

Augusta First Baptist Church
John 1:1:1-18
God With Us...Just Ask John
December 24, 2006

John 1:1-18

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

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

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

[14] And 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. [15] (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ") [16] From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. [17] The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. [18] No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

We are here, the journey is almost complete. For four weeks we have made a pilgrimage alongside Matthew, Mark, Luke and today, John, and we have listened to their stories. Each one has shared with us the story of Jesus coming to this world to live among us as the very presence of God.

Today, as we conclude this series we listen to John's story. John is unique in many ways from the other gospels. In fact, Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the synoptic Gospels because the three Gospels roughly parallel one another. They are a synopsis of one another. They have their unique qualities, but overall are similar. John, however, is quite unique with very few parallels with the other three.

As we consider Jesus coming into the world, John does not begin with an Angel's announcement, or Mary's beatific response. John does not begin with a manager or shepherds or Magi. John, like Mark, does not tell us anything about the events surrounding the actual birth of Jesus. Like Mark, John has really nothing to say about how Jesus got here.

Unlike Mark, however, John does take us to a beginning; specifically *the* beginning. The first line of John is the very same as the first line in our first book in the Bible - Genesis: "*In the beginning.*" John says it this way: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*"

There are perhaps no other suitable parallels to this passage that come close to the poetry of John. In fact, the symbol of John is the eagle and one can see the appropriateness of this for these opening words take us to heights unmatched by any other writer. Out of all the gospels John is the more mystical, esoteric of the storytellers. He plays with the images of light and darkness, "*in the world, but not of the world,*" "*the Word with God, and is God,*" and so on. Particularly these first 18 verses known as the Prologue of John it is easy to get caught up in the transcendent picture of who Jesus is.

There are three things John tells us about God With Us...

God is Bigger Than We Think

Several years ago – more than forty years ago – J. B. Phillips published a book that was required reading when I was in seminary. The title is important for you and me this morning: Your God is too Small.

Have you ever considered that maybe we have made God too small for God's own good? We have made God into an idol of our own choosing: a law-enforcer, a dithering old man, a placid, pale Galilean, or even a Santa Claus ready to answer our wish list. We all at one time or another are guilty of putting God in a box.

The Gospel of John rips the lid off the box and reminds us that God – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Israel, God, who was in the beginning, and all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being – this God will not and cannot be contained, domesticated, truncated, controlled or manipulated.

John reminds us that the best we can do when speaking of God is in metaphor. God exceeds our language, our constructs and the very best and noble of our ideas. Indeed, God exceeds the deepest of our contemplations. *“In the beginning”...before the collision of matter, before the birthing of stars and particles and heat and life...” the Word was with God and the Word was God.”*

Fifteen or so billion years ago, astronomers and physicists tell us that the universe exploded into being. The nearest star besides the Sun is 4.3 light years away and there are many other stars billions of times further away. It boggles the mind to think that most of the stars we are seeing are ancient shards of light that has shined down hundreds, thousands even millions of years ago. John reminds us that before the stars gave us light, “In the beginning was the Word.”

Is your God too small? I am afraid many of us have made God in our own image and when that happens we stop believing in God, because we don't need to.

I must hasten to add, however, that if God is only transcendent, only Holy Other, Divine Thou, this Ancient of Days, we will eventually feel inconspicuous and lonely. And so, even in this poetic pronouncement the Gospel of John wants us to know:

God is Closer Than We Imagine

Geologists tell us that the planet earth may be as old as 7 billion years.

The Bible reminds us that before the earth's platelets shifted and continents came into being, before dinosaurs roared their terrible roars, before the first glint of light tore open the bulwark of darkness, there was God. And not only was there God, but this same God had a plan that when we humans came to walk the earth, even when we ourselves drew our first breath, we would not be alone. This is the Gospel of John's Christmas story.

Remember all the ruckus over the publication and later the movie *the Da Vinci Code*? The author, Dan Brown, fictitiously and misleadingly criticized the gospels as not emphasizing the humanity of Jesus. The author of *the Da Vinci Code* never read John.

John is not simply a gospel for the contemplative. John reminds us that this Son of God, this One who is light of which the darkness cannot comprehend, walked among us. [14] *And 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.*

As John Claypool phrased it, “God became who we are.”¹ God became visible, reachable, understandable.

The Word made flesh, the birth of Christ, means that God understands; *God is closer than we imagine*. All my life I have struggled against the image of God who is high and lifted up, far removed from my worldliness. God is Holy, God is Other, God is the great I AM. Now, of course all this is true, but if this is the only relationship we have with God then it is a limited relationship because it implies God is distant and detached and can in no way understand what is going on in our paltry lives.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God is not just above and beyond us, but right here among us.

God is Giving More Than We Receive

Sisters and brothers, this is grace incarnate.

Listen to the words of the gospel again: 1:16 *From his fullness we have all received, **grace upon grace**. 17 *The law indeed was given through Moses; **grace** and truth came through Jesus Christ.**

Did you catch that? We have all received it. We did not ask for it. We did not pay for it. We definitely did not earn it. No, we received it because God gave it. Grace is a gift. Pure and simple. It is a gift we receive. It is a gift we give. The Greek word for grace is which can also be translated as gift. When we talk about God, we are talking about grace.

Odd isn't it, that so many have this misunderstanding that God is the one who takes away. “Watch out, God is going to get you.” Take away the things in life that bring you happiness or joy or peace. We often interpret the death of someone using the words that God took my loved one away. Unfortunate.

I happen to believe that God is all about grace – all about giving. What better way to speak of Christmas than to speak not of what we need to be giving, but how we need to be receiving. I believe the giving part will come in due time if we learn to hear and believe and live out John's words: 16 *From his fullness we have all received, **grace upon grace**. 17 ... **grace** and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

Do you realize that the first time Jesus is named in the gospel of John it occurs here in verse 17? And what is the first thing the gospel writer wants us to understand and associate with this Jesus? How does he introduce it? **Grace**.

There was a movie out just a few years ago called *Pay it Forward*. Some of you may have seen it. The movie was essentially about a school teacher who gave the assignment to a junior high grade that for extra credit they are to come up with ways to make the world a better place. One child (the "star") came up with a method of spreading the love this way: when someone did something good for you, you were in turn to "pay it forward" to 3 other people--doing a good deed to three other people.

The other day I received an email from a member who helped volunteer with the Angel Tree Ministry...*Yesterday in the Activities Building, God was present. I could see Him in the eyes of every person giving grace and receiving grace. We all gave and we all received.*

¹ Taken from the radio broadcast “30 Good Minutes” first aired December 25, 1994.

A friend of mine, Joel Snider, who is the pastor of FBC Rome tells this story about Jodi Williams. Jodi Williams was the recipient of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize. This woman was a nobody. She wasn't the leader of some great organization. She was not the president of anything. She was a person with a passion. The passion that she had was that the use of land mines around the world is a travesty. She got the passion that if people got serious enough about it that maybe there could be something done about the danger of land mines left over after wars. So this woman, out of the blue, began to organize over a thousand different organizations, mainly unrelated organizations, on six different continents opposed by almost every major government in the world, and she changed the world. She got things enacted and people have responded. They have said, "Yes, we are not going to do this with landmines any more." She won the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize. Do you know what her secret was? When they asked her, "How did you organize all these people you never met before, all these organizations that are unrelated on six different continents," her answer was, "e-mail." She used e-mail.

Now listen. The text this morning is about grace – not just any grace but God's grace. Jodi Williams used e-mail, and we have the reality of grace. All she had was a computer and internet access, and we have the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, who has conquered sin and death and lives at the right hand of God to reign forever until He draws this age to a close in His favor. If she can win the Nobel Peace Prize with e-mail, what can a church with these resources do in the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ? What can't we do?

God with us: *God is bigger than we think; closer than we can imagine; giving more than we can receive.*