

**REFLECTION**  
**The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson**  
**May 16, 2021**  
**John 17:6-19**

*Jesus prayed for his disciples, “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.*

I may be wrong, but the person who wrote the Gospel of John seems to me to be an *old soul*. An *old soul*. It’s not a matter of chronology or number of years. I’ve heard people say, “That child has an *old soul*. You can see it in her eyes.” And we all know plenty of old people who we don’t think of as *old souls*—who we admiringly say are “young at heart.” *Old souls* just seem to be born that way. As I read the Gospel of John, I’d say, “*Here’s an old soul.*” At least we can figure that John, the writer of this Gospel, is not a first-time explorer of the mysteries of God and the magnificence of creation or new to the art of dramatic writing and bringing out the deepest questions. He begins with that masterful prologue that re-focuses the story of creation in the Book of Genesis. John is a poet. His poetry is as beautiful and mysterious and powerful and as up-to-date as watching NASA videos from Hubble’s telescope and cameras—videos of nebulae, great pillars of creation, star-birthing regions of gas and dust eventually becoming dense enough to form stars and planets. Whether by the light of florescence or in the imagination of an *old soul*—John writes,

*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*

Then John goes on to describe light shining in the darkness—a *light that cannot be overcome by darkness*. Through his *old soul* telescope John sees humankind sanctified by the presence of God from the very beginning and Jesus coming forth out of the pillars of creation to which he will later return after his mission is complete. *From God, to God*. John builds his creation video around seven signs (or more)—signs that are evidence of a divine and mysterious purpose—a galactic power enfleshed in Jesus. John uses the word

*cosmos* not just the word for earth when Jesus speaks about *the world*. Even in today's Gospel lesson, which is a prayer that Jesus prays at a gathering with his disciples the last time he is with them, on the night before he is to die: Jesus prays:

*"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the cosmos.  
... for the words that you gave to me I have given to them,  
and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you"*

Today's Gospel is part of what is known as the farewell discourse. It is the night of the last supper. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and then he begins a long monologue about leaving and his impending death. It is four chapters and 117 verses long. Some say the prayer seems a bit rambling, as if he is trying to figure it out for himself. But, not to the ears of an *old soul*. Jesus talks about what it all means and what it will be like for the disciples after he is gone. Jesus is not rambling. He is harvesting his memories—cherishing the people he has spent his mission with. He is including them in the big, cosmic picture—God's divine and mysterious purpose and power enfleshed in the cosmos—in Jesus and in them.

*"I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world  
so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves."*

Protect them. Sanctify them. Give their lives meaning and purpose.  
Enflesh in them your mysterious purpose and divine power that you  
enfleshed in me.

This is what *old souls* talk about. Purpose and meaning wrapped up in experience and memories. And what about death? *Old souls* know that there is purpose and meaning and love beyond the grave. This is what *old souls* talk about. What are your deepest hopes for

your children, your friends, your brothers and sisters, your partners? What are your deepest hopes for yourself?

When my husband's favorite aunt was dying he went into the room to sit with her. When he arrived she said, "Oh, come on in. I want you to meet everyone!" and gestured to a crowd of people that only she could see. The author, Reynolds Price said at his mother's funeral that just before she died, she whispered in his ear, "Reynolds, I only regret my economies." And Paul Scherer, a noted preacher who taught preaching to a generation of American preachers across denomination lines — (and my son's great grandfather for whom he is named) said to those around him before he died, offering his final evaluation and advise — "Too much sugar." *Old souls*.

Jesus' prayer for those around him cut straight to the heart—to his hopes for them and us, to the purpose and meaning of his life, their lives and our lives as his followers.

*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.  
And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth."*

*Old souls* go all the way back to the beginning.

*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God  
and the Word was God.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jesuit priest and poet published only after his death—in a poem entitled *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo* offers this old-soul wisdom: (I've abbreviated the poem to get to cut to the heart of the matter.)

How to kéeep—is there ány any, is there none such, nowhere known some,  
bow or brooch or braid or brace, láce, latch or catch or key to keep

Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty,... from vanishing away?  
Ó is there no frowning of these wrinkles, rankèd rinkles deep,  
Dówn? no waving off of these most mournful messengers, still messengers,  
sad and stealing messengers of grey?  
...So be beginning, be beginning to despair.  
...Despair, despair, despair, despair.

Spare!

There ís one, yes I have one (Hush there!);  
Only not within seeing of the sun,  
Not within the singeing of the strong sun,  
...deliver it, early now, long before death  
Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty's self and  
beauty's giver.

...O then, weary then why should we tread? why are we so haggard at the  
heart, so care-coiled, care-killed, so fagged, so fashed, so cogged, so  
cumbered,  
When the thing we freely fórfeit is kept with fonder a care,  
Fonder a care kept than we could have kept it, kept  
...A care kept.—Where kept? Do but tell us where kept, where.—  
Yonder.—What high as that! We follow, now we follow.—Yonder, yes  
yonder, yonder,  
Yonder.

*Old souls* talk like that! Ha!

How are we to keep beauty, life in all its depth and breath and beauty, from  
vanishing, from disappearing, from dying? The answer has been spoken in Christ.  
“Give it back. Give all that beauty back, life itself, through loving and serving,  
back to God, back to God’s divine purpose and meaning.” Through loving and  
serving. Back into the great cloud of creation where it is kept with *far fonder a  
care than we could have kept it!* From God... to God. AMEN