

The Wonder of the Incarnation (John 1:1-18)

This opening to John's gospel that Donna read for us moments ago, is powerful and majestic, it's scope is breath-taking and awesome to consider. In a true sense it is pure mystery, incomprehensible to mortal thought—the very idea that the Creator God actually walked the earth as a human being staggers the imagination. How that happened is itself inexplicable; that it did is the bold, audacious claim made in this text. In that mystery the very character of God is revealed in ways humanity understands, and as that realization forms, it's meant to evoke a sense of wonder that leads us to worship as the only reasonable response.

John's gospel is directed to the church to bolster our faith foundations, to firmly establish in our minds the identity of the one we follow, the reason for his appearance, and the promises we are given through him. These opening verses are a kind of executive summary to the rest of this gospel's content—it is to inform our understanding as we read through the material John records. Jesus did not become God in the imagination of his followers after his shameful death. In Jesus God has come to fulfill the grand plan of reclaiming creation as the place of fellowship between God and humankind. And in that process, deep truth about ourselves and of God emerge to close the gap of our distance drawing us into the very life of God present to us, indeed within us.

So John begins with the backstory of Jesus. In the film industry, backstory is an essential piece of the process that provides characters in the story the motivation for their actions. By understanding backstory, actors add nuance to their character—how they speak, how they appear, how they respond to the storyline being developed around them. Some actors are so devoted to this process that they remain in character throughout the filming, even during breaks or when they're not on camera so that they fully embrace the essence of the character they portray. So then, as John reveals the backstory to Jesus, we understand that he is the Creator God who lived on the earth for a time as a human being. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." These few words begin to develop deeper theological context for us; we learn of distinction and unity: the Word and God. Careful readers will recall the opening words of Genesis: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." Again, distinction and unity: the Spirit and God. John then weaves these ideas together: "All things came into being through him, the Word, and without him not one thing came into being." The Word was the means of creation—the Word was not an element of creation—the Word was the agent of creation in union with God and the Spirit—from the very beginning God is community acting in concert to bring about creation as we know it. Verse 14 then makes it clear: "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory"—glory is when God's character is expressed or revealed, and that Word was "full of grace and truth." At the outset, John means for us to know that Jesus' teaching and ministry are true and reliable—they are trustworthy, for they are rooted in God's very self.

The wonder of the gospel story is that in Jesus, we discover that God is better than we could have imagined and in Jesus we receive a life better than we could have hoped for. But amid this wonder, there is also heartbreak.

Jonathon Rogers, a writing coach in Nashville, recently said that the goal of all non-fiction writing is to prompt the response: What a world is this. To this end, authors simply present what actually happened—not what they hoped would happen, nor do they interpret what happened; to be true to the genre, they just recount what happened. The apostle John fits the category, for in recounting the wonder of the incarnation, he describes outcomes wherein we find the heartbreak. What a world is this applies equally to wonder and despair. And, of course, the same event can prompt either response.

The focus of our time in the text today begins in vs. 10 where the heartbreak shows up. "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him." These are among the sadder words of Scripture—what a world is this, that the world's creator would be present in it and remain unknown to it? How far had the world drifted from its

mooring in the grip of God's life and love that they failed to recognize their Creator? John doesn't answer the question for us—perhaps it was obvious to his original audience. Graeco-Roman culture in that day was polytheistic, and in a pre-modern world the gods were the answers for the contingencies of life. They pulled the levers that controlled weather, health, power, victory or defeat in battle, emotion, and fate. Gods were tangential to life, and any sort of relationship to the gods was transactional. They were a nuisance, but one had to appease them. Their ideas of God prevented them from realizing the true God to whom they owed their existence. 2000 years later, not much has changed except that the idea of God has morphed into irrelevance or non-existence. In our post-modern world we no longer blame the gods for natural phenomena. We understand how weather happens, why there is illness, etc. If the idea of God lingers in the human imagination, that God is so distant and unknowable consigning it to irrelevance, or we've decided that the spark of deity—whatever is meant by that—resides within each of us meaning that we control our own destiny. We are spiritual, and thrill to the wonders of creation, but that wonder is what we worship rather than its creator. What a world is this...and God's heart breaks.

John continues: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." Equally sad and tragic. Those most prepared to receive him, those whose history should have led them to glad reception—opted out. What a world is this. Because Jesus did not meet their expectations, because he didn't support their agenda they rejected him—worse yet, they undermined him and colluded with their own oppressors to put him away. Now to be fair, I have to point out that those who rejected him outright were the religious leaders of his day, and they did so because he failed to endorse their own ideas of God and how they perceived God working among them. They indeed longed for liberation and believed the promised messiah would become their king, fighting on their behalf for the restoration of their kingdom. Their expectations were heightened as Jesus began his ministry announcing the arrival of God's kingdom, but their hopes dwindled as Jesus steadfastly refused to take up arms and form a rebellion. Their pre-conceived idea of what God should do locked them out of what God was actually doing in their midst. I wonder how much of this yet lingers in the collective mind of the church in our day. Are we failing to live into the fullness of what God is doing in our world because we are pursuing an agenda we ourselves have conceived? Have we, perhaps, succumbed to the temptations of power, wealth, and station in life at the expense of acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God? Are we obscuring the life of God by baptizing secular values and securing our own interests to the detriment of others? Perhaps in this extraordinary moment in our life's experience, we're given an opportunity to reflect on what really matters in life, and how God sustains this even in calamity. What will it mean for us to be followers of Jesus in a post-COVID world? Where is Christ leading us in the future unfolding before us?

Heartbreak aside, John leads us into joy—"But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God..." To believe in his name here means to trust him and all that is associated with him, his purpose, his approach, and his outcomes. What a world is this! In Jesus' day this was huge and the cause of great joy for it primarily resonated with those who had, until him, been excluded from the blessing of God by the ones who claimed to know God. By trusting him, outcasts were in, the rejected were accepted, the despised were valued—they came to know that they belonged to God, were loved by God, were welcomed into God's family, and in that welcome they received the ability to live in grace according to a true understanding of God and themselves in God's life. This we know today as well. Having received Christ, we belong to God and from Christ's fullness we receive grace upon grace enabling us to live deeply in the life of God. And doing so, we participate with God by the power of the Holy Spirit to reveal the character of God so that God's purpose in creation is fulfilled—that the world might know that what has come into being in him is life, and that life is the light of all people.

This happens in our day as it did in the days of Jesus—his life displayed the beauty of God based in truth portraying the nature of God as it really is amid life in the world as it really was—detached from God collapsing from its lack of center bleeding out its goodness and

despising its blessing. But from Christ's beauty anchored in God, blessing poured out touching the world at its point of need, offering hope and grace. That blessing multiplied through those who had received it capturing attention and re-kindling hope to the place where those ready to receive it sought its source and discovered ultimate truth. And that pattern is transferable—it's alive in us whose lives display the beauty of Christ's character living through the moments of our day in the energy of our engagement with others. God continues to pour blessing into the world through our lives yielded to the impulse of God's Spirit prompting the expression of God's love that overwhelms the darkness shrouding the world so that the light of Christ burns as a beacon of hope calling all to the wonder of the Creator who longs for them. This is the bold, audacious claim our faith proclaims—don't let anything in your experience dilute its power. Embrace the beauty of Christ, gladly release its blessing in every setting, and let these lead the world to truth. AMEN