosophies that were present at
the time when John was writing this. John may have been familiar with such language and may have used this common language to convey the nature of Jesus.

Logos was a popular subject in stoicism and Judaism. Stoicism is the study of ethics based on logic and natural law. In early Stoicism, when John was writing, Logos was the term for the principle of reason that governed the universe, or in short, logic. John could have been influenced by this meaning, but it is more likely that John was more influenced by Jewish and early Christian interpretations of Logos.

In Judaism, logos was predominantly a way of speaking about the creative plan of God that governs the world. It seems that John views logos in a similar way, but with Jesus as the way in which God chose to govern the world. John took part of the Jewish understanding of logos and placed Jesus right in the middle of it.

Regardless of John’s particular influences, when he uses the word logos, he seems to be emphasizing the divinity of Christ: Jesus as equal with God and a part of creating the very world which he entered into as a human. This means that Jesus is life and light, which John mentions in verses 3 and 4 when he says, “All things came into being through him,” and that, “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

When I was young, I was afraid of the dark. Something about not being able to see what was around me made my young imagination go wild, as I imagined scary creatures hiding on the floor, or slimy monsters slithering up the walls preparing for a midnight snack. In order to keep me in my own room and in my own bed, my parents gave me a nightlight that was bright enough for me to see all four corners of my room. There was nowhere for something to hide in the dark.
But the thing was, sometimes there were things outside of my room that still scared me. Maybe it was a clap of thunder in the middle of the night, a bad dream, or a weird sound coming from the backyard. Regardless of what it was, I would quickly grab my pillow and a blanket and quietly make a bed on the floor of my parents’ room where I was safe. But the odd thing was that my parents’ room was actually dark. There was no light and the corners of the room were blanketed in darkness. Still, I felt safe and protected, even in the darkness, because I knew my parents were close by. I wonder if Jesus being the Word of God is kind of the same thing.

John says that the life found in Jesus is the light for all people: a light that shines in the darkness which the darkness cannot overcome. John never says that Christians won’t experience darkness, but that Jesus is that light that darkness will never be able to overcome. For me, this is an incredible hope in times of despair, and I believe this light to be a primary purpose in Jesus’ birth. Yet, we don’t always give it proper attention. We tend to view Jesus solely through the lens of his death, similar to the way that so many have made the Christian faith solely about events that take place after death, and completely miss the hope and light he brings into our present reality.

John doesn’t even mention Jesus’ death in his prologue, but rather focus on Jesus’ identity as the incarnation of God. Understanding Jesus as the Word can perhaps lead us to a place where we have a better understanding of the life and the salvation which Jesus promised later in John’s gospel, for Jesus, the logos, brings life to God’s creation and that theme of life reverberates throughout the gospel of John, especially the idea of eternal life, which is not just reserved for the future after death but life that is already present through now through Christ.
One of my earliest memories of church is sitting in a classroom during a summer vacation Bible school. The teacher was trying to get us to memorize scripture, but I had never intentionally memorized anything before. Sure, I had my favorite kids’ books and movies that I could recite in my sleep, but I had never memorized anything intentional and nothing from the Bible. But by the end of the week of Bible school, I had the scripture verse memorized, and since then, I’ve been able to recite that particular verse, John 3:16 from memory.

A lot of you may also have this scripture memorized, because for so long we have focused on it as a form of a generic description of the Christian message, and I would agree with this description in part. If you want to convey what Christianity is about, John 3:16 could possibly be a good staring place, as is says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that who so ever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

But I think we sometimes memorize John 3:16 and then move on from its implications too quickly. We view John 3:16 through a lens of atonement, thinking only of Jesus’ death and resurrection as the reasoning behind God sending him to the world. We see the payment for sin as the only reasoning behind God being made flesh. While Christ’s death was a part of the plan from the beginning, I think there is far more to unpack than simply God sending Jesus to die. I believe gave God the world Jesus for far more.

We have four gospels full of stories from the life of Jesus before the story of his death, and even our passage today from John mentions Jesus being made in the flesh and coming to live among us. Jesus’ living among us, as a human being in the flesh,
exemplifies God’s love for God’s creation. When humanity lost its way, God didn’t judge or simply start over, but God became flesh lived with us, literally translated as pitching a tent among us. God resided with God’s people to demonstrate what true love and light are. And John says that those who accepted him, were allowed to become children of God. That is the beauty of Logos, a word that in most traditions means logic. When humanity lost its way, God didn’t give us a logical equation to solve to get back on track. We don’t have a list of requirements or an ethical mark to reach in order to know God. God gave us Jesus as the logos. He is the answer.

In our world which is often dark, assurance of safety and protection would be nice. Yet, unfortunately, God does not promise to shield us from loss or pain, and 2020 is an example of that. People still get sick, the powerful still oppress the vulnerable, and justice often goes unserved. But since we are not promised a refuge from the darkness, God came to us to give us light.

This Word, Jesus, is a light in the darkness. This light can guide us and give us a hope that nothing else can. The God whom we worship is not some egotistical, legalistic God who leaves us to find out own way in the darkness. God loved us so much that God gave us Jesus to demonstrate love and to give us life. So although the events of last year may seem dark, and God may have seemed distant at times, I am confident that God was with us, experiencing our pain with us every step of the way.

Being realistic, the world is no different today than it was before Friday. When we woke up to the new year, the same problems we had in 2020 were present. Although there can be a glimmer of hope on New Year’s Day, it isn’t as if the world has pushed the reset button. Besides flipping the page on the calendar, our lives probably look the
same, and that can feel depressing, especially after a year like 2020. But I don’t think we have to live in the past or let it define our future. I believe that John’s message of Jesus being the light in the darkness can provide us with an immeasurable hope. Like me sleeping on the floor of my parents’ room when I was afraid, the world may still be scary, and darkness may still be all around, but we can rest peacefully, knowing that God loved the world so much, that he gave us Jesus, the Word, to offer us comfort and peace, to be with us in our pain, and to be a light in the darkness. And since we know about this light, let us be comforted by it in this new year, and look for ways to share it with our world in need of life, light, and love.