

John 1:14–18

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[0 : 0 0] That's John 1, 14 to 18. 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.

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.

For from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, the only God who is at the Father's side.

He has made him known. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning, and welcome to Christ Church Chicago on this Christmas Sunday.

What a great thing to be able to contemplate what the coming of Christ means as we prepare for tomorrow. You know, until the mid-16th century, the standard Bible readings for Christmas Day church services were taken from Luke's gospel primarily.

[1 : 1 3] And for good reason. The Roman Catholic Church, with its lectionary focused on Luke and the one who accentuates the nativity scene and the shepherds who are keeping their flock, their watch over the flock by night, the host of angels who lit up a darkened sky to announce the birth of Jesus.

But then along came the Reformation, and with it an archbishop by the name of Cranmer, who organized weekly readings for the newly founded Church of England, and he changed the course of direction.

When it came to selecting the gospel text to be read each and every Christmas Sunday, Cranmer abandoned Luke's flocks and fields, and in their place he favored John's gospel, in particular this prologue.

He brought us Christmas by speaking of the Word, the Word who was with God, the Word who was God, the Word who was now coming into the world. And this year at Christ Church Chicago, we've followed Cranmer's lead.

We've taken now four consecutive weeks to consider John's magisterial prologue. We looked at Christmas as the eternal Word of God.

[2 : 4 1] Christmas, which comes with a witness to all of God's activity in that Word. Christmas as it comes to those who both reject and receive this gift.

And now this morning, on this Christmas Sunday, we come to what I would simply call the fullness of Christmas. I want to make the fullness of Christmas known to you, in hopes that you'll be able to leave and worship Him well.

As far as I can tell, and I've been contemplating this the last few days, of all that's been written in Christian literature.

Verse 14 of our text. Put your eyes on it again or pull it up on your own screen. Verse 14, more than anything else, captures the fullness of Christmas.

Let me just read it again. Christmas fullness.

[3 : 5 6] That opening phrase, and the Word became flesh. Ah, you could write volumes on this.

For as we will one day lay our flesh down, the Word became flesh that we might have life.

Flesh. He even uses language that seems lower than one might consider dignified for humanity.

He doesn't say the Word became a man. The Word became flesh. The condescension of Christmas, in all of its fullness, is that the eternal Word came into the world as flesh.

To this point in the text, we were told that the Word was coming into the world. We were even told that the Word came into the world.

[5 : 12] But the manner in which the Word was coming has not yet been disclosed until now. The Word became flesh. The eternal Word, the second person of the Trinity, did not come into the world as an idea, as some force to be reckoned with.

The Word was, in one sense, our own nature. The divine one, the eternal one, took on flesh. Dust. What a condescension, then, Christmas is. What a mystery it is. Just think of it. I've been trying to capture it all week long, and nowhere close.

The one who was without beginning, now, in Mary's womb, began. I don't have words commensurate to the task of communicating the strength of Christmas.

Others have tried, and more will. John Donne, when he spoke of Mary, phrased it like this, Immensity, a capital I, Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

[6 : 29] My own pastor, shortly after I was converted and began to hear him preach annual Christmas messages, tried to capture it by speaking of the eternal Word, now poised on the threshold of heaven, and leaping off and diving down through the galaxies and entering into our own atmosphere and cradling himself in Bethlehem amid straw.

The meaning, though, is beyond measure. How do you capture the Word became flesh? I'm much more mundane than Hughes or Milton or Dunn, and yet we try.

For me, I would simply put it this way. The Word as flesh brings us the possibility of experiencing divine favor.

For you this morning, know this. The Word as flesh presents you the possibility of experiencing divine favor.

He's come. I'm thinking in terms of more. The phrase, the Word became flesh, is only the opening phrase of the fullness of Christmas.

[8 : 03] My Bible reads, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. This idea of flesh isn't enough to capture the fullness. He dwelt among us.

The word here is He tabernacled among us. As the contemporary Christmas card puts it, God moved into the neighborhood. It wasn't merely that He became flesh.

He became one of us. He didn't stand apart from us. He lived for a while among us.

Men and women and children actually rubbed shoulders with the Word now incarnate. This dwelling, this tabernacling of God.

What does this mean? C.S. Lewis tried to capture it by way of analogy. If you're not familiar with him as a writer, he was very influential in Christendom in the 20th century, perhaps the most influential writer for the Christian faith.

[9 : 16] He was an atheist, though, for a long time into adulthood and moved from atheism where there was no God to considering agnosticism where I'm not sure if there would be a God to actually embracing the glory of Christmas and coming to faith in Christ.

He was reaching for an analogy to communicate how is it possible that God, who dwells in the heavens, would condescend to earth and make Himself known.

He did it this way. He said, My own analogy, he goes on, is I now first perceive suggested the opposite.

If Shakespeare and Hamlet could ever meet, it must be Shakespeare's doing. Hamlet could initiate nothing. Shakespeare could, in principle, make himself appear as author within the play and write a dialogue between Hamlet and himself.

The Shakespeare within the play would, of course, be at once Shakespeare and one of Shakespeare's creatures. And then he simply says, it would bear some analogy to the incarnation.

That is what Christmas is teaching when it says that he not only became flesh, but he dwelt among us.

[10 : 56] That God wrote himself into the script, spoke, and made all divine glory known.

This is the mystery and the wonder and the glory of Christmas. But there's more. It's not merely that he dwelt here as one of us, but this idea of tabernacling signifies an Old Testament connection to God's dwelling among his people.

If you're not familiar with the Old Testament scriptures, God's people who had been recently rescued from Egypt were asked to construct a traveling box, as it were, God on the move, so that God would dwell with them.

The box represented both the presence of God and the place from which God spoke and the provision that God would make through substitutionary atonement to dwell in our midst.

And when you actually get into Numbers chapter 2, the placement of the ark among the people of God was fascinating. The tabernacle stood in the center and the people of God were arranged from the south facing it, from the west, from the north, and from the east.

[12:22] And so, what you had when God tabernacled among his people was every family pitching their tent with the opening of their tent to the tabernacle.

It isn't merely then that God is present with us, Emmanuel, it's that your life, my life, is to be oriented toward him. We're to be facing him.

This is the implication of Christmas. Not merely that he was present, but it reorients the entire purpose of our lives.

Consider that this Christmas as you consider the creche. When you come to the creche, when you think of the infant Christ on straw, know that you are to orient your entire life around him.

Everything about our lives ought to be arranged around him. Here lies one not only for us to worship, but to encircle. He is to inform your very work.

[13:31] He is to inform the very direction of your life. Not until he moves do you move, and when he moves, you move. Every consideration of our thoughts, the plans we have for our families, the vocations we choose, the things we want to accomplish, we're all to be facing him.

The intimacy of this tabernacling, this presence, ought to inform every aspect of our life, and yet there's even more.

The fullness of Christmas is not merely that the Word became flesh or that the Word dwelt among us, but notice, and we have seen his glory, glory as the only son from the Father.

flesh, the possibility of favor, dwelt, the sense of the orientation of our life, but here, glory, glory as the only son from the Father.

How do I capture Christmas, but in this very phrase, it is already moving in very subtle ways as a writer from the creche to the cross.

[14:56] This little notion of the only begotten one is the echo of Abraham who takes Isaac, his only begotten one, who marches him out unto a sacrifice, which is a picture or a portrait of the sufferings that are already being prepared for the eternal Word who has taken on flesh.

Yes, the one who was born is indeed come to die. The glory itself is a strange glory. When you and I consider glory, what do we think of?

We think of outshining all our contemporaries. Not so with God. Glory, glory here is wrapped in the sense of his eternal light being hidden within the garment of human flesh.

Glory for John will be Jesus' prayer in the garden. Now is the time to glorify thyself. glory is like the ingenious action taken in the movie The Maltese Falcon where this statuette which had purportedly been made for the king of Spain and had had jewels that would be priceless in cost was covered by enamel that it would be shrouded or hidden lest others would steal it.

This is what God does with glory. Glory is glory is the glory of God in Proverbs 25 too is to conceal the matter.

[16:56] and all of this glory then that's spoken of in this verse we have seen his glory is already a movement to the cross a movement not to his outshining but to his hanging on a tree and the darkness descending and three hours of pitch and humanity lost in the cobalt blue of death only to know that through that alone substitution comes and resurrection is now possible.

Glory in this sense is like the legend of the cathedral that I've heard about in Toledo Spain this place where Columbus evidently brought gold back from some of his journeys and the cathedral was gold plated and so the legend goes when war came the priests would paint over the gold in black matte finish so that one would think it was nothing more than iron glory is shrouded glory according to Tolkien was introduced by a character named Strider who simply sat quietly in dark garb in a corner not even noticed upon arrival only to learn much later that he's Aragorn prince of them all glory is Johnny Cash the long man the dressed in black it's the dark coat glory glory is substitutionary atonement glory is the cross glory is so unlike anything you and I know and so as you sit here this morning and some of you grieve the loss of those who have laid their flesh down know that true glory is shared by your

Savior who himself gave up his life that we might live this is Christmas this is the babe that I bring to you in Bethlehem this is anything but sentiment it is all substitution this is a jewel beyond price that is hidden to the world this is the one who possesses a glory of all gold all weight all value all preciousness but hidden in him this is what Christmas is and all that he has to offer is concealed

that he might make provision for sin and it's not only that the fullness of glory is not yet even there this singular verse just continues to emerge that word became flesh he dwelled among us we've seen his glory glory as the only son from the father and here it is fullness doesn't come into the end full of grace and truth now think of it in

Jesus you have one who is full of the fullness of God full of grace and truth now you and I we like to be filled of one or the other do we not we like to be grace filled people but often at the expense of truth or we like to be truth filled people but at the expense of grace and Jesus comes and he's got I've got them both he says and I've got them in fullness I when you see me you see full on grace and without compromising full on truth Jesus alone Jesus full of grace and truth when Moses came he gave us God's truth and there was a grace to it but when Jesus comes you get grace upon a grace you get a better grace you get grace and truth you get mercy and might you get forgiveness and a favor that will enable you to walk in obedience to him oh this is

Christmas this is true glory and as you consider today and contemplate tonight what enters the world in the morning with the light you celebrate an eternal word who took on flesh and not only that but dwelt among us not only that but who dealt with our sin not only that but who showed us what true glory is that we might become children of God not only that he was full of all grace need grace this morning he's full of grace need truth this morning he is truth this is

[22 : 32] Christmas according to John's magisterial prologue and the implication of which just falls out into verses 15 and following it won't take long but what he wants to say is that John bore witness about him and cried out this is he of whom I said he who comes after me ranks before me because he was before me John wants you to know that all the fullness of Christmas comes with the credibility of a witness that would call you to worship that that's the point of the verse the fullness of Christmas comes with the credibility of a witness that will call you to worship John himself says I I'm not worthy to untie this one's shoes he who comes after me is before me and you and I then ought to fall on our face before this one Jesus not just merely at the creche but at the cross but what he will do in the consummation you giving your life to

Christ is the appropriate response to Christmas have you done that today have you done that at any point in your life have you yet been not understanding the fullness of Christmas worship is the response to word and he he won't leave you without reasons verse 16 verse 17 notice the smallest of words for we worship for from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace we worship him because in him we have grace we have grace upon grace no wonder he contrasts this with the ministry of Moses which was a gracious ministry but in Jesus we have grace upon grace verse 17 for the law was given through

Moses grace and truth came through Jesus Christ did you notice this is the first time in the gospel his name is actually mentioned the eternal word which was with God and was God the word of which John bore witness the word which becomes flesh is now disclosed to you to be nothing other than Jesus Christ and he is greater than Moses Moses who had a glory of his own Moses who wanted to see God Moses who wanted to be with God Moses who wanted his life to face God Moses who said Lord I'm not going anywhere unless you come and reveal yourself to me and he says he's even bigger than that he's bigger than the Baptist he's bigger than the prophet he's the one he's the one look at verse 18 no one's ever seen God the only God who's at the father's side he has made him known can I just give you a closing word for any who today are not yet believers in the

Christ of Christmas verse 18 makes it clear if you want to know God if you want to see God if you want the beatific vision to dwell in the presence of God well he that is Jesus is the one that makes him known the world did not know him but he makes him known 1925 the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello penned a play called six characters in search of an author he places a stage before the audience with a director orchestrating a play and six characters suddenly wander in half baked characters that never found their way into an actual play they become the foil of individuals who are looking for purpose and meaning in life and Pirandello's point is clear you'll never find it and it ends badly for all six because they are searching for why they are here and who created them and what his plans and purposes are for them and they never discover it

I'm here to tell you today that if you're in search of the author verse 18 can be trusted Jesus Christ will make him known and you can go through life from this day forward learning about the fullness of Christmas I spoke to a man this morning in our midst I said how many Christmases have you celebrated he said well I'm 69 I suppose 69 of them now you're all wondering who the man is but he

said actually upon second thought I haven't celebrated 69 I didn't come to know Jesus the Jesus who made God known until I was 16 so this is my 53rd if my math is correct celebration of Christmas how many for you how many for you how many Christmas mornings have you had the experiential grasp grasp of the fullness of Christmas well for some for some may tomorrow even tomorrow be your first our heavenly father we have encountered through the writing of [28 : 53] John the word made flesh and as the night comes and the darkness falls and we consider again Mary giving birth in a stable may we come may we see this one who became flesh may we understand that he came to dwell among us not merely for us may we take his glorious dark death defying journey to the cross and may we experience his grace to live in the light of his life so plant within our hearts joy in Christ's name amen let's