

December 31, 2017
1st Sunday after Christmas
John 1:19-34

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“The Witness of the Baptist”

The Word became flesh.

The Word became flesh and lived among us, pitched a tent among us, dwelled among us.

The Word became flesh and this Word was there in the beginning with God and, indeed, this Word was God and *all things* came into being through him. In relation to flesh the Word was no foreigner; yet the Word was treated as a foreign object, for the world did not know him and did not accept him.

Theologians have described the Gospel of John as “the pearl of great price” among all the writings of the New Testament. The author’s voice is distinctive and almost lyrical. Unlike the other gospels which either begin with abrupt pronouncements or with extended genealogies, the Gospel of John begins with a poem. Over the course of the next several weeks we will be walking through this at times deeply moving and enigmatic Gospel.

Last Sunday, Christmas Eve, we began at the beginning (a good place to start!) of the Gospel, with the first 18 verses of chapter one, a passage that is commonly called, “the Prologue.” In contrast to Matthew and Luke, the Gospel of John is not interested in the traditional Christmas stories regarding the circumstances surrounding Jesus’s conception and birth. We are given no portrait of Mary and Joseph on the run, no virgin birth; we see no angels, no wise men, no stable or baby lying in a manger. If you think about it, it is quite hard to imagine the children performing our annual Christmas program based on this Gospel alone! And yet the Gospel of John does contain a Christmas story of sorts, even if it is poetically told. In this unusual Gospel, we might say that the Christmas story begins not with the birth of Jesus but before the creation of the world itself. The Word that became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and proclaimed the good news to the poor and release to the prisoners is, according to the Gospel of John, *without* a beginning. That is, Jesus in his very person is the revelation of the eternal Word of God. For John, then, what happens on Christmas is a revelation of what is eternally true: that God is always and everywhere with us, as the One who calls creation into being, sustains creaturely life, and redeems the world through the faithfulness of the life and love of the Word made known to the world in Jesus. Later theologians of the early church would draw on the Prologue of John when formulating doctrine, in defense of the divinity of Jesus, his pre-existence, and eventually his eternity as the second person of the triune God, the Son. And while the author of the Gospel of John tends to focus on the heavenly origins of Jesus’s person and his eternal significance in a way that is remarkably different than the other Gospels, a familiar character does play a prominent role in this first chapter: alongside the Word is a man named John who baptizes.

Now we know John, this peculiar figure, from the other Gospel accounts. In Mark and Matthew he appears as a fire and brimstone preacher in the wilderness; he eats grasshoppers and wild honey, he’s decked out in clothes made from camel’s hair and he wears a leather belt around his waist. In this Gospel,

John is referred to as “a man sent from God,” who “came as a *witness* to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.” And yet, to clarify his role, the author explains that John himself was *not* the light, but the one who came to *testify* to the light. To witness. To testify. It is as if the author is describing a trial in which John comes forward as a witness who has come to testify.

And in our passage today we become observers to John’s testimony. We are observers of an interrogation scene in which John is asked a series of questions by Jewish faith leaders and liturgical experts. It is here that we get a glimpse into what the people of Israel may have been expecting, a new leader, a new prophet, a new king upon which to rest their national and religious hopes. And it is here that we get a glimpse into the identity and purpose of this Word that became flesh.

The interrogators first question to John is, *Who are you?* Now because John had been baptizing with water, an action associated with end-time expectations during this time, his interrogators had probably been hearing things and had made a number of assumptions about him. While there was no uniform Jewish expectation of a single end-time figure in the first century, many Jews expected and hoped that God would send a new national leader, an anointed king in the lineage of David. So before his questioners, John insists that he is *not* the Messiah. *What then? Are you Elijah?* According to popular tradition Elijah had been taken up to heaven in a chariot and many believed he was in some sense still alive and active in the world and would even one day return before the day of the Lord. Given what we hear about John the Baptist in the other Gospels -- that he wore clothes like those of Elijah, for example -- the association should not be surprising. Yet, John again simply answers: “I am not.” Finally, they ask, *Are you the prophet?* It is unclear who exactly “the prophet” is here, but given the various expectations of the time, one can assume that the prophet might be someone in the tradition of Moses. Some believed that Moses himself might return to restore the people’s relationship to God and the Law.

John testifies that he is none of these end-time figures--not a Davidic Messiah on which the people could place their national and political hopes, not a prophetic, miracle-working figure like Elijah who would bring hope and healing and reconciliation, and not a prophet like Moses who would provide strong leadership and a clear moral voice. After John rejects all of these potential roles, his interrogators begin to grow impatient: “Well, then who are you? We need to have answer for the Jewish religious authorities. What do you say about yourself?” Why are you going around baptizing with water? And John replies, “I am a voice crying out in the wilderness.” The image of a voice crying out in the wilderness is drawn from Isaiah, which in its context referred to the role of the angels in preparing a way through the desert by which Israel could return from Babylonian captivity to the land of Palestine. As Raymond Brown puts it, “Like a modern bulldozer the angels were to level hills and fill in the valleys, and thus prepare a superhighway.” John’s response is that the only meaning of his actions is to *prepare the way* to the one who is “coming after” him, the one who *already* walks in their midst but who they do not know. John’s only role is to make known the unknown one who is already present; for it is this unknown one who is the awaited bringer of salvation.

Like the angels in Isaiah, John the Baptist’s task is to prepare a road, not for God’s people to return to the promised land, but in the words of Raymond Brown, “for God to come to [God’s] people. [John’s] baptizing and preaching in the desert was opening up [human hearts], leveling their pride, filling their emptiness, and thus preparing them for God’s intervention” (Brown, 50).

After the interrogation of John, our text has a scene change. It is the next day and John the Baptist sees Jesus coming toward him. John declares, he testifies: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" In a series of declarations, John identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God, the pre-existent one, and as the mediator and vehicle of the Holy Spirit. Notice how John does not put himself above any other person as if he has received some special knowledge or vision of the Word. In verse 33, John says, "I myself did not know him." John is not a Messiah, he is not Elijah, and he is no Moses. His role is simply to prepare the way, to testify, to witness, to point. John's testimony is that the Spirit descended from heaven like a dove and remained on Jesus. This became the sign for John, a revelation that Jesus is the anointed Son of God.

What does it mean that John points to Jesus and says these words about him? What does it mean for us during this season of Christmas and as we anticipate the beginning of a new year. What does it mean to say that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world?

First, I think it is important to avoid a moralizing of this word, "sin." We tend to think of sin and sins as something that primarily concerns private individual actions. When I screw up, I sin. To sin is to eat too much chocolate or to say something mean to my sibling, and while these may indeed be examples of sins, this is not what is meant here. In this case, sin is singular, it describes humanity's alienation from God and our alienation from one another. To speak of sin in the singular is to speak of the brokenness of the world around us, the painful reality that the world is so often a site of division and violent conflict, exploitation and oppression. But John the Baptist is here to testify that while the world is a broken place, the Lamb of God has come to remove the barrier that separates humanity from God, that separates humanity from the love that moves the sun and the stars. That Jesus is the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world means that every system of domination and exploitation on earth is broken up in and through the power of life-affirming and life-giving love for others. This is what John means when he says "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." The love for the other embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, as opposed to hatred and fear of the other, is the life and light of the world, and nothing can extinguish its flame. And this is what we confess to be true when we gather together to celebrate Christmas: that the Creator is here, ever-present to creation, and that the Creator does not come with empty hands, but gives us light and life and love and resurrection. Out of God's own love for the world the Word "pitches a tent," makes a dwelling with us so that our lives may come to reflect the light and love in and through which this world was created; and in this way we join in the work of the Baptist, we become witnesses to the love that casts out fear and to the light that is not overcome by darkness. To believe in the name of Jesus, to believe in the story of Christmas, is not to blindly assent to some set of beliefs or propositions about God or Jesus, but to extend light and life and love to those around us, especially to those who feel overcome by darkness, who find it difficult, if not impossible, to see light and to experience life, who do not feel loved and who have not experienced mercy and grace. May it be to these ones especially that Christmas is carried forward into the new year.