

The Gospel of John

Text: John 1

Reading: *Daring Faith*, pp. 27-43, 50

Prologue (1:1-18)

A. Jesus' Pre-Existence

1. Matthew and Luke each present the birth of Jesus and a genealogy. The Gospel of Mark dives right into the ministry of Jesus; the author gives no account of the birth of Jesus but begins with the preaching of John the Baptist. John's Gospel, like Matthew and Luke, has a preface to the account of the preaching of John the Baptist, but what a distinctive preface it is! No birth narrative! No virgin conception! No genealogy! Rather, the reader steps onto the stage of the cosmos. We begin "In the beginning."
2. The thrust of John's opening is not simply to remind one of Genesis. It is to show the pre-incarnate Christ co-existent with the Creating God. He was present with God and as God.
3. There is little doubt that John wants his readers to understand that the story that they are about to read is a story of a new creation of the same importance as the first creation of Genesis. It is a dramatic opening phrase and a dramatic beginning. The attention is on the Word and its activity. The Word is with God in the beginning. It participates in creation. It becomes flesh.

B. Life, Light, Darkness

1. John shifts the readers attention in verses 6-8 with the appearance of John the Baptist. John appears as a character before Jesus does because John's main role is to point to Jesus. He is a guide and witness to Jesus and his ministry. John will witness that Jesus is the light, the presence of God shining in the world.
2. Jesus comes from light. He challenged the darkness before creation and now challenges the darkness that is found, tragically, within creation itself. The Word is bringing into being the new creation, in which God says once more, "Let there be light!"
3. Perhaps the most exciting part about this opening passage is that we're in it too: "To anyone who did accept him" (v. 12)—that means anyone at all, then and now. You don't have to be born into a particular family or part of the world. God wants people from everywhere to be born in a new way, born into the family he began through Jesus and which has since spread through the world. Something can happen to people in life which causes them to become new people, people who (as v. 12 says) "believe in his name."

C. Incarnation

1. Christian doctrine speaks of the Word becoming flesh as the incarnation. The Gospel of John helps us to understand the origins of this important word. "Incarnation" is a transliteration of a Latin word; *carne* is "flesh" in Latin. *Incarnation* is the English form of that Latin word, and literally means "becoming in-flesh."
2. Every time we use language of "incarnation," we are actually saying the words of John 1:14, "the Word-become-flesh." The incarnation is the key to the Gospel of John, because for John, the fact that God now chooses to express Godself through a human being is the ultimate good news. God comes to us in the Word-made-flesh. This is what leads John to burst into the hymn that is the prologue.

This is the primary theme of John's Gospel: If you want to know who the true God is, look long and hard at Jesus. How does our understanding of God get off track when we try to think about who God is apart from Jesus?

The Testimony of John the Baptist (1:19-34)

- A. The remainder of John 1 is portrayed as a series of consecutive days. John 1:19-34 depicts two different days on which John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus. On the first day (vv. 19-28) John testifies that he is not the light; on the next day (vv. 29-34) John testifies to the light.
- B. John the Baptist is not a forerunner to Jesus or one who claims to be a prophet himself, but is the one who bears witness. This witness includes announcing the coming of the Lord (v. 23). John's entire ministry of baptizing and preaching has the sole function of pointing to Jesus (vv. 24-27).

One of the many points to ponder about John the Baptist is the way in which all Christians are called to the same attitude that John had. We don't preach ourselves, as Paul said, but we preach Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as servants for his sake (2 Corinthians 4:5). Or, as John put it, "I'm only a voice."

How might we follow the example of John the Baptist in our own lives?

- C. Jesus as the Lamb of God takes away "the sin of the world," **not** "the sins of the world" (v. 29). The singular noun "sin" is crucial to understanding John's words and to seeing Jesus as the liberating lamb of the Passover tradition.
 - 1. "Sin" as a singular noun refers to a broken relationship with God in which we all share equally, whereas "sins" in the plural can be used to point a catalog of individual misdeeds and "sinful" behaviors (some worse than others), which is not what John is saying here.
 - 2. In John, sin is not breaking the law, but the breaking of relationship. As the Passover Lamb, Jesus liberates the world from slavery to "sin" by bringing the world into new and fresh contact with the presence of God (i.e. a restored relationship), so that human alienation from God can end.

The First Disciples of Jesus (1:35-51)

Read John 1:35-51. Why do John the Baptist's disciples begin to follow Jesus?

- A. The next day again opens with John's witness (vv. 35-36) and repeats his words from verse 29. John's witness is not only reliable but also effective, because it leads others to Jesus.
 - 1. The gathering of Jesus' disciples on the two days of 1:35-51 models many patterns of discipleship that will continue throughout the Gospel: Jesus' first disciples in John come to him because John testified to them about Jesus.
 - 2. This pattern of discipleship, that **those who have received someone else's witness become witnesses themselves to Jesus**, continues through the rest of chapter 1, as each new disciple in turn goes and finds someone else.
 - 3. Andrew brings Peter to Jesus (vv. 41-42); Philip brings Nathanael (vv. 45-46). This pattern will repeat itself in John 4, when the Samaritan woman will testify to her townspeople about Jesus and lead them to him (4:29-30, 39-40).

- B. Another pattern is that disciples take initiative to seek Jesus, and Jesus responds to this initiative with both a question (“What are you looking for?”) and an invitation (“Come and see”). This pattern will be repeated throughout the Gospel: Nicodemus in John 3:1-11, the Greeks in John 12:20-26, Mary in the garden after the crucifixion (20:11-18).
- C. The call to Nathanael stands out in this sequence (vv. 45-49), because for the first time witness to Jesus is met with resistance.
1. What Nathanael thinks he knows about Jesus—that he is from Nazareth—determines what he is willing to accept about Jesus (“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”).
 2. Nathanael’s reaction introduces a theme that will be repeated throughout the Gospel: **People’s preconceptions about Jesus can stand in the way of a full experience of Jesus.**
 3. The Pharisees in John 9, for example, are so sure that they know who Jesus is that they do not see what he has done in the healing of the blind man. Even those who are the closest to Jesus can let their preconceived ideas get in the way of a fresh encounter with the Word-made-flesh.
 4. In another example, Martha is so sure about her understanding of the resurrection that she is not prepared for what Jesus will do for her brother Lazarus (11:39-40).

Nathanael, who comes from Cana (so John tells us in 21:2), can’t believe that anything good would come out of the rival village, Nazareth, a short distance up the hill (v. 46).

What kinds of prejudices or stereotypes prevent people from seeking Jesus today?

- D. Nathanael’s statement prompts Jesus to make his first real speech of the Gospel (vv. 50-51). He speaks words of promise about the things that the disciples are still to see: “You will see greater things than these” (v. 50). **This is a promise to the characters in the Gospel story, but it is also a promise to the Gospel’s readers. As the Gospel unfolds, story after story will demonstrate the truth of this promise of “greater things.”**

Reflection

1. What word, phrase, or event stands out to you in this story?
2. What do you think the story is saying to the audience that originally received it?
3. What is the story saying to us today?
4. What is the story calling us to believe?
5. What is the story calling us to do?

Points for Home

1. The incarnation is the key to the Gospel of John. For John, the fact that God now chooses to express Godself through a human being is the ultimate good news.
2. If you want to know who the true God is, look long and hard at Jesus. A decision about God is always a decision about Jesus.
3. Jesus is the Passover Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, restoring humanity’s relationship with God.
4. Those who receive someone else’s witness about Jesus often become witnesses themselves to Jesus.
5. Jesus invites us to “come and see” the “greater things” that he promises to do.

Sources:

Gail O'Day, *The Gospel of John*

NT Wright, *John for Everyone, Part 1*

R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*

Robert Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel*