

### John 1:1–13 (NRSV)

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

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

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

### Romans 1:1–4, 16–17, 3:21–26 (NRSV)

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,<sup>2</sup> which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures,<sup>3</sup> the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh<sup>4</sup> and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,

<sup>16</sup>For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.<sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

<sup>21</sup>But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets,<sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ<sup>a</sup> for all who believe. For there is no distinction,<sup>23</sup> since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;<sup>24</sup> they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,<sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed;<sup>26</sup> it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

*At the end of Act 3 all appeared lost. God's people had shown themselves to be faithless countless times, unable to live up to their end of the covenant with God. Did that mean God's promises would go forever unkept? Or would God find a new way?*

### Our story so far

We are looking at the entire biblical story as if it were a six-act play. This week, we come to Act 4, the story of a promise kept.

*Act One*      *Act Two*      *Act Three*      *Act Four*      *Act Five*      *Act Six*  
Creation → Fall → Israel → Jesus → The church → Renewal of creation

In Acts 1 and 2, God creates everything, including humans in God's image. All is good until the humans rebel against God, seeking to be like gods themselves. This rebellion not only destroys the humans' relationship with God but even damages God's creation. In Act 3, God sets out on a new course. The creator of the cosmos chooses one couple through whom all peoples would be blessed. God would save them and curse them without end. God made

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<sup>a</sup>or *through the faith of Jesus Christ* [This footnoted translation is now dominant among North American Pauline scholars, including Grieb, Keck, Hays, and N. T. Wright. I believe that this “faith of Jesus Christ” translation is one of the keys to a truer and more meaningful reading of Romans].

a covenant to protect and preserved them, asking only two things in return, that they love God and love one another. But the people of God would remain rebellious and sinful, understanding little about what it really means to love.

So, when the curtain closes on Act 3 the question is this: Because God's people have proved unable to live up to their end of the covenant, would God's covenant promises of restoration and renewal go forever unkept?

And when the curtain rises on Act 4, we find the story of a young Jewish maiden and the most extraordinary birth imaginable. We have come to the story of Jesus.

### *Approaching Jesus*

Jesus was thoroughly and completely Jewish<sup>b</sup>, born into first-century Judaism, with all its tensions and hopes. Much of Jesus' teachings and many of his actions only make sense in light of the beliefs and lives of first-century Jews. There are three keys to putting Jesus in the context of the biblical story.

1. We need to remember the purpose of the covenant God had made with his people. God had chosen Israel and through them all of creation would be renewed, salvation and peace would be brought to all, and God's kingdom would return to the earth. Thus, we should not be surprised that Jesus had more to say about the kingdom of God than any other subject. Jesus' healings were an enactment of God's kingdom, in which the blind would see and the oppressed would be set free. (see Luke 4:14-30, for Jesus' first public teachings and pronouncements about the arrival of God's kingdom)
2. If Israel was the God-chosen agent of creation's redemption, then the obvious question is *who* constitutes Israel. Israel was the nation of God's people, not a nation in the modern-day sense, but a people brought together under a covenant with God. God's people were those who worshipped the LORD God, who kept the Sabbath, circumcised their male children, obeyed God's dietary laws, and so on. Keeping God's law was the badge of membership in the people of God.
3. So . . . the Jews, the people of God, believed in one God who had created all that is and had chosen them, the knowers and keepers of God's law! They believed that one day the whole world would see that they had been right and that they would be the ones through whom the world would be reconciled with God. BUT . . . it sure didn't look like it. By Jesus' day, the Jews had lived under foreign oppressors for more than 500 years. This is the driving tension in the Old Testament. Much of the story of Judaism in Jesus' day is the story of Jewish attempts to force God's hand, to try to make the fulfillment of all God's promises come true.

### *Act 4 – The story of Jesus*

The basics of Jesus' life can be told briefly and are agreed upon by all but the most skeptical of historians:

In about 6BC<sup>c</sup>, a young Jewish woman gave birth to a baby and named him Jesus. When this Jesus was around 30, he began a public ministry of teaching, proclaiming, and miracle-doing. Jesus' growing confrontation with the Jewish leadership culminated in his crucifixion by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, in about 30AD. After his death, some of Jesus' followers claimed that he had been resurrected.

That seems a pretty sparse telling, but the bare facts, about which most people agree, believer and non-believer alike, are pretty simple. But what did it all mean? Did Jesus die a

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<sup>b</sup>It is sometimes for us to wrap our brains around this. Jesus was Jewish, as were all of his disciples, the apostle Paul, and all believers for at least ten years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The Jesus movement was a Jewish movement through and through. Indeed, Paul was even a Pharisee before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Paul considered himself a Jew until the day he died, one that had met and come to believe the Jewish Messiah, Jesus.

<sup>c</sup>Don't be thrown off by this. Though our calendars were built with Jesus' birth at 1AD, the calendar makers got some things wrong. We know that Herod the Great, who ordered the Bethlehem massacre of infant boy, died in 4BC. Hence, Jesus had to be born before that.

tragic figure, a failed would-be Messiah? Or was Jesus truly resurrected? And if, so what would that mean?

### The Good News

The Gospel of Mark was the first gospel written. In Mark, the first words by Jesus are, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). Any first-century Jew would have heard these words as a proclamation that the story of God's people was coming to a climax. In the Greek, "good news" or "gospel" is *evangelion*. This was not a "church word." Instead, the *evangelion* was a proclamation that a new emperor had been borne, had taken the throne, or won an important military victory. This proclamation was carried to the Roman provinces by heralds, or messengers.

The Good News, or *evangelion*, that Jesus brings is the claim that Jesus is Lord; not Caesar or anyone else. This proclamation, that all other claims to lordship are false, set Jesus up in direct competition with Caesar and with those who would deny that "the kingdom of God has come near."

Each of the four gospels provides an interpretation of the story of Jesus. Likewise, the rest of the New Testament provides additional interpretation of Jesus, both the person and the event. Proclaiming that, yes, Jesus was actually resurrected by God, the NT writers explore the meaning and implications of this, for the world and for each of us.

If Act 3 in our play is the story of a tragedy, that of a people unable to simply love God and one another, than what is Act 4? Let's take a look at the Christian answer to some of these questions.

### *The meaning of Jesus?*

Why was Jesus born? For what purpose? Why did God humble himself, taking on a full-blooded humanity? If your answer to these questions is "to save us," you are right so far as it goes. But God's rescue involves far more than just us. It is the keeping of promises that God made long before, way back at the beginning of Act 3. Seeing Jesus as the keeping of a promise is essential to grasping the biblical story. Here's how it works.

Jesus and Paul lived in a time of great turmoil, as many Jews resisted Roman rule. They remembered God's extravagant promises and awaited the day when God would finally keep his promises, when, as written the scroll of Jeremiah, "I [God] will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

But they had waited a long time and it was natural for some to wonder if God's promises would forever go unfulfilled. The Jews knew that they weren't really keeping their end of the covenant God had made with them – they didn't really love God and neighbor every day.

Yet, *God had made the promise*. And, for Paul, God is righteous and keeps the promises he makes. And in Jesus, God had kept those promises – through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the way out of the covenant dilemma. In a sense, Jesus was the "righteousness of God" in the flesh. Despite the unwillingness or inability of the Jews to live up to the covenant and to be the light to the world, God had provided the means of covenant-keeping. This means was Jesus Christ, the one Jew who did truly love God and love neighbor without fail. Jesus' own faithfulness all the way to the cross revealed that God is not only the promise maker, but the promise keeper. In Christ, God's covenant people had been restored to a right relationship with God. Hence, they had been saved. And who are these covenant people? Namely those who have faith in Jesus Christ.

To reiterate, God's righteousness (his covenant faithfulness) was revealed to the world through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, for the rescuing of all who believe. Our claim is this: God's saving justice, his covenant faithfulness, was unveiled in the person of Jesus Christ.

### *But a crucified Messiah?*

Because we believe that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and was also crucified, it is hard for us to grasp that for any first-century Jew, *crucified Messiah* was an oxymoron, i.e., a combination of contradictory words. So far as the Jews were concerned, there was simply no way that God's Messiah could end up on a Roman cross. Such an idea was absurd, foolish, crazy. The fact that Jesus ended up dead on a cross could mean only one thing – that he wasn't the Messiah, that once again the hopes of Israel had been dashed upon the rocks of Roman reality. On that dark Friday afternoon, anything that we might call a "Jesus movement" collapsed. The disciples went into hiding, fearful that they too would be picked up by the Jewish leadership or the Romans.

When Jesus is raised to new life by God, it is the *proof* that although Jesus was crucified by the Romans he was, nonetheless, God's Messiah. It is the resurrection that turned the phrase *crucified Messiah* from an absurdity into a revelation of God's love and faithfulness.

We shouldn't be surprised that the apostles met so much resistance as they worked to carry this Good News. As Paul put it, "we proclaim Messiah crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks [meaning simply, non-Jews]" (1 Cor.1:23).

The resurrection of Jesus was his vindication, the proof that he was right all along and that the salvation of Israel and hence the whole world had been won through his journey of suffering, shame, and death. The resurrection is the reason why there are Christians at all. Had Jesus' death been the end of the story, there would be no Christians, no teachings preserved, no stories told.

Yet, for all that, the resurrection is not the climax of the story; it was not the place of God's victory over sin and death. That place was the cross. Here again is Paul: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

### *The Good in Good Friday*

But how could that be? How could God's victory be won via Jesus' death? How could it be that our reconciliation with God is accomplished on that cross?

These questions swirl around the word, "atonement." You can think of it as "at-one ment," putting us "at-one" with God, i.e., putting our relationship right. It is a relational idea and speaks to our relationship with God.

Though the NT writers are clear that this atonement has been accomplished via the cross, they do not offer any single theory of how it works. Instead, we get various images. For example, one image is grounded in the courtroom: Jesus stands in our place and takes the punishment that is our due. Another image is taken from the slave-market: God redeems us from our bondage. Yet another image is that of a pardon, taken from the language of kings. None of these images tell the whole story by themselves; together, they provide a rich picture of how it is that Jesus put us right with God.

### *Putting it all together*

Here is a way to tell the story that I think is faithful to the biblical writings and puts the credit for our salvation where it belongs, not on us but upon God:

God made a promise to Abraham that the world would be put right and that it would be done through his own family, indeed, that all the families of the earth would be blessed through them. And God rescued Abraham's family from slavery in Egypt, making a covenant with them, teaching them how to live in right relationship with God and one another. He would be their God, they would be his people, and one day the world would be put right; justice and mercy would remake the planet.

God's teaching boiled down to two things: love God and love neighbor. Yet, tragically, this love-filled life proved impossible for God's people. They chased after other gods and they failed to love their neighbors every day. They even lost sight of who their neighbors were.

They forgot that all the families of the earth were to be blessed through them. They imagined that they had some sort of exclusive claim on God.

It became sadly evident that God's promise to restore and renew the cosmos could not be kept, for his people could not keep their end of the bargain. So what did that mean, would God's promise stay an unfulfilled promise forever?

In a word, no. God would provide one Jew who would be utterly faithful to the covenant, loving God and loving neighbor every day and in every way. God, in the person of Jesus, would do and be for Israel what Israel was unable to do and be for herself.

Of course, such love put Jesus on a collision course with the powers of this world, who had long forgotten God's ways. Jesus' path would take him to that cross. It had to, for the only way off that path was for Jesus to abandon the vocation given him by God. But, instead, Jesus was faithful all the way to the cross. The covenant had been kept by this one faithful Jew and the restored relationship of this kept covenant can be ours, if we only trust Jesus and embrace him as our representative Messiah, the one whose faithfulness revealed that God is not only the great promise-maker but the great promise-keeper.

And how do we know that this is a true story? Because God raised Jesus to new life and gave him dominion over the heavens and the earth. Alleluia!

*Looking ahead*

Next week, we go on to Act 5. This is the Act in which you and I live; we are part of the story. God forms the believers into a Church, empowering them to be the light to the world and to make disciples. It is time for all the world to come to the LORD God!

### ***Daily Bible Readings***

**Monday, Matthew 1** Jesus is born.

**Tuesday, Matthew 5-7** A summation of Jesus' teachings – the Sermon on the Mount.

**Wednesday, Matthew 21:1-17** Jesus enters Jerusalem as Messiah and cleanses the temple.

**Thursday, Matthew 27** Jesus' trial, crucifixion, death, and burial.

**Friday, Matthew 28** Jesus' resurrection and the commissioning of the disciples.

**Saturday, John 10:1-18** Jesus, the good shepherd.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

My experience is that we tend to have a lot of pat phrases that we fall back on when it comes to talking about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. "Jesus paid for my sins." "We are washed in the blood of the lamb." Such phrases have their purpose but they can blind us to other ways, biblical ways, of thinking about God's work in Jesus.

What are some phrases that you've used or heard others use? What do you think they mean? If you are talking about this as part of a group, you might make a list of them. You might even try categorizing them. Which phrases are you most comfortable with? Which ones make you uncomfortable? Why? Which ones surprise?

You might go on to discuss the story of Jesus as I told it at the end of the study. How well do you think this story fits with what you've heard or been taught over the years? How well does it fit with your own reading of Scripture? What do you think it highlights? What do you think it leaves out? Do you think it would be helpful to someone trying to make sense of Jesus' death? It helps me understand that Jesus' death was not arbitrary, but the unavoidable consequence of Jesus' faithfulness to God. Do you see this too?

Finally, the story as I told it requires us to embrace Jesus as our representative, the one who has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. How do you think Jesus can be our representative? We are human after all and Jesus is God. Your answer will reveal why the Christians have always held fast to the claim that Jesus is fully and completely human, just as he is fully and completely God.

