



## JOHN: A PORTRAIT OF JESUS

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John 1:1-19

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For the past three weeks in this sermon series, I have discussed how Jesus is portrayed in Matthew, Mark and Luke, or what are called the synoptic gospels. I have talked about Jesus as the inspiring teacher in Matthew challenging us to be our best. Jesus as the man of power and action urgently intervening on our behalf in Mark. In Luke, we heard of a Jesus who is the master host, ever welcoming us and widening the circle of who is invited to the party.

Each of these three gospels begins the story of Jesus with his human origins. We get a genealogy, a couple of birth narratives, and Jesus being baptized. In the gospel of John, it is like we are given a view of Jesus with a wide-angle lens. The conversation does not begin with Jesus in the flesh. There is no cooing infant to be found here. Instead we are transported back to the dawn of time. Echoing Genesis we hear, “In the beginning...” We are told that Jesus Christ was present at the creation of all that is and in fact all that is was created through him. His work did not begin in the dusty streets of ancient Palestine but before there was even a world to walk upon. And the metaphors begin to cascade, as they will throughout this Gospel. Jesus will refer to himself as the “bread of life,” “the door,” “the good shepherd,” “the true vine,” “the resurrection and the life,” and “the way” among others. Here at the start of the gospel, Jesus Christ is called “the Word” and “the light.”

The gospel of John is less concerned with giving us some form of accurate biography of Jesus. John has rearranged the events of Jesus’ life that the other



three gospels agree upon. Instead he is seeking to grapple with the metaphysical mystery of Jesus' identity as one who is both God and human.

Perhaps the most telling of the metaphors that John uses to explore this mystery is "light." In John, Jesus the Son and God the beloved parent are bound at the hip. Over and over again we hear Jesus say such things as "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." In the other gospels there are moments when Jesus appears to struggle with a potential distance from God but this never happens in John. When you are in the presence of Jesus you are always undoubtedly in the presence of God.

When John speaks of Jesus being the light of the world, he is telling us that Jesus illuminates God's presence in our midst. Jesus allows us to see God. In John, when Jesus calls the disciples, he says to them, "Come and see." In John, the miracles that Jesus performs are called signs because they provide a picture of God's power at work in the world. When Philip asks Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." Jesus responds, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

It is light that lets us see. It is interesting in Genesis when we hear about the creation of the world, God creates light before we need it. Light is created before any creature with eyes even exists. It is a proleptic gift, a gift in anticipation of what we will need. And so it is with John's description of Jesus' origins. We do not hear of his birth into a broken world. We hear of his existence before the world began. Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God's grace, existed before we even needed grace, before anyone at all had ever made the smallest mistake, had ever even had the opportunity to turn away from the divine. Redemption was woven into the very fabric of creation.

In the gospel of John, the victory over all that threatens us, our broken-ness, our mistakes, even death itself, is already assured. In the presence of light, darkness will never prevail. This metaphor of light has lost some of its punch over the



centuries. Light was a much more valuable commodity before electricity and the light bulb. When light was only found with sunshine, campfires and candles, our dependence upon it was much more obvious. Nowadays we need to be reminded that without light we would literally be stumbling around in the dark.

Yet as common as light has become in this world we still do not fully understand it. Scientists still debate whether it travels as a wave or stream of particles. Could it possibly be both? As vital and important as it is to our basic existence, it is still a mystery.

We can see why light is the perfect metaphor for John to use for Jesus. It is something we need so deeply and yet still do not fully understand. Was Jesus merely a man who was a wise teacher? Was he God only pretending to be a man? Could he possibly be both? As vital and important as Jesus Christ is to us, he is still a mystery.

But here is the other thing about light. It may literally allow us to see but it does not guarantee what we see. In a short story by Eudora Welty, she has one of her characters, a traveling preacher, utter this plea, “Lord, give me the strength to see the angels when I am in paradise...Do not let my eyes remain in this failing proportion to my loving heart always.” Jesus may be the light of the world. He may be illuminating the divine in our midst but our eyes are not always all that good at recognizing God in the midst of the everyday.

I am continually struck by how many different perspectives people can have when they are looking at the same thing. And I am even more taken by how, depending on our mood, we can see the same scene in vastly different ways. One can come home at the end of the day and walk into an apartment strewn with children’s toys and despair the clutter and chaos. Or one can walk into the same scene and experience joyful gratitude for the blessing of a bustling family.

The writer Neil Gaiman captures this sentiment in his usual dark manner. A character in one of his short stories says this, “I’ve heard we see the world not as it



is but as we are. My landlady told me she would not willingly walk upon the beach for it was littered with weapons: huge, hand-fitted rocks each ripe for striking.” (Gaiman, p. 67) Later in the story the landlady murders the narrator. An absurd and disturbing example, but it does speak to how much who we are affects what we see. One person’s resort location is another’s potential murder scene. What do we see when we look at the world? The preacher Tom Long once said, “If you can see the kingdom of Heaven, you’ll drop your nets and follow.” He goes on to suggest that our failure to follow Christ is not really so much a failure of will but a failure of religious imagination.

Some days my religious imagination has its mojo going. As I meet and speak with people I have the sense that the Holy Spirit is indeed at work. The possibility of God’s presence is tangible. And then there are other days when I am doing the very same things, sitting in the same meetings, speaking to sometimes the very same people and I have no sense that God is present.

My personal antidote to this malaise is to slip into the sanctuary for a few minutes. The sanctuary can be a distinctly different space depending upon the time of day and the angle of the sunlight coming through the windows. Because our sanctuary faces east, the early morning sunshine pouring through the balcony windows can be stunning. It fills the room with warmth and energy that no electric light ever could. There is something about that sunlight streaming in that makes it a little easier for me to envision God at work in the world. It gives a little jump to my imagination. It lets me see the possibilities of the divine in our midst. In ancient times it was custom to orient all churches toward the east so they could welcome the arrival of the light on each new day.

These days it seems that each week brings us yet another violent tragedy in our world. As we mourn victim after victim, it is easy to be awash in a tidal wave of fear and anger. It is easy to doubt the presence of God. It is easy to be bereft of hope.



But even in the midst of this, we are reminded that redemption is indeed woven into the very fabric of creation. “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it.” Before time began, a promise was made that all would be redeemed and made whole once more. When we trust in that promise we can see that ultimate solutions are not found in division or in violence, but in the actions and words of the light of the world who spoke to us in John saying, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

When we cannot find the presence of God in our world or in our lives; when we cannot see how God is possibly present; when our imagination refuses to allow us to find the divine in our daily comings and goings we can turn to the gospel of John.

In the gospel of John, Jesus is that sunshine streaming through our sanctuary windows. He is the light. He is the one who provides the illumination that we may see divine possibilities. Jesus is the one who is so enmeshed with all of whom God is that his presence illumines for us a very different way to see the world. Jesus sparks our religious imagination. Jesus brings us a vision of the world that is infused by its loving Creator.

*Thanks be to God. Amen.*

Gaiman, Neil, *Trigger Warning: Short Fictions and Disturbances*, HarperCollins, New York, 2015.

