

“The Gospel Of The Incarnation”

August 25, 2019

John 1:1-18

SI: This is a sermon series on the Gospel. We started out by asking:

What is the Gospel?

We saw that in the big picture, the Gospel is everything in the Bible, it's the whole grand story of God redeeming this fallen world.

But more specifically, the Gospel is the proclamation of salvation through Christ.

Then we asked two more questions?:

Why do we need the Gospel?

What does it mean to believe the Gospel?

For today and the next few Sundays let's consider another question:

What is the content of the Gospel? If it's good news, what exactly is that news?

There are many important and true teachings in the Bible that we have to know to understand the Gospel, like all the things the Bible says about judgment.

“The soul that sins shall die.”

“God is angry with the wicked every day.”

“Shall not the judge of all the earth do right.”

Judgment for sin gives us a context for understanding the Gospel.

But those statements about judgment aren't, strictly speaking, the good news. The content of the good news is the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

INTRO: One of my special memories is when we took our kids to see the Grand Canyon. We told them to close their eyes and hold hands and we led them right up to the rim and then said: Now open your eyes!

Their reaction was better than I expected.

They were in awe of the grandeur and beauty before them.

I was too. I was also in awe, but I had seen the Grand Canyon before.

And I wished I could have seen it as they did, looking at it for the very first time.

Some of you may be familiar with James Montgomery Boice.

He was the pastor of Tenth Presbyterian in Philadelphia and he was also a theologian and scholar.

He did his doctoral work at the University Basel on the Gospel of John.

He also preached a famous sermon series on John in five volumes that is still published. Fifteen of those sermons were on these first 18 verses of chapter one.

By the way, these first 18 verses are called John's Prologue.

He makes a comment about John's prologue like my comment about Grand Canyon

"I wish it were possible to approach [the Prologue] as though reading it for the first time. [It] contains something that was new and quite startling when it was first written, and yet for us who read it nearly two thousand years later it has become commonplace . . . It tells us—inexplicable as it may be—that God became a man. Nevertheless, because we have heard that . . . from childhood, we read it and are often strangely unmoved."

I felt that very keenly as I was preparing this sermon.

John's prologue is intended to captivate us with a grand declaration of the most profound event in all of history.

Our jaws should drop open, we should be in awe every time we read this passage.

But we've heard it so much, and we believe it so thoroughly, that our response is: Of course the Creator of the universe took in human nature in the person of Jesus.

Of course Jesus is light and life and lord of history.

Of course he's one with the Father, Second Person of Trinity, eternal Son of God.

Of course Jesus Christ is totally unlike all other religious leaders and visionaries and gurus, he's not even remotely in the same category—he's God.

And he once appeared in real time and history, and lived among us, to accomplish the redemption of the sons of God.

We believe all that. And it's precious to us. And our lives are founded on it.

We teach our children to believe in him and put their faith in him.

We sing about him on the Lord's day. We pray to him every day.

We think about him and his claims on our lives, how to please him.

But still Dr. Boice's point resonates with us:

Wouldn't it be nice if we could read John's prologue as if for the first time?

We're in the dark. Our spiritual eyes are tightly shut.

We have never seen God. We can't even conceive of God rightly.

But as we read, our eyes are opened

and suddenly we find ourselves standing on the rim of an incomparable vision:

God became a man! Jesus Christ is God!

Wouldn't it be nice if we could somehow be bowled over by it all?

We'll, we can't go back.

But it is possible to see something we know well as if for the first time.

One way to do that is to really concentrate on it occasionally.

Review the details. Look at the complexity and beauty of it.

Another way is to look at people who are seeing it for the first time,

and enjoy their reaction, and let that remind us how great this is.

So that's what I want to do this morning with John's prologue, vs. 1-18.

Two points, or two headings for you note-takers.

1. The good news of Christ's incarnation
2. The reactions of people when that good news hit them for the first time

And Lord willing, we'll leave here today with a fresh sense of awe.

MP#1 The good news of Christ's incarnation

Look again at the concluding verse of John's prologue, verse 18.

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

John concludes with a negative statement and a positive statement.

Negatives are crucial for clear communication and to emphasize a point.

Ever since Popeye's opened within walking distance of our house, we've eaten entirely too much fried chicken. When I go to get us some, Allison says:

I want the chicken fingers, regular not spicy. She's clearly emphasizing a point.

John does the same: No one has ever seen God.

God is invisible. If you can't see something then you can't know it.

Religion is often defined as mankind seeking after God.

There's this mountain and God is at the top, and all the religions of the world are seeking God, each in their own way, they each have a vision and making way up.

People say: I'm a seeker.

But according to John, it's a futile search because no one has seen God.

So that means people don't even know where to look.

Not only that, I'm getting a little off track here, but Paul says religions are mankind's attempts to avoid the true God with all his demands and holiness by inventing gods who we can put in a box and use at our convenience.

So it's not just that God is in a spiritual realm that our senses cannot access, but our rebellion against his law is also a moral barrier that prevents us from seeing God.

So we can only know God if he reveals himself to us.

And he has done that in several ways.

He has revealed himself in creation.

Creation tells us there is a God who made all this, and that he is powerful.

But it doesn't tell us anything about his character.

Is he good or toying with us? Is he interested? Is he personal?

Creation alone doesn't tell us.

People form all sorts of opinions about God when all they look at is creation.

Is he indifferent? Is he cruel? Is he part of nature?

So God has gone beyond creation,

and he has also revealed himself in miracles and mighty deeds.

Miracles revealed more about him—specifically that he is interested in mankind.

But even miracles don't reveal him fully, because subject to various interpretations.

Pharaoh looked at the Plagues concluded he should resist this foreign God who

seemed to be an enemy of Egypt, so he hardened his heart.
Even when God spoke from heaven at Jesus' baptism, some people who heard said it was just thunder.
Even miracles and mighty deeds of God don't enable people to see him.

God has revealed himself in visions.

There were prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel who had extraordinary visions, but even they didn't see God clearly, at least not in a way they could describe to us. Read their descriptions and it's all word pictures. They say things like:
The appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.
Something like a pavement of sapphire. Something like wheels in wheels.

So God ultimately revealed himself as a man, as a real life, human being.
Vs. 14 is the high point: The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
John doesn't say that the Word assumed the form of a body or hid in a body.
But that he became flesh, he became a human being.
What does that mean?

Theologians have coined a word for it. They call it the incarnation.
I never had Latin, one of the holes in my education. But I had Spanish.
Carne means meat, chili con carne.
The incarnation is God with meat, God with flesh and bones.
It's the eternal Son of God taking on a full human nature, body and soul.
By using the word flesh, calling particular attention to human limitations.

Throughout the centuries, the greatest Christian minds have tried to explain it.
How the Word who, according to verse 1 is not only with God but is God and partakes of all the characteristics of deity—how can he also partake of the characteristics of humanity?

The Bible says, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
Yet Jesus fell asleep in the back of a boat and disciples had to wake him up.
The Bible says God knows all things, he knows the end from the beginning.
He even knows what would have happened under different circumstances.
Yet Jesus, speaking of his Second Coming, says that of that day and hour no one knows, not even the Son.
How do we understand this? There have been many inadequate explanations that have tended to downplay either his humanity or his deity.
The church has agreed that we can't fully explain the incarnation, we can only describe it—God and Man in two distinct natures and one person forever.

And that during his time here on earth, in some sense his deity was veiled.

And at this point, the witness of John the Baptist is so important.

Do you wonder, as you read this prologue, why John Baptist mentioned twice?

He's mentioned more than Jesus Christ is by name.

It's to stress the all-important point that God became man in real time and history.

This is not a myth. It really happened.

The point has often been made that if it could be proved that Buddha never existed, it wouldn't affect Buddhist religion because it's a philosophical system.

That's not true of Christianity. If Jesus never existed, Christianity is destroyed.

But he did come, his glory was witnessed by John the Baptist and others.

And in life and person of Jesus Christ,

we finally and completely know exactly what God looks like.

This is the great revelation, this is the Grand Canyon of John's prologue.

The One he will write about is none other than the Son of God, God himself.

I trust that all of you know that and believe it.

There's a saying that evangelical Christians often use that I'm sure you've heard:

Christianity is not a religion, it's a relationship.

That means the heart of our faith is not performing religious rituals or

keeping religious traditions, it's knowing God as a person through Christ,

and a growing sense of his presence in our lives.

Let me give you a twist on that phrase.

Christianity is not a religion, it's a revelation. No one has ever seen God but

God, the One and Only who is at the Father's side has made him known.

This is the fundamental content of the Gospel.

God became a man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth so that we could see God.

And so seeing him we could know him.

But let's not stop here, for our enjoyment and benefit

Let's look at . . .

MP#2 The reactions of people when the good news of the incarnation hit them for the first time. Eyes closed, then they open them and standing on rim!

Read four of them.

There was an article about some PCA missionaries in Bangkok, Thailand.

It told about a college student named Kieow who was struggling to pass an English class she needed to get her degree.

A friend told her about a class run by missionaries who taught English using the Bible.

So Kieow went to the class. Buddhist, never read the Bible in her life.

Never heard the Gospel. Knew the name Jesus, associated with Christianity. Listen to the way she tells in her own words what happened.

“Because of growing up in a Buddhist family, we believed in angels, but we never talked about God. (I discovered that) Jesus isn’t just the father of a religion; He is God. If he is God, I want to know. That day I went home, I prayed to Jesus that if he was God, I wanted to know him. That night I had a dream. Someone was knocking on the door. The person said, ‘I’m standing here and knocking.’ I said, ‘Yes, I want to open the door.’”

The statement that jumps out at me is:

“I prayed to Jesus that if he was God, I wanted to know him.”

She understood in an instant that following the teachings of a man, even the father of a religion like Buddha, could not compare to knowing God.

John says: The Word was God. The Word became flesh.

You can know God in the person of Jesus. He’s accessible.

He’s interested in you. Isn’t that amazing.

This second story is told by Frederica Mathewes-Green,
an author and occasional commentator for NPR.

In college she was hostile to Christianity. She argued that Jesus never existed, just an invention by weak minds. But after college she was traveling in Europe.

I walked into a church in Dublin (an agnostic), and walked out a Christian. I had an unexpected confrontation with the presence of One I discovered to be my Lord, and was set reeling. I knew I needed operating instructions quickly, and particularly wanted to find out who this Jesus was. I hunted up a Bible, a pocket-sized King James with print several microns high, and plunged into the Gospel of Matthew. I disliked it from the start. Jesus was often abrupt and hard-edged. I disagreed with some of the things he said. I was offended. But something had happened in my heart. The confrontation in the church had knocked a hole in my ego. I knew at last that I didn’t make the world, I didn’t know everything, and it was time for me to sit down, shut up, and listen. I kept working my way through the Gospels, and they began working their way through me. There are still parts of the Bible I don’t like. But I *like* the parts I don’t like, because I know that’s where I need to listen harder.

She said: “I knew at last that I didn’t make the world.”

What she meant was that there was a time when she thought she was in control and that she owned her life.

But John says: “All things were created by him and for him.”

She saw that and it changed everything for her.

Jesus made the world, everything in it, including you, and he made you for him.

And notice the effect it had on her—

Even when she read things she didn’t like in Bible—
time for me to sit down, shut up, and listen.

Do you tell yourself every day: Jesus Christ made me for himself. He owns me.

That revelation ought to make you fall to your knees.

The third story is a famous one—it’s C.S. Lewis’s story. You know who he was.

He was an atheist, not hostile to Christianity, he just didn’t believe.

He was a literature professor at Oxford, specialized area of study was mythology.

The common view in the university was that the Gospels are myths.

But Lewis says in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, that his training and expertise in this area told him that the Gospels were not mythology.

He said they didn’t have the feel of myths. They were too real. Too historical.

And yet at the same time they tell a story that seems to be the greatest myth of all—that God became a man.

C.S. Lewis, with his great mind, wrestled with this.

He slowly came to the dawning realization, as he put it:

“Here and her only in all time, the myth must have become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man.”

And then Lewis tells how he took the bus one afternoon to zoo and he just says:

“When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God,
and when we reached the zoo I did.”

So much that is striking about his story.

But more than anything, a man in search of truth.

Finding, as John’s prologue says, that history bears witness to the Light.

And that in Jesus Christ is grace and truth.

This is a good story perhaps for those of you who question at times and doubt.

The last story, let’s read it together. Turn to John 20:24.

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas

was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

John puts this incident here at the end of his Gospel as a sort of bookend with his opening prologue. The Word was God. Thomas says: My Lord and my God. A devout, Bible believing Jew. The last person in the world to believe that a man of flesh and blood could be the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This would be a theological Grand Canyon.

And yet that is what Thomas confesses—that Jesus Christ is Yahweh God with hands and feet scarred by the nails of the cross.

I was talking to a young dad recently who was telling me about all the theological questions his children are asking him.

And I agreed that is one of the great pleasures for Christian parents.

You start to talk about spiritual things with these little people and read them the Bible and they start asking some questions that make you scratch your head.

If children ever ask you: What is God like?

The best answer you can give to that question is: He is exactly like Jesus.

He loves like Jesus loves.

He's as true as Jesus is true.

He's as faithful as Jesus is faithful.

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only Son who is at the Father's side has made him known. That's Good News.