

Word Became Flesh

1st Sunday in Lent – February 24/25, 2007
Sermon Background Study

John 1:1-14 (NRSV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

*“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”
The Word lives among us still. When we gather for
worship, we do so knowing that God’s presence is
here, in this place, on this day.*

As I write this, I am finishing up the first course I’ve ever taught on the gospel of John. Working our way through this gospel has been an exhilarating, moving, and profound experience for us all. I’ve taught a lot of different classes in our Bible Academy, but this class on John has generated more theological questions from students than any of the others.

Throughout Lent and Easter we’ll be taking a journey through John’s gospel. We’ll look at some dramatic stories of encounters with Jesus. We’ll consider some of those theological questions. And we will also focus extra attention on what this gospel says to us about worship. The *Heart & Mind* readings on the third page of these studies will take you through all of John’s gospel at a meditative pace.

In the beginning

Echoing the opening words of Genesis, John begins his Good News of Jesus Christ in the poetic language of worship. John’s prologue (v. 1-18) is theologically dense, but not difficult to grasp. This is John’s testimony to Jesus. When John wrote these words, Christians had gathered in small communities to worship Jesus for decades. John’s prologue affirms this worship. He doesn’t provide us with any theological or philosophical explanation. He simply states that Jesus is simultaneously distinct from God, in communion with God, and is God. He expects our response will be not to scratch our heads asking how but to fall on our knees.

The Plot of John’s Gospel

We don’t often think of the gospels as having plots, but they do. Each gospel is a skillfully written narrative and each has certain themes around which the writer builds the plot. To put it another way, none of the gospels are just a random collection of stories loosely strung together.

Alan Culpepper outlines the plot of John’s story in this way.¹

Jesus is the Word incarnate who has been sent by the Father to (1) reveal the Father to the world, (2) to take away the sin of the world, and (3) to authorize believers to become the children of God. Though Jesus is put to death, paradoxically it is through his death that Jesus fulfills his mission.

Here’s Culpepper’s simple outline of the gospel:

Jesus’ origin, Ch. 1
Jesus’ public ministry, Ch. 2-12
Jesus’ farewell discourse, Ch. 13-17
Jesus’ death and resurrection, Ch. 18-21

John’s story unfolds through a series of encounters that people have with Jesus. Some of these people are Jews, some are not. Some are men, some are women. Some are crippled or blind, some are not. The question posed to all is simply, “Who is Jesus?” And in every case, the question demands a response. Does the person recognize that Jesus is the eternal Word? Does the person come to believe? Do they trust Jesus? As you’ll see, some do and some do not.

As you read through the gospel, notice how often the words “testimony” and “testify” appear in the gospel. John contains more than a third of all the occurrences of these words in the Bible. John writes so that we, the readers, “may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing [we] may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

1. “The Plot of John’s Story of Jesus,” *Interpretation*, October, 1995

The Word

The ancient Jews wrestled with many of the same questions we do. Since the creator cannot be the creation, how God be both not of this world and yet be active in the world? The Jews came to use words and ideas such as “Word” and “Wisdom” to describe God’s presence and work in the world, believing that God was truly present in temple and torah in ways that God was not present elsewhere. The Jewish readers of John’s gospel would certainly have heard the echoes of “Wisdom” in John’s description of the “Word” (*logos* in the Greek).

Yet, many of John’s readers were not Jewish, but pagan, steeped not only in the pagan pantheon of gods, but in the pagan philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. The philosophers spoke of a *logos*, a first principle, a first mover, which (not whom) lay deep within all creation and all human beings.

For John, all these echoes of God come together in Jesus. Jesus is the transcendent creator, through whom all things came into being (v. 3). Yet, he “became flesh and lived among us” (v. 14). John uses language that would speak to diverse audiences, but would bring them all back to Jesus, to the question that drives the gospel forward: “Who is Jesus?”

Light and darkness

One of the most striking aspects of John’s gospel is that it is always pushing the reader toward a decision, a choice. There is never a middle ground. Who is Jesus? This gospel is a sea of dramatic contrasts. There is light and there is darkness. There is life and there is death. Belief and unbelief. Bread and starvation. Water and thirst. Understanding and ignorance. Each person Jesus meets must choose whether to walk in the light or remain in the darkness. We must make the same choice.

In John’s gospel, there is Jesus and there is the world (*kosmos* in the Greek). The world may have come into being through Jesus, but the world doesn’t know him (v. 10). Though many of his fellow Jews rejected Jesus, to all who believed, Jew and pagan alike, he gave the power to become children of God.

“we have seen his glory”

We probably have a pretty good idea what John means when he describes Jesus as the true light that overcomes the darkness. But we may not be so clear what John means when he writes that “we have seen his glory” (verse 14). We use the word “glory” a lot around church, but what do we really mean?

A person’s “glory” is their true and essential character revealed for everyone to see. To glorify Jesus is to lift him up so that everyone can see his essential goodness, love, and righteousness. Three times in the John’s gospel, Jesus says that he must be “lifted up.” These are foreshadowings of Jesus’ death on the cross, a very public death that revealed the depth of God’s love for humankind. Speaking of the “glory of the cross” seems odd given the humiliating and terrifying nature of crucifixion. Yet, the cross is the concrete and visible expression of God’s love.

When Moses was with God on Mt. Sinai, Moses asked to see God’s glory. But Moses had to hide when God’s glory passed by. He could not see God’s face and live. But, John writes, in Jesus we see “the glory as of the Father’s only son.” Jesus is God made flesh. John says, in so many words, if you want to know what God is like, take a long look at Jesus. Look at him, see God.

One of the gospel’s main themes is that men and women are responsible for the inescapable choices they make to believe in Jesus or not to believe. Don’t be surprised if, as you read through the gospel, you sometimes feel like John is pushing you into a corner – he is! The choice we must make is no different from the choice facing each person Jesus meets in the gospel.

The children of God

A couple of months ago, we looked at the story of Nicodemus’ night-time visit to Jesus, as told in John 3.¹ Jesus spoke of the need to be born again, or better, a second time. Such new birth, Jesus told Nicodemus, is “of the Spirit.” Nicodemus didn’t understand, but in the prologue, John prepares us for understanding.

All those who believe in Jesus, who place their full faith and trust in him, are given the power to become the children of God (v. 12). It is God who has formed us into his church. From the earliest days, the followers of Jesus gathered together to worship, to pray, to enjoy fellowship with one another and with Jesus, and to serve.

Our own worship, as the gathered body, is an essential part of our lives as disciples of Jesus. As Kathryn Ransdell writes, “Attending worship isn’t an option; it is the means by which we gather to honor and praise God for being God, and it is the means through which we receive healing, redemption, forgiveness, restoration, and cleansing.” Amen.

¹This background study, “Born Again,” from November 11/12, 2006, is posted on-line at www.standrewacademy.org, as are all studies.

Reading With Heart & Mind

February 25 – March 3 (John Ch.1 was read Feb 22-24)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions or thoughts that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday John 2:1-12 Jesus goes to a wedding in Cana. Why do you think that his mother, Mary, wants Jesus to do something about the wine? Why doesn't Jesus want to? Why does he do it?</p>	<p>Monday John 2:13-24 Jesus cleanses the temple in Jerusalem. You might read Jeremiah 7:1-15 as background. What is Jesus trying to accomplish by interrupting the temple activities? Why does John put this episode at the beginning of Jesus' ministry?</p>
<p>Tuesday John 3:1-21 Nicodemus visits Jesus during the night. What is Jesus trying to convey to Nicodemus? Why is it so hard for Nicodemus to understand Jesus? Why does Jesus think Nicodemus ought to "get it?"</p>	<p>Wednesday John 3:22-36 Jesus and John the Baptist. More of John's testimony to Jesus. Verses 31-36 are from the narrator. Why so much emphasis on testimony?</p>
<p>Thursday John 4:1-30 Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well. What sort of healing do you think she needs? What is the point of their conversation about worship?</p>	<p>Friday John 4:31-45 What is the food that Jesus has to eat after his encounter with the Samaritan woman (v. 33) and how does it nourish him? The Samaritans are not Jews. When many of them come to belief, what title do they give Jesus? What is its significance?</p>
<p>Saturday John 4:46-54 Jesus heals the son of an official. What makes the official different from so many who come to Jesus seeking help or reassurance? What surprises Jesus? What gifts are the official and his family given by Jesus?</p>	

Sermon Notes

St. Andrew Library resources on the Gospel of John

Our library has many excellent resources on the Gospel. Gail O'Day's commentary in *The New Interpreters Bible* is excellent. Sunday school teachers will find Gerard Sloyen's commentary from the *Interpretation* series especially helpful. The library also has a copy of Raymond Brown's *Anchor Bible* commentary, one of the most influential books on John in the last fifty years. There is also a copy of N.T. Wright's excellent 2-volume commentary from his . . . *for everyone* series, as well as William Barclay's commentary. Any of these would make your reading of John much richer and more meaningful. And they are all in our library!

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have more than ten Fellowship Groups meeting now. There are also a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Jesus is the Word. Jesus is the light. Jesus is in eternal fellowship with God. All that is came to be through Jesus. Jesus is God! So . . . why then did the "world" not know him (v. 10)? How could the creation turn on the creator? Why did Jesus' own not receive him? You'll see in this gospel that, despite Jesus' power to heal and to save, many people who encounter him do not believe? Why do you think that Jesus was, and is, rejected by so many people? Later in John's gospel we'll come to some of his thoughts on what we could call a theology of unbelief.

Yet, some do believe. And all those that do are given the power to become the children of God. Why do some believe and not others? Why is John careful to make clear that the new birth entailed in believing is of God – *not* "of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man," (v. 13)? What does this say about our own faith and our own free will? How could our birth be God's doing, not our own, yet our decision to believe be genuine? How can God hold us responsible for his work? These questions will arise time and again in this gospel.

Though John does not present to us a developed theology of the Trinity, in these opening verses we are thrust before a God who is inherently relational: Jesus is both "with God" and yet "is God." Thus, we profess a God who is relational in God's very being, yet was made flesh, taking on our humanity. How does such a proclamation inform our understanding of our world and of ourselves? What does it say about God? What does it say about our practice of worshiping together rather than alone?