

Jesus in the Gospel of John
“The Word Became Flesh”

[John 1:1-4, 10 & 14](#)

This Lent, we are reading the Gospel of John together. In many ways, John’s Gospel is significantly different from the other three Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke because it comes from an independent literary tradition.

The first three Gospels are referred to as the Synoptic Gospels because their stories are quite similar. The word, “synoptic” comes from the Greek word, “synopsis,” which means “seeing all together.” Sharing a common source, the Synoptic Gospels record Jesus’ ministry in a similar sequence using similar if not identical wording. In these three Gospels, Jesus often speaks in parables, memorable stories which use simple, everyday imagery, and his teachings are focused on the kingdom of God. The context of Jesus’ ministry is Galilee where he calls people to follow him.

In contrast, in the Gospel of John, the context of Jesus’ ministry is in and around Jerusalem. Jesus does not speak in parables but in metaphors. John’s Gospel includes stories that are not found elsewhere in the Synoptic Gospels, such as the wedding at Cana, the visit of Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man who had been ill for 38 years, the man born blind, the resurrection of Lazarus, and Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples. The focus of his teaching is not on the kingdom of God but on himself, as the one who reveals God to the world.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus repeatedly calls people to believe and abide in him, instead of following him. The word “*believe*” appears 98 times. Yet, despite his pronouncements, despite the many signs and miracles he performs, Jesus is portrayed as being misunderstood and ultimately rejected by the masses. Here are a few other things that are unique to the Gospel of John: Nathaniel is mentioned as Jesus’ disciple, but he never appears in the other Gospels. And Jesus’ mother is often mentioned, but never identified by her name.

So, who wrote this unique Gospel? As with the authorship of the Synoptic Gospels, we do not know. In several moments in John (19:26, 20:2 and 21:20), there is mention of “*the disciple whom Jesus loved,*” and it has been church tradition to assume that this anonymous disciple was John, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples. The belief that he wrote the Gospel of John is based on John 21:24, which reads, “This is the disciple who testifies concerning these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.”

However, biblical scholars debate the attribution of authorship of the Fourth Gospel to John. In fact, some even speculate that it was written by multiple authors. Whoever the author or authors were, what is evident is their familiarity with both the Jewish scriptures as well as non-Jewish, Greek sources of thought. Since we will probably never know for sure who wrote the Gospel of John, we’ll just assume, for the duration of this sermon series at least, that John was the author.

There is widespread agreement among biblical scholars, however, when it comes to the date the Gospel of John is thought to be written -- between 90 and 110 AD. This is because there is the threat of expulsion

from Jewish synagogues given to the sympathizers of Jesus, and the practice of worshipping in synagogues did not become central to Jewish faith until after the destruction of the Second Temple in 69-70 AD.

By then, the Synoptic Gospels, as well as some other Gospels which did not ultimately make it into the Christian Canon, would have already been circulating around. Scholars believe that John's Gospel came out of a Jewish-Christian community, those who came to identify Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and began professing this belief. At some point, it appears that this community of believers in Christ was no longer welcomed in the Jewish synagogue.

So it is thought that John is writing to a beleaguered group of believers, facing being put out of their social community for their continued belief in the Messiah. About the purpose of writing this gospel, John says in chapter 20, verse 31, *"These things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's son, and that believing, you will have life in his name."* I pray that, through reading the Gospel of John together, we will join the multitude of believers who have come before us, who held fast to believing in Jesus even when it was costly to do so politically and socially, discovering that indeed, there is life in his name.

Now, let's turn to the first chapter. The first 18 opening verses which are in poetic form, is called the Prologue. Here we find the major themes of the Gospel foreshadowed. You will see how these themes repeat again and again in the rest of the Gospel. The first 4 verses are believed to be an early Christian hymn about Jesus. It begins with these three words, "In the beginning."

Where have we heard this phrase before? You might recall that the book of Genesis starts with the same exact words. John's use of "In the beginning," evoking the beginning of Genesis, is intentional. With these words, we are taken back to the story of creation, and we find Jesus is there not just with God but being the One through whom all things came into being. We will see later how the connection of Jesus to creation is found not only in the prologue but also throughout the Gospel.

Actually, the beginning of the Prologue is not distinctive to the Christian faith. It would have found acceptance with both Jewish leaders and Greek philosophers. They would have agreed with John's claim that behind the universe, there is the Word, the logic, the mind of God, the creator. However, in verse 14, we have a radically bold claim. John proclaims that Jesus is the embodiment of the Word of God, the Word which created the cosmos and everything living in it. He says, "The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." In other words, it is an announcement of Emmanuel, God who is with us, who became one of us. The fancy term for these statements is incarnation.

This concept of incarnation is beautifully expressed in Philippians 2:6-8, which was another hymn of the early church. It reads, *"Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."*

For the Jews, such a proclamation would be considered to be blasphemous because they believed in the one invisible God. The idea that a god, a spirit could become flesh would not make sense to the Greeks because

they believed in the separation between flesh and spirit.

John does not say how this happened, how Jesus became the Word of God incarnate. We do not find Mary's conception story in the Gospel of John, no angels announcing his birth. Apparently, how he came to be is not his concern.

For many generations before Jesus, people believed in God. They tried to understand God with their own experiences and and describe God with their own reason and logic. Then, Jesus came to us. He showed us who God is and what is expected of us through his life, his teachings, his suffering, his death, and his resurrection. In the person of Jesus, the Word of God, the logic, the wisdom, the mind of God is revealed to us most perfectly, most convincingly, and most beautifully. The invisible God is made visible to us in Jesus Christ. And, John's ultimate concern is whether we will come to know who Christ is and whether we will believe and abide in him.

Among the several major themes in the Gospel of John, light and life are the two most prominent themes that are introduced in the Prologue. John says Jesus came to be the light for us in this world of darkness. We see darkness in the news of gun violence that takes away lives of the innocent, especially the lives of young children and youths. We see darkness in the senseless terrorist attacks against humanity. We see darkness in the natural disasters that destroy our homes and communities, and lives. We experience darkness when we lose our job or receive a frightening diagnosis of our own or a loved one. We experience darkness when someone we love dies. We experience darkness when we suffer from depression or are gripped by fear. But, the good news we find in the Gospel of John is that Jesus comes to dispel the darkness which threatens to engulf creation in chaos with the light of comfort, healing, peace and hope.

In the Gospel of John, the darkness is also a metaphor for losing our way. When we drift away from the path of God and wander in our sinfulness, Jesus comes to us with the light of mercy and grace to guide our ways back to God. As John says, the light of Jesus leads us to life. The word, "life" appears 47 times in John's Gospel. Most of the time, it is the life Jesus offers, and often it's used coupled with the word "eternal."

John 3:16 is probably, the most famous passage about the eternal life. It reads, "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.*" But, the eternal life John talks about is not that which comes after death. Instead, it is the life that begins here and now. It is the foretaste of the eternal life to be experienced here on earth through Jesus Christ, a life of love and joy, peace and hope.

According to John, we can live that life when we believe in Christ and trust in him. We believe and trust that Jesus is the light and the life. We believe and trust that Jesus is the way and the truth. We believe and trust that Jesus came to be the light for us, so we, as followers, must be the light for others. As those who have the light of Christ and walk in it, we are called to lead others to the life of Christ. This lent, as we faithfully walk with Jesus, following his light as he leads us, may we experience the life he offers, and arrive at the eternal life Easter brings to us!

Thanks be to God. Amen!