

“Presents and Presence”

John 1:14-18

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most profound statements in the Bible. Some scholars have actually referred to it as the single greatest verse in the New Testament.

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

Where is this text found in the Bible, and why is it so highly revered? It is a part of the prologue to the Gospel of John. In some ways, it is to the fourth gospel what the birth narratives are to Matthew and Luke’s gospels.

In Matthew and Luke, the birth narratives serve as an overture for the rest of these gospels. Every major theme found in Matthew and Luke is introduced in the birth narratives. It is a brilliant literary device.

The fourth gospel does not include any of the stories of Jesus’ birth like you find in Matthew and Luke. There is no manger and there are no sheep, shepherds or Wise Men.

Instead, John traces Jesus’ origin back to a time before the world even existed. For John, Jesus is a part of the uncreated realm who became the presence of God in our midst. The Creator of the world came to live among us. The Eternal One entered time and space.

This is why John’s gospel echoes the first words found in Genesis: “In the beginning...” For John, Jesus’ existed before the prophets, the patriarchs or even Adam and Eve. The One

who inhabited the heavens chose to come to earth to begin a new chapter in the relationship between God and humans.

So, in the first eighteen verses of John's gospel, the writer does the same thing Matthew and Luke do. He introduces Jesus to his readers and highlights many of the major themes found in his book, especially light, life, truth and grace.

My purpose today is not to address all eighteen verses of the prologue, and there are two reasons why. This is perhaps the most difficult passage in the New Testament to interpret, and I count myself among the many who struggle to explain all it means.

Secondly, I took a class on the Gospel of John when I was in the seminary. It was taught by renowned British scholar and theologian, Dr. George Beasley-Murray, and he spent two weeks talking about this single passage.

Knowing my audience as well as I do, I did not think anyone would be willing to carve out two weeks of this busy month to stay at church and tackle this text. What I would like to do this morning is focus on one verse of this magnificent passage to see how it speaks to us as we continue our pilgrimage through Advent.

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

What was John's message to his readers? The creative and governing force of the Universe, the Word, came to live among us in the form of a man called Jesus. We commonly refer to the divine becoming flesh as 'the Incarnation'.

Why would God do this? I believe God did this for two reasons. God wanted us to know him, and God wanted us to know he understood us.

Like every loving and responsible parent, God loves us and desires to have a close relationship with us that will last throughout all eternity. God wants to be known, and God wants us to trust him, the One who stands behind all reality.

God is eager for us to know the kind of life he envisioned for all of us when he created the world. The best way God could do this was to show us what he had in mind through the life and ministry of Jesus.

One of America's most brilliant physicists, J. Robert Oppenheimer, wrote, "The best way to send an idea is to wrap it up in a person." This is precisely what God did for us.

Through Jesus, the One full of grace and truth, God showed us what to value and how to arrange our priorities. As a man dedicated to reflecting the nature of God in all he said and did, Jesus taught us how to handle our problems, meet our challenges, respond to our enemies, resolve our conflicts, manage our time, use our resources, achieve our potential and resist the temptations that would keep us from becoming all God intended for us to be when we were created.

This is why listening to and following Jesus brings the best out in us and leads us straight to the heart of God. I pray you are one of his disciples, and you are reflecting the heart and nature of God in all you say and do.

There is another reason God came to live on earth and dwell among us. God wanted us to know that God understands us. God wanted to assure us that nothing we feel or experience is strange or unknown to God because God chose to share the human condition with us.

God knows what it is like to be poor, obscure, misunderstood, rejected, denied and betrayed. God is fully aware of what it feels like to be rejected, ridiculed, ignored, abandoned, deceived, confused, angry, disappointed, frustrated, stressed, tempted and to suffer and to die.

Because Jesus walked in our shoes, we can no longer wonder if God understands us or cares about our challenges and struggles. Jesus, who was fully human as God in the flesh, has put our minds at ease. Our prayers will always be heard by someone who knows exactly how we feel and knows what we need.

As important as it is that we believe this, I think it is equally important that we do this.
What do I mean?

The most loving thing we can do for another person is to enter their world and to compassionately walk with them along their journey. As nice as it is to give gifts to people, which we'll do on Christmas morning, the most loving thing we can do for another is to give the gift of ourselves.

When we enter their messy and mysterious lives for the purpose of encouraging and helping them, we give them the greatest gift of all. We continue the practice of incarnation that God so wondrously modeled through Jesus.

In her book, Life Lessons, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross tells the story of the effects the cleaning lady had on patients at a hospital. Kubler-Ross noticed that many of the dying patients felt much better after their rooms had been cleaned.

One day she asked the cleaning lady what she was doing to the patients when she cleaned their rooms. "I am only cleaning their rooms," she defensively replied.

Determined to know how she was making the patients feel better, Kubler-Ross followed the cleaning lady for several days. Finally, the cleaning lady grabbed her arm and dragged her into a private room behind the nurses' station. She told her what she was doing that had such a positive impact on the patients.

I walk over to them, look them in the eye, touch them and listen to their story. I may want to run, but I don't. I stay there with them because I think this is what real love is."

Of this woman, Kubler-Ross writes, "Unschooling in the ways of psychology and medicine, this woman knew one of the greatest secrets in life. Love is being there and caring."

How did this simple cleaning lady learn to practice incarnation? There was a night she sat in a busy emergency room holding her six-year-old child that was struggling to breathe due to pneumonia. She was alone and could get no attention.

That night, her daughter died in her arms. Looking back upon that horrible experience, she made a commitment this would never happen to another person as long as she could do something about it.

I like what Kubler-Ross writes about relationships in light of this story. "There is no such thing as an insignificant or accidental relationship. Every meeting, encounter or exchange with everyone from a spouse to an anonymous stranger, no matter how brief or profound, how positive, neutral or painful is meaningful. In the grand scheme of things, every relationship is potentially important for what it can teach us about ourselves and what it can do for the other person."

The one who 'became flesh and dwelt among us' will not let us live in isolation, shutting people out of our lives or looking upon them with disdain or indifference. He encourages us to be vulnerable and to take risks. He pushes us out of our comfort zone and demands that we open our eyes and ears so we can see what we have been overlooking and hear the cries for help we have been ignoring.

Who did this more effectively than Jesus as he walked those dusty Palestinian roads listening to people's stories and responding to their needs with compassion and grace?

Who entered your world and walked alongside you when you needed them most?

Who needs you to do it for them this week?