

John 1:1-13 (NIV2011)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—
¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Who is Jesus?

Seems like a pretty simple question. Sadly, too often we make Jesus into who we want him to be, rather than seeking to know the real Jesus. Today, we begin a new series looking at this question and the answers found in the pages of John's gospel.

As I worked to prepare the *Christianish* sermon series last fall, one of the statements that struck me the most was from Scot McKnight who works extensively with young adults and has done so for fifteen years. He wrote, "Reared on self-esteem and impervious to guilt, the next generation needs good news that can break through their defenses." McKnight went on to say that you can't talk about sin and grace to someone reared on Mister Rogers and "I'm Ok, You're Ok." Even more telling was this quote from McKnight: "iGens have a robust enough self-image to think Jesus is just like them."¹

"A robust enough self-image to think Jesus is just like them." Really? Just like them? Is Jesus really just like me, or even just a little better version of me? Who really is this man Jesus that people have worshipped for the last two thousand years? Not the sort of Jesus imaginatively concocted for one reason or another, but the actual Jesus, born to Mary from Nazareth. Who was he then? Who is he now?

There are lots of ways we could get at these questions. In this series, we are going to listen to some of those who actually knew Jesus when he walked the hills of Galilee. For four weeks, we are going to be in the first chapter of John's gospel. . . . That's right. Four weeks - one chapter. But, you see, this single chapter contains testimony after testimony about Jesus, each seeking to help you know who Jesus really is.²

John's gospel was probably the last to be written, about 60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. And though the gospel does not name its author, Christian tradition holds that the author was the youngest of the disciples, John, who refers to himself as the "beloved disciple" in the writing. He was an eyewitness to it all.³ And he is the only gospel writer to tell us why he wrote his own story of Jesus:

¹ From McKnight's article, "The Gospel for iGens," in *Leadership* journal, summer, 2009.

² You've probably noticed that I keep referring to Jesus in the present tense. I do so because when we come seeking to know the real Jesus, we are seeking a living person, not some historical personage. Yes, Jesus walked the hills Galilee almost two thousand years, but he also lives now, for he was resurrected by God after his death on the cross.

³ In the 20th Century, many scholars began to argue against the claim that John was the author or even that the Beloved Disciple was the author (see John 21:24-25). However, Richard Bauckham has recently demonstrated the weakness of many of these claims in his important book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.

³⁰Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Thus, the entire gospel is focused on this question of Jesus' identity, even its very first words.

In the beginning

John begins his remarkable writing with the simple, yet profoundly challenging words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." New Testament scholar N.T. Wright helps us to see the significance of John's word choice:

[John begins with] the unforgettable opening words: 'In the beginning was the Word.' At once we know that we are entering a place which is both familiar and strange. 'In the beginning'—no Bible reader could see that phrase and not think at once of the start of Genesis, the first book in the Old Testament: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' Whatever else John is going to tell us, he wants us to see his book as the story of God and the world, not just the story of one character in one place and time. This book is about the creator God acting in a new way within his much-loved creation. It is about the way in which the long story which began in Genesis reached the climax the creator had always intended.

And it will do this through 'the Word'. In Genesis 1, the climax is the creation of humans, made in God's image. In John 1, the climax is the arrival of a human being, the Word become 'flesh'.

When I speak a word, it is, in a sense, part of me. It's a breath that comes from inside me, making the noise that I give it with my throat, my mouth and my tongue. When people hear it, they assume I intended it. 'But you said ...', people comment, if our deeds don't match up to our words. We remain responsible for the words we say.

And yet our words have a life which seems independent of us. When people hear them, words can change the way they think and live. Think of 'I love you'; or, 'It's time to go'; or, 'You're fired'. These words create new situations. People respond or act accordingly. The words remain in their memory and go on affecting them.

In the Old Testament, God regularly acts by means of his 'word'. What he says, happens—in Genesis itself, and regularly thereafter. 'By the word of the Lord', says the psalm, 'the heavens were made' (33:6). God's word is the one thing that will last, even though people and plants wither and die (Isaiah 40:6–8); God's word will go out of his mouth and bring life, healing and hope to Israel and the whole creation (Isaiah 55:10–11). That's part of what lies behind John's choice of 'Word' here, as a way of telling us who Jesus really is.⁴

And then John goes on, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." Jesus as the creator of the universe? Yes, this is John's claim. Bear in mind that John was a Jew and, hence, radically monotheistic in a pagan, polytheistic world. Yet, John has this to say about a man whom he had lived beside for nearly three years. To this day, many Christians have trouble truly embracing that nothing was made without Jesus. The Creator born to a young woman from Galilee? It seems preposterous.

Yet, such claims about Jesus began to be made not long after his death and resurrection. More than thirty years *before* the writing of John's gospel, a Pharisee-turned-apostle named Paul wrote the following about Jesus:

¹⁵The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:15-17)

⁴ Wright, Tom. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10* (3–4). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Jesus makes such claims about himself as well one day in the courtyards of the Jerusalem temple:

¹⁹ Jesus gave them [his accusers] this answer: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. ²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed. ²¹ For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. ²² Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. (John 5:19-23).

Jesus’ listeners that day knew that when Jesus spoke of the “Father,” he was speaking of the LORD God, who had created everything, revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush, and saved the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. And, yet, Jesus claims that whatever God does, he does; that he can only do what God does. That as God has the power of life, so Jesus has the power of life. That as God judges, Jesus judges. Whoever dishonors Jesus, dishonors God. . . . No wonder that some of Jesus’ fellow Jews were plotting to get rid of him. Jesus’ blasphemy couldn’t be tolerated. And blasphemy it simply had to be, for such claims couldn’t actually be true could they? In his commentary on the gospel of John, D. A. Carson puts it well: “In a theistic universe, such a statement belongs to one who is himself to be addressed as God, or to stark insanity.”

Just like me?

How could anyone sincerely claim that Jesus is “just like me”? Frankly, it makes more sense to dismiss Jesus and the claims about him as so much nonsense or religious fancy than it does to claim to know Jesus and yet also claim that he is “just like me.” As best I can figure, such a claim could only be made out of ignorance about the claims made by Jesus and about Jesus.

It is essential to understand John’s claim: “In the beginning was *Jesus*, and *Jesus* was with God, and *Jesus* was God.” For 2,000 years Christians have proclaimed John’s message that, yes, Jesus is the full revelation of God. Knowing Jesus is knowing God. And if we are right about this, then, of course, how could one claim to be “just like” Jesus. Indeed, how could someone claim to know God and yet deny Jesus the Creator. He is not merely one of the great prophets. He is not merely a great teacher and rabbi. He didn’t come merely to show us a better way of living. Jesus is the incarnation of the one true God, the God of Abraham and of Moses.

As we go through John’s gospel, we’ll see that John wants to force us into a choice. Are we for Jesus or are we against Jesus. For John, there is no middle ground, no “we’ll see” or “perhaps.” John sees light and darkness, and he calls his readers to step into the light of the Word.

With all this, Christians today are left with only a few choices.

1. We could simply shut up and enjoy our own private relationship with Jesus. But, then, how could we ever do as Jesus instructed us: “Go and make disciples of all nations”? No . . . the Christian proclamation of the Good News is meant for the whole world. Shutting up isn’t really an option.
2. We could change our claims about Jesus to make him more “acceptable” to non-believers, whether it is “Buddy Christ” or “Big Bank Jesus.” Of course, it wouldn’t really be Jesus, but at least we’d all just get along.
3. Or, we could learn what it is we Christians have claimed about Jesus for most of the last two millennia and then state it boldly and lovingly to all who would hear.

For the Beloved Disciple, John, the last option is the only choice we could even consider!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The genesis of the “Just Like Me?” sermon series was Scot McKnight’s observation that iGens’ self image is so robust that they think Jesus is just like them. Discuss your reaction to this statement. In brief, in what ways do you think Jesus is just like you? In what ways is he not?
2. John’s first claim about Jesus is clear, bewildering but clear: Jesus, the Word, is God. But what if John is wrong and Jesus isn’t really God? Why do you think the early church fought so hard to protect the claim of Jesus’ genuine divinity? What happens to the Good News if Jesus isn’t really and truly and fully God?
3. People don’t really talk about Jesus very much, and if they do, they often fall back on pat phrases. In these last minutes of the discussion, discuss how you could get better at simply talking about Jesus, the same way we’d talk about anyone else. What do you think holds us back? How could we help one another become better conversationalists about our faith and about our Lord?

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Deuteronomy 6:4-9 A prayer Jesus would have been taught as a boy.	Tuesday, John 5:19-23 What would it make you if you do everything God does and God does everything you do?
Wednesday, John 10:22-42 Jesus makes these extraordinary claims himself. He and the Father (God) are one!	Thursday, Ephesians 4:1-6 One, one, one, one. There is unity in God.
Friday, Hebrews 1:1-5 What would it make you if you were the exact representation of God’s being?	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle’s Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

We are studying the gospel of John.

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands in its own.

This is very “drop-in.” Bring a lunch if you like. Bring a study Bible.

Coming – beginning January 23

Dr. Engle will begin a weekly Bible study that will meet every Monday evening from 6:45 to 8:00 in Piro Hall.

The first course will be *Paul and the Galatians*.

Scott’s 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The class is usually led by Dr. Scott Engle and is organized into series:

Beginning Jan 8: a four-week series with Rev. Arthur Jones

Whose Jesus is the Real Jesus?:

The Gospels and Other Takes on the Son of God

Beginning Feb 5: a four-week series with by Dr. Scott Engle

Sin: A History

The story of sin and forgiveness from Genesis to now