Sunday, April 15, 2012 (1 John 1:1–2:2)

Christ was "from the beginning." In its first moment, creation had humankind, therefore meaning, implicit in it.

by Marilynne Robinson in the April 4, 2012 issue

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The familiarity of the great texts of the New Testament can obscure the achievements of their writers. In its first three verses, the First Epistle of John joins "the eternal life that was with the Father" with the physical presence of Jesus, who has been seen with eyes and touched with hands.

Christ's deity might have been cast into doubt rather than affirmed by these remembered encounters with his humanity. It is surely remarkable that the ultimate theophany should have taken the form of the life and death of an obscure man whose face and voice, however well loved, were also familiar to those around him, apparently neither imposing nor forbidding. While he lived and taught, any number of people must have looked on the face of God and gone on about their lives, taking

no special notice of it. Yet these verses invest his earthly presence and the experience of it with as pure an awe as they do his presence at the creation.

All poetry and all fiction have as their deepest question the kind and degree of meaning that we, brilliant and limited creatures that we are, can take from the world, from what we hear, see and touch with our hands. Behind this lies the deeper if unacknowledged question of the beginning of things, how being came to be. If the event behind it all can be described exhaustively as the consequence of natural forces, then the presence of humankind and everything else is both accidental and more or less inevitable as the working out of the effects of this first event. It is, of course, speculation that such forces preexisted the cosmos we know. And my use of the word *natural* to describe them, as if the absence of intention or spirit in the forming of the cosmos were baseline reality, is a concession I make here only for brevity's sake. In any case, the idea of an accidental universe is pervasive and full of consequence because it makes meaning a secondary property of existence. It can have arisen only out of human desire, or human fear, or human error. This view of things reflects but cannot interpret the fact that if our strange species did not exist, the question of meaning would itself be meaningless.

John's epistle, in declaring that Christ was "from the beginning," is saying that, in its first moment, creation had humankind, therefore meaning, implicit in it. Christ entered a world in which deeply and uniquely human experiences, of sin and atonement, self-deception and knowledge, unrighteousness and forgiveness, were and are as real as time and weather. Because he was there in his potential humanity from the beginning, because his presence informed what was made, he is himself the truth we yearn and struggle to know. In him we find what we are and ought to be. The truth is that we are not an anomaly in the universe but are in every sense very much at the heart of it. The writer of the epistle alludes to the prologue to the Gospel of John and interprets it to make clear the implication of the presence of Christ in the creation, that "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

Why the passions should have been systematically excluded from our conception of the whole of reality is a question that seems never to be asked. The ancient Greek poet Hesiod said that love is "mid all the gods preeminent," and the philosopher Parmenides put love first among the gods in the genesis of the universe. This is not to suggest that these ancients meant anything wholly consistent with John's meaning. It is only to say that, absent the filter that automatically excludes the

passions from our conception of essential reality, love could be felt by them as intrinsic to it, the source of its cohesion. Pagans that they were, their thinking is closer to John's than is the modern Christian habit of putting metaphysics aside, and therefore reducing "God is love" to mere sentiment and the presence of Christ in the creation to mere poetry. By "mere poetry" I mean language that is ornamental rather than meaningful. But the epistle tells us that existence is made out of meaning, is saturated with it. It is something we see with our eyes and touch with our hands.

We participate in this truest reality not by attaining to esoteric knowledge, but by giving love its natural expression as love for one another. So if a writer were to proceed by the light of the epistle, how would meaning be found in experience? It would be found everywhere, in the endless variety in which reality offers itself to us. This would include offenses against its sacredness: "Whoever does not love abides in death. . . . How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" Perhaps we turn away from the demands of meaning, preferring to be lonely aliens here.