

C Christmas 2 1.2.21

John 1:1-18

Focus Statement: God loves us so much that God put skin on and moved into our world.

Well, after three days of trying, it appears no one is going to get to watch the Bible chat for this week. I fought Facebook and Facebook won. The only good news in Facebook's victory is much of this sermon is that bible chat, so you won't be hearing the same thing twice. If I had managed to post it, you would have heard me say that the prologue to John's Gospel is probably, at least in part, an ancient Christian hymn. And hymns, as you know from singing them, are meant to evoke rather than explain, making us feel and know, with our hearts rather than our minds, about God's great love for us. Like a good hymn text, this passage is rich with metaphor, meant to be sat with and pondered. What I want to do with this sermon today is just dig a bit deeper into the text, and let these ancient words resonate within us. I hope this sermon isn't like explaining the joke, but I want you to hear what lies just beneath the surface of this beautiful text.

So we start, "In the beginning," which, as Maria from the Sound of Music taught us, is "a very good place to start." "In the beginning," and immediately the spidey sense of John's Hebrew audience was peaked. Because "in the beginning" is how the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the most important of their sacred texts, begins. It may also have peaked your spidey sense, because the Torah is what we call in Christianity the first five books of the Old Testament. Our Bible starts this way as well, "In the beginning," opens Genesis, "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep." John starts even before the formless void, "In the beginning was the Word." The Word here is the Greek *logos*, and it has more of a sense of active communication than something you

might look up in a dictionary. In the beginning was the message, in the beginning was the conversation. With *logos* John was taking a word familiar to both his Hebrew and Greek audience and layering their understandings on top of one another. For the Hebrew audience, when God speaks, action follows. After the formless void of creation, the voice of God moved over the waters, and light appeared. God's voice at Sinai gave Moses the Law. God's word echoed through the prophets. For the Greeks, *logos* was the term for the principles of nature that guided the universe, the creative plan from which the world was created. In the beginning, says John, was this active, vibrant conversation of God, who was with God, who indeed was God. Here, in this very first verse, is the promise on which the whole of the Gospel turns: when we see Jesus, we see God, when we hear Jesus, are in communication, conversation with Jesus, that is conversation with God.

Mic drop right there. We could stop at verse one and walk away, because that is some announcement right there, but John goes on. "He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being in him, and without him not one thing came into being." What we hear here is the very beginning of turning from the timelessness of God to the timebound promise of the presence of Jesus. C. S. Lewis describes the human experience of time as traveling along the edge of a ruler, there is only one direction to go, one set pace to travel. God, on the other hand, is the air around the ruler, touching all parts of it at the same time, both in front, behind, and right where we are, all at the same time. With verse two, we find this expanse focusing in at the zero edge of the ruler. Still everywhere at once, but paying attention at one specific point.

Then the text narrows our focus further with a claim about who this Word is. This word is life, “and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Or the darkness did not understand the light, the Greek for overcome can also mean both. Hold that for a moment, we’ll come back to it.

Verse six introduces us to our first, human character, “a man sent by God whose name was John.” Before we go any further, let’s point out that John is a super common name, and this John is not the same John who is the writer of this Gospel. John, this person, not the writer of the Gospel, appears in all four Gospels, but he plays a different role here than he does in the others. While he does baptize in John’s Gospel, his real role here is to point us to Jesus. To say, there he is, there is the one you should look at, the one you should know. Right away John’s presence in the prologue tells us that we have moved from the cosmic to the personal. That this is a historical story with historical parameters. It’s the equivalent of Luke’s name dropping of whose who in the ancient world, but in a much more focused way.

He, John, was not the light, the prologue is quick to point out. But “the true light, the light which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” Here we get the first use of the word “world.” The Greek here is *kosmos*, where we get the English cosmos. But in John’s Gospel, rather than referring to the whole of the universe, *kosmos* refers to the specific domain of humanity. A specification that matters as we read verse ten, “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, *yet the world did not know him.*” We heard in verse three that he was part of the creation of everything, now in verse ten it is made clear that he was also part of the creation of us. This is important for a couple of

reasons. One, it makes it clear that humanity and creation are not separate, that we too are a part of the creation which God called good. Two, it gives the end of verse ten that much more sting. He came, as verse eleven tells us, to what was his own, to the place he created, and not his place, but his own people, the people whom he created, did not accept him.

Remember I said we'd come back to the darkness not overcoming or understanding the light. This is that but with us, with people. Overcoming is a reference to the crucifixion, despite humanity's best efforts, we could not kill the God who came to save us. In fact, as the end of this Gospel will show us, our attempt will only make clear God's glory.

Understanding is another key truth about Jesus. In John's Gospel, seeing and knowing are key attributes of discipleship. Relationship with Jesus shapes what people are able to know and see.

Then in verse fourteen, the thing that has been hinted at all along becomes clear. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." The Word, the message, the communication, the conversation of God became flesh. Became here is *ginomai*, which is the first time the verb "to become" has been used. Previous it was all *emi*, "to be." "To be," "I am" was another clue for John's Hebrew audience, "I am" being the name God gave to Moses from the burning bush of Exodus, "I am who I am, tell them I AM has sent you." Now, in John, the I Am becomes flesh. The Greek for flesh is *sarx*, and it's got this real meaty, bloody sense to it. There isn't any symbolism in *sarx* it is as real as it gets. "The Word became flesh and lived among us." Lived here is *skenoo*, a word that calls on all God's Old Testament promises to dwell with God's people. *Skenoo* shares the same root as tent or tabernacle. My favorite modern translation of this verse, "And the Word put skin on and built his house in our

neighborhood.” The Word, the message, the communication of God, who was with God since the beginning, who in fact was God, who created us, now lives with us, in our homes, in our lives, just as we live, “as we have seen his glory.” And the we here does not refer to eyewitnesses, but to the community, who know Jesus through each other. “Glory,” the Glory of God, in the Old Testament after all is a thing that cannot be seen straight on, but that has to be looked at askance, like Moses through the veil or Elijah through the cleft of the rock. We see the glory of God not head on, but still we see, through each other.

And we see that “glory... full of grace and truth...from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.” Grace, *charis*, appears four times here in the prologue and then never again throughout the entirety of the Gospel. “Grace and truth” echoes a common Hebrew refrain of steadfast love and truth. Placing that old promise here reminds us that the promises of God are now enfleshed. Those words don’t need echoing any longer, because we can see them in the words and actions of the Word made flesh. The rest of the Gospel is a vision of what grace and truth look like.

“The Law indeed came through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Two amazing things happen in this short verse. First, it spells out a truth of humanity, that we need both law and grace. Grace and truth do not undo the Law, they make the Law something we can live within. Because we cannot follow the law on our own, not perfectly. We try, we think we can, but experience shows us otherwise. Left with the law alone, we fail. But with grace and truth alongside, the law changes from condemnation to helpful guide and teacher. The law shows us how to live, grace lifts us up when we fall short. And

who brings us this promise? This is the final move from the cosmic to the personal, the Word receives a name, Jesus. All of this power and might and majesty is now clearly spelled out as resting in the presence of a single human, a man named Jesus.

“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.” And with that, we conclude the prologue and enter into the narrative. The rest of this chapter, and the next twenty chapters, are all about doing just that. The purpose of Jesus ministry is to make God known, to us and to the whole world, so that through Jesus we can come to know God, and in knowing God can know life, can have, can be, life. In *the* beginning was the Word, and in every beginning that followed, there too was, is the Word. In the beginning of time, in the beginning of this new year, in the beginning of every breath we take, every word we speak, every action we take, there too is the Word. From him we have received grace upon grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.