

Christmas According to John

January 4, 2015

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John 1:1-18

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.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

STARTING WITH CREATION

Where does the good news of God's salvation begin?

The four gospels start the story at a different point.

Mark's gospel begins with John the Baptist in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord. Luke's story begins with the birth of Jesus. In Matthew's gospel the story begins with a genealogy that connects Jesus with the history of his people.

But, John starts the story earlier than all the other gospels. He begins the story at creation. “In the beginning was the Word.” In the creation story, when God speaks things happen. The universe is created.

Today some believe that the universe is simply matter and energy. Their version of creation would go this way,

“In the beginning there was matter and energy, that’s all there was and all there ever will be.”

In this model, the universe can be reduced to the random interaction of cosmic forces.

Christians disagree.

Now don’t misunderstand.

Certainly there are Christians who embrace the findings of science and the scientific explanations of how the universe was created. I am one of them.

But, I believe that there is a Creator who stands behind those cosmic forces.

We believe that before the creation of the cosmos there was the Word, the eternal Word, the Creator of heaven and earth. We believe,

“In the beginning was the Word, and this Word was with God and this Word was God.”

THE DIVINE CHRIST

This is John’s way of saying that God was in Christ. And not only was God in Christ, God was in Christ before the creation of the universe. God was in Christ from the very beginning ... and before the beginning.

In addition to this the eternal Word of God, the God revealed in Jesus Christ was an active participant in creation. This eternal Word created all that you see around you.

Now you might wonder:

Why does John insist on starting the story so early? Why is John so intent on emphasizing the divinity of Jesus?

John wants to make it abundantly clear that in the man Jesus we have a complete and accurate picture of God. Jesus was *NOT* a man who was adopted by God. Jesus was *NOT* a demi-god who was given special powers.

God was *IN* Christ.

In Jesus we behold the very light of creation revealed in human form.

In Jesus we see what it means to be truly human.
And in Jesus we see what it means to be truly divine.

Jesus lets us see the divine glory of the Creator God in a form that we can understand.

He is the light of the world. But, he is the light of the world that comes into the world.

This is why Christmas is so important. If we don't understand Christmas, nothing else in the Christian faith will make any sense.

The incarnation is the primary building block of the Christian faith. This is where we begin the Christian year and this is where faith is born in us.

During the Christmas season we think about the meaning and the mystery of the incarnation in a number of ways.

We think about Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy.
We think about Jesus born of Mary in humble circumstances.

THE LIGHT SHINING IN OUR DARKNESS

And today we think about the fact that in Jesus the very light of creation is revealed.

This is the most unique and most important aspect of the Christian faith. Jesus is the light that shines in our darkness. If you want to know God, look to Jesus.

In this respect Jesus is unique. Jesus is not just one light among many. Jesus is not just another prophet among many.

Jesus is the one true light from which all light comes.

Later in John's gospel Jesus will say,
"I am the way, the truth and the life."

Jesus is the unique and authoritative revelation of God.

Those that believe that the universe is nothing more than matter and energy also believe that if there is to be any meaning in life, men and women must create that meaning.

In other words we human beings must make our own meaning because there is no purpose to creation.

That's a logical conclusion.

If there is no divine will behind creation, then men and women really do set their own standards. There is no right and wrong; there are only cultural norms.

WITNESSES TO THE LIGHT

But, John's gospel tells us that the Word of God is behind the awesome power of creation. God is in Christ, and we are not lights unto ourselves. We are not the captains of our own ship and the masters of our own faith.

Instead, we are messengers. Our job is to merely be witnesses to the light.

Originally, that was the role of John the Baptist. John was not the light. John was a witness to the light.

We noted several weeks ago that in the early paintings of John the Baptist he is always pointing. He is pointing toward Jesus. And that is our job too. We too are called to point toward the one true light in a world that is filled with darkness.

The Apostle Paul said that we don't preach ourselves, we preach Christ.

This is more challenging than we might think. There is a natural temptation to point toward our lives inward instead of pointing toward Christ. There is a natural temptation to be self-centered instead of God centered.

We must fight this temptation.

Like John we are called to point toward the one true light that comes into the world.

NOT RECOGNIZED OR WANTED

Of course the world has never been receptive to this one true light. God as revealed in Jesus has never been the God that the world expected. Nor has Jesus been the God that our world wanted.

God incarnate comes incognito.

John says that the even though he created the world the world did not recognize him. Even the Jews, God's own people did not recognize the coming of the Messiah.

God's people had longed for this day for generations. But, when the day dawned, they could not see the divine light.

They rejected the Son of God. Throughout John's gospel, we encounter deep disappointment and rejection. People simply did not understand or believe.

Jesus asks Nicodemus,
 "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"
 (3:10)

He asks the religious leaders,
 "If I tell you the truth, why do you not believe me?" (8:46)

And he warns the disciples,
 "If the world hates you, be aware that they hated me before it hated you."

How odd that sometimes the religious people are the last ones to see and accept the divine light. In fact quite often it is the religious people who actually reject the teachings of Jesus. That's true even today.

CHILDREN OF GOD

But, fortunately not all rejected Jesus.
 Some believed.

And they became children of God, born not of flesh and blood but by the power of God.

Notice that in this sense the incarnation works both ways.

In Jesus the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. Divinity is lowered

And those who accept Jesus are born of the Spirit of God. Humanity is raised.

Those who believe become the children of God.

To use the phrase I have adopted this Advent/Christmas season, Christ is born in us.

Or, to use a phrase that John uses in his gospel,

“We are born again.
We are born from above.”

GRACE AND TRUTH

This Christmas God gives us what we cannot give our selves, the gifts of grace and truth.

We find these gifts of the incarnation in verse 14. That verse reads,

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

And then John goes on to say in verse 16, “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” Grace overflows in God’s kingdom.

These two important gifts, grace and truth are given to us in the incarnation, and they work hand in hand.

Grace refers to the free gift of God’s salvation. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Truth refers to the fact that in Jesus we have an accurate picture of the nature of God and God’s purposes.

And what is God’s nature? What is God like? What is God’s plan for the world?

John will tell us later in perhaps the most famous passages in the Bible, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:17)

This is the truth about God, and that truth is apparent in the ministry of Jesus. God is not out to get us. God is out to save us.

God reaches down to touch us and lift us up. And God's kingdom begins with those who need it most. God's touches the least among us as a sign of salvation for us all.

This is the truth about the God who stands behind the creation of all that is. That God is a God of grace.

THE ABSENT GOD

From time to time people tell me that they do not feel like God is in their life. They do not see God. God is absent. There is a spiritual crisis.

Today's passage affirms that feeling. In verse 18 of our passage for today we read, "No one has ever seen God."

So, you might ask, "If no one has seen God, how can we talk about God?"

Today's lesson gives us the answer. God comes to us in Jesus. God becomes a human being. God becomes accessible to us.

In Jesus, the Son of God we come close to the Father's heart. God chooses to reveal his glory in a way that we can understand.

John Calvin referred to this as "God's condescension."

But, we must not make the mistake of thinking that this incarnation is limited to just the birth of Christ long ago. The incarnation has implications for how we live, this year and every year.

Howard Thurman's poem, "The Work of Christmas" captures how the incarnation sets the agenda for the rest of the year. Thurman wrote,

"When the song of the angels is stilled,/ when the star in the sky is gone,/ when the kings and princes are home,/ when the shepherds are back with their flocks,/ the work of Christmas begins:

to find the lost,/ to heal the broken,/ to feed the hungry,/ to release the prisoner,/ to rebuild the nations,/ to bring peace among the people,/ to make music in the heart."

HOMEWORK!

I have some homework for you to do this week. (I know. This is not school. This is church. But, I have some homework for you to do nonetheless.)

Some people tell me that they find this passage to be difficult to understand. The language is too lofty and philosophical.

I know what they mean. I struggled to understand this passage for a long time too. In eighteen verses we have covered enough ground to preach at least eighteen different sermons!

But, this week I chose to preach one sermon because it all goes together. Today's passage is a summary of the gospel.

To put it another way, John's prologue is nothing more than a fancy table of contents for the whole book of John. All the stories in John's gospel are illustrations of the truth found in our passage for today.

Let me suggest a new way to analyze and study John's gospel.

Print today's Scripture passage on a piece of paper.

(You can look up the sermon on our church's website and then just print the page that has the Scripture. There are also a number of websites from which you can copy and paste the scripture.)

After you have done that, look at all the other stories in John's gospel in the light of this passage.

All of them will point directly to some statement in this prologue.

I think this will help you better understand the flow of this unique statement of faith.

You might even leave enough space on your paper to pencil in the passages from John that illustrate the various parts of the prologue.

And then after you have taken time to understand this passage, also take time to put it into practice.

The Word has become flesh in Jesus Christ.

In faith “flesh out” the gospel in your life by pointing to the one true light in word and deed.

Bring grace and truth to the world that God loves.
This is the Christmas story according to the gospel of John.

Amen.