

Message #3

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John

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THE WONDER OF THE INCARNATION

JOHN 1:14-18

I.

I was in Walmart this week and discovered that Christmas merchandise is already on the shelves. Since Halloween is over, Christmas is the next big holiday on the calendar. Thanksgiving comes first, but it does not seem that retailers have figured out a way to make money on that celebration.

While we might regret much of the commercialization of Christmas, we Christians can certainly appreciate the attention that is given to the story that is part and parcel of the occasion. For it is a wonderful story, and it is rooted in real history, and it has tremendous significance for every human being.

The original Christmas story is provided in two of the New Testament gospels--- in Matthew and in Luke. We don't tend to think of the Gospel of John as having the Christmas story. But the passage before us this morning is really the Christmas story in brief, with an important theological commentary intertwined with it.

We have begun a study of the Gospel According to John. We have noted a couple of key features of this biography of Jesus. This John is the Apostle of Jesus and brother of James. John was writing a couple of decades after the other gospels were composed. So he includes material that the others do not, and he omits much of the material that they include. The author also specifically describes the purpose of his book. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 20:30) In #20 v. 30 he writes, "**Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; (JOHN 20:31) but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**" The signs are miracles performed by Jesus. There are seven of them in this gospel, and John organizes his book around them.

Verses 1-18 of Chapter 1 form the prologue, or introduction, to the gospel. (PROJECTOR OFF) We have seen that John uses the term *logos*, or Word, to describe the Son of God. To secular Greeks this term pictured the inanimate force behind the universe. Jewish people may have thought of the God in Genesis who spoke the world into existence and the written Law which He provided for His Chosen People. In his use of terminology John implies a distinction in the Godhead, and he speaks of the Word in terms of light and life. Last time he introduced us to John the Baptist, the first witness to the coming of this divine Word.

II.

In v. 14 in our passage this morning we encounter THE WITNESS OF THE APOSTLE JOHN TO THE INCARNATION. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE WITNESS OF THE APOSTLE...) The Apostle John writes, "**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.**"

This is the first time in John's account that we have a specific indication that this divine Word is Jesus Christ. So what we have in the first line is the Christmas story in one sentence. This is also where we get the Latin terminology of incarnation, which refers to God becoming a human being.

To Greek audiences who had some awareness of the philosophers, this was an extraordinary claim. The *logos* was generally recognized as the inanimate force involved in the creation of the world. The claim that this Word had become flesh was a unique and unusual claim. John chooses an especially earthy word to describe this incarnation. He does not say that the Word simply became a man. He says that He became flesh. Some among the cultural elites of that day thought that matter was inherently evil. For the divine Word to become flesh was shocking.

To Jews who were familiar with the God who spoke the universe into existence and who connected the Word with the Torah, God's law, this was also an extraordinary claim. Many religious Jews were looking forward to the coming of a Messiah. But the expectation was that he would be a human being, not a God who took on human flesh.

Jewish ears also would have tuned into the choice of the verb "dwelt." Literally this verb said that the divine Word had tabernacled among them. He had set up His tent. To add to this picture, John speaks of beholding His glory.

This imagery pointed to the story of the exodus, when the Hebrews were freed from slavery in Egypt and led into the wilderness by Moses. At Mt. Sinai God gave them instructions through Moses that they were to construct a tent that was to be the focus of worship and to be the place where He would be manifested to His people. In Exodus #25 v. 8 (PROJECTOR ON--- EXODUS 25:8), God tells Moses, "**And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell---** in the Greek translation of the Old Testament this is the same word that appears in our verse--- **in their midst.**"

YHWH, the God of Israel, also revealed Himself to His people through a pillar of fire that led the people at night and a cloud that led them during the day. This manifestation of God's presence was later called the "Shekinah," which means "glory." (EXODUS 40:34) Thus we read in Exodus #40 vv. 34 & 35, "**Then**

the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. (EXODUS 40:35) And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it. and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." But now the Apostle John says that the divine Word has tabernacled among them and we--- he and his fellow apostles, and perhaps other disciples--- saw the manifestation of this divine glory.

Keep in mind that John is writing his gospel after 70 AD. (PROJECTOR OFF) It was in that year that the Romans destroyed the temple and killed thousands of Jews in Judea. Religious Jews were at a loss. How can God be worshiped according to the Torah when there is no temple or tabernacle? John's claim is that God has tabernacled among them in the form of a human being.

The natural question that the readers of this gospel would have is: How is it that John and his companions saw the glory of this divine Word? We might think of the Transfiguration when Peter and James and John saw Jesus on a mountain conversing with Moses and Elijah. It was said that the garments of Jesus became exceedingly white and radiant. But John does not record that experience. So my suspicion is that John is more generally referring to the signs that he will describe in this book, as well as the behavior and speech of Jesus and His death and resurrection.

This glory in v. 14 is also described as "glory as of the only Son from the Father." The word "Son" may be implied in this clause, but it does not actually appear in the original Greek text. Some of you may also have in your translations "the only begotten" instead of "only Son." That is not really a good translation. For it implies that the Son was begat, that He was created by birth at some point.

The Greek word in question is *monogenes*. (PROJECTOR ON--- MONOGENES) It involves the combination of *mono*, which means "one," and *genos*, which means "kind." We get the term in biology "genus" from this Greek word. So the word literally means "one of a kind." What is being described is an eternal relationship between God the Father and God the Son. We will explore this term and its significance in more detail when we get to John 3:16.

This one of a kind being was full of grace and truth. Moses encountered Him on Mt. Sinai. This truthful God provided Moses with the Ten Commandments along with further elaboration of divine law. He explained the seriousness of the sin of the Hebrew people in building and worshiping a gold calf. Yet He also displayed grace in not destroying these persistently sinful people.

In Jesus the Apostle John also saw grace and truth. The word "truth" appears 25 times in his gospel. John will record the claim of Jesus "I am the truth." He will tell the Samaritan woman at the well about her sin, yet He will display grace in not holding that against her. Eventually sin and truth will meet at the cross.

There are tremendous theological implications that come out of the claims of this verse. What does it mean that the Word, the Son of God, became flesh? How can God become a human being? What is the relationship between His divine nature and His human nature? The early church struggled to figure this out. Some tended to deemphasize His humanity. Some tended to deemphasize His deity.

In the Apostle John's day there were some who said that the Son of God only appeared to become a human. He wasn't completely human. This belief was known as Docetism. Another group later said that Jesus Christ already existed as a human being when the divine *logos* took the place of His human spirit. Because of His sinless devotion to God, He was adopted at His baptism or at His resurrection or at His ascension. This viewpoint was known as Adoptionism. Another group said that Jesus had only one nature. He really didn't have a human mind. Another group, called the Nestorians, said that because Jesus had both a divine nature and a human nature, He was really two persons.

There was a church council which was held in Chalcedon in Asia Minor in 451 BC. Out of this council came the formulation that has been accepted by the orthodox church of Christ ever since that describes the mystery of the Incarnation. (PROJECTOR ON--- COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON) It declares, **"Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man, united in one person forever, without confusion of his two natures."**

This is the Christmas story. The Son of God took on an additional nature in becoming a human being. By virtue of the involvement of the Holy Spirit, it was a sinless human nature. But forever afterward Jesus Christ is the God-man. He is not just God. He is also a human being. As man, he is qualified to be our representative. Thus He experienced a real human death when He was crucified. But because He was also God, His death has infinite value.

The author of the New Testament Book of Hebrews describes something of the significance of this. (HEBREWS 2:14) In Hebrews #2 vv. 14 & 15 he writes, **"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, (HEBREWS 2:15) and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."** Such is the good news of the Incarnation.

III.

In the remainder of the passage, we encounter THE WITNESS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST TO THE INCARNATION. (III. THE WITNESS OF JOHN THE...) In v. 15 we read, **"(John bore witness about him, and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.:'"**) The Apostle John, who wrote this gospel, never refers to himself by name in this book. The only John is John the Baptist. So this identifying description included in the other gospels is not recorded here.

In all four of the gospels the public ministry of John the Baptist is portrayed as preceding that of Jesus. In antiquity it was generally understood that chronological priority also indicated superiority of rank. But John the Baptist is careful to deny that in this case. He clearly testifies that Jesus has a superior rank. For He existed before John, as v. 1 of our chapter indicated: **"In the beginning was the Word."**

You will notice that the ESV translation in the black Bibles puts v. 14 in parentheses. Many commentators also understand this verse to be a parenthetical statement. Early Greek writers did not use any punctuation at all. So in a situation like this, it is a judgment call as how to understand this verse. If it is a parenthetical statement, then the rest of the paragraph is the commentary of the Apostle John.

To me it seems that the natural way to understand the next three verses is that the Apostle John is continuing to quote the testimony of John the Baptist. Beginning in v. 35 of this chapter the Apostle John will describe the disciples of John the Baptist. Most commentators understand the unnamed disciple of John the Baptist in these verses to be the author of this gospel, who later becomes the disciple of Jesus. If this is indeed the case, then the Apostle John was exposed firsthand to the teaching of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was a prophet. His primary job was to set the stage for the appearance of Jesus. So it seems very believable to me that John the Baptist could have uttered the words of these next three verses.

So v. 16 reads, **"For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."** If these are the words of John the Baptist, then he cannot have been speaking about the completed life of Jesus. He would have been talking to fellow Jews about the Son of God who has become a human being. The word "grace" does not appear in the rest of John's gospel. John does not seem to use this word himself. But it could have been a subject that John the Baptist spoke about.

The commentators and Greek grammar experts have slightly different understandings about the meaning of the expression "grace upon grace." It probably involves the idea that this Son of God has provided grace and even more grace.

If John the Baptist was telling fellow Jews that they had received the divine Word's fullness and had received grace, and even more grace, from Him, in what sense could that be true? He must have been talking about the preincarnate Christ, the Son of God before He became a human being. Most students of the Scriptures recognize that the term "angel of the Lord" refers to the preincarnate Christ. In Exodus #14 v. 19 the Bible says that it was the angel of the Lord who was leading the Hebrew people in the wilderness. In 1 Corinthians #10 v. 9 the Apostle Paul says that the Hebrew people put Christ to the test in the wilderness of Sinai.

So it was indeed true that the Jewish people had received fullness from the Son of God in the Old Testament. He had blessed them in many ways. They had also received grace upon grace. The Son of God was involved in rescuing the Hebrew people from their slavery in Egypt. He sustained them in the wilderness. He put up with their grumblings and rebelliousness. When they built and worshiped a gold calf, he refrained from wiping them out. His grace extended into the time of the kings and the prophets. Now this grace was displayed in the incarnation.

In Colossians #2 vv. 9 & 10 (COLOSSIANS 2:9-10) the Apostle Paul describes something of the fullness that resides in Jesus. He writes, "**For in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.**" The implication for us is that when we are connected to Jesus, we have abundant resources available to us. There is no situation that we face that is beyond the ability of Jesus Christ to provide what is truly needed for us. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 17: "**For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.**" We will see the Apostle John make several references to Moses in his book. Jesus will be compared to him. Moses was known for the law of God that was recorded by him. Jesus will be known for both grace and truth.

This is actually the first mention of the name of Jesus Christ recorded in the Apostle John's gospel. The only other time that the full name Jesus Christ appears is in #17 v. 3. There it is part of the recorded words of Jesus Himself. This could support the notion that v. 17 is recording the words of John the Baptist. For elsewhere John uses just the name "Jesus." That name "Jesus" appears 237 times in this gospel.

The law given through Moses was good. For it provided a way for God's people to worship Him. It also showed them their sin and their need for a Savior. Jesus was and is that Savior. He is characterized by grace and truth.

According to v. 18, "**No one has ever seen God, the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.**" This points us back to Moses' encounter with God on Mt. Sinai. It was there that he was given the Ten Commandments and the other details of God's Law. While he was on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments, his people below got tired of waiting for him. They built a gold calf to serve as an object of worship. Moses was disgusted when he found this on his return from the mountain. He threw down the tablets containing the commandments in disgust.

The Lord offered to destroy all of these people and to make a new nation out of the descendants of Moses. Moses pleaded with God to forgive the people. He did forgive them. Moses was stressed out by all of these challenges. He asked God to show him His glory. At the end of Exodus #33 He did. (EXODUS 33:20) But the Lord also says in v. 20, **"But, he said, 'you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.'"**

Earlier the Lord had appeared to Moses in the burning bush. All of the Hebrews saw the pillar of fire and the cloud. Later Isaiah will have a vision of God in #6 of his book. But all of these appearances were apparently partial and incomplete. They were all manifestations, or glimpses, at the God who is there. But John says that they were really not seeing the essence of God the Father. It was Jesus who was the best display of God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Here again in v. 18 we have the appearance of that term *monogenes*, "one of a kind." Some manuscripts have "one of a kind" Son. But the best evidence suggests that the original term was "one of a kind God." Here there is further evidence of a distinction in the Godhead. Also Jesus Christ is called "God" here.

He is said to be at the Father's side. Literally, the text says that He was "in the bosom of the Father." This was regarded as a place of special affection. Luke #16 Jesus tells the story about Lazarus and the rich man. When the rich man dies, he is said to be in hell. But from there he can see Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. The picture is that of the poor man being right beside Abraham in a place of privilege and honor.

The statement in our verse, v. 18, also points us back to v. 1, where the Word was said to be "with God." In v. 2 that affirmation is repeated. Someone who is in that position of privilege is fully qualified to tell people about God.

Thus John the Baptist claims that Jesus has made God the Father known. The Greek word is *exegesato*, from which we get the word exegesis. People go to seminary to learn how to exegete the Bible. In other words, we are taught how to explain the message of the Bible. Here we have the claim that Jesus is the Great Exegesis of God. He is the Great Explainer of God. In the book that follows, the Apostle John will explain what Jesus says about God.

IV.A.

Finally, we want to consider THE WITNESS OF THE INCARNATION TO US. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE WITNESS OF THE INCARNATION TO US) There are at least four lessons that I can see that we can get out of this passage. The first is that THE INCARNATION EXPLAINS GOD TO US. (IV. THE WITNESS... A. THE INCARNATION EXPLAINS...)

The Hebrew Bible tells us much about God. It describes some of His actions in human history. It tells us about our creation. The giving of His Law tells us about His justice and character. But when God takes on human flesh, we learn much more. We have a further record of His direct words and we have a record of His interaction with humans. We see God's compassion in being willing to become a human being--- to be born as a baby, to live life in this messy world and ultimately to die for us.

Jesus shows that God can be trusted. In Hebrews #4 v. 15 (HEBREWS 4:15) we are told, "**For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.**" The life and death of Jesus explains God to us.

B.

More specifically, THE INCARNATION SHOWS US HOW TO LIVE. (IV. A. B. THE INCARNATION SHOW US...)
Jesus told us about the two greatest commandments. We are to love God with all of our being, and we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. The history of the life of Jesus leaves us an example of how to do this. We see something about what it means to love God in Jesus' life of service and worship and prayer.

We see something of what it means to love our fellow human beings by the record of His actions with people. We see how He treats His friends and political authorities and religious leaders and enemies and family members.

C.

Thirdly, THE INCARNATION SHOWS US HOW THE TENSION BETWEEN GRACE AND TRUTH IS SOLVED. (IV. A. B. C. THE INCARNATION SHOWS US HOW THE...) Verse 16 speaks about how God has displayed grace upon grace. The Lord showed great patience toward Israel throughout the Old Testament. His people kept going astray. Yet God was gracious toward them.

Verse 14 speaks of grace and truth. The Law and God's actions showed the truth that God is holy. Sin requires punishment. This is a moral universe. Justice demands punishment for wrongdoing. God established a system of animal sacrifice that was designed to show the seriousness of sin. This system taught that the wages of sin is death. Yet the blood of sheep and goats could provide no final resolution for the problem of sin.

The ultimate solution was Jesus Christ, who was both man and God. He possessed two natures in one person. He was fully God, yet fully human, though He had no sin. So when He died on the cross, He was our substitute for the penalty of sin. As a human being, He could serve as our representative. As God,

His sacrifice could have universal value. Thus He bore the wrath of God against sin in our place. Truth and grace were displayed upon the cross.

Our one responsibility is to put our trust in this Jesus for what He has done for us. Verse 12 in the passage that we looked at last week describes our responsibility: **"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."** We are to receive Him and welcome Jesus into our lives. This responsibility is also described as believing in His name, putting our trust in Him for what He did in our behalf and for who He is.

D.

Finally, OUR LIVES ARE TO BE AN INCARNATION OF JESUS TO OTHERS. (IV. A. B. C. D. OUR LIVES ARE TO BE...) There is a song familiar to most of us that begins, "They'll know we are Christians by our love." We are to reflect the love of Jesus toward people around us. There is an increasing number of people in our world who do not know the Bible and who do not go to church. We may be the closest thing to Jesus that people around us will get. So we are to be a witness for Jesus to them.

Toward the end of John's gospel, after His resurrection, we find this exhortation to His disciples in #20 v. 21 (JOHN 20:21), **"Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.'"** Our responsibility is to grow in knowledge and character as Christians and to be witnesses to the people around us. Our lives are to be an incarnation of Jesus to others. (PROJECTOR OFF)