

In the Beginning...

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Date: 07 July 2019

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[0:00] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. So, Deacon Mark this morning is down preaching at Good Shepherd in Binghamton.

And we have Good Shepherd's rector here with us in worship this morning, along with his family. Welcome, Father Matt, and it's great to have all of you guys with us.

So, I'm excited that this morning we're going to be starting a sermon series on John's Gospel. If I had to pick a personal favorite of the Gospels, with the caveat that they are all equally divinely inspired, of course, I'd have to call John the one nearest and dearest to my heart.

It is particularly clear on who Jesus is, why he came, and what it means to believe in him and have salvation in him. I don't know about you, but I think that those things touch on some eternally important questions.

[1:25] What do you think? When we think about John, or when we think about any book of the Bible, we have to ask ourselves, why was this written?

What was this written to address? What was the purpose in writing this? That's an important question. When we think about that with John's Gospel, we find a pretty clear statement of purpose in chapter 20 of John, where we read this.

Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, 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.

Now, you might be thinking, wait a second, I already believe in Christ.

How is this relevant to me? First, it should be said that John's Gospel does have an evangelistic focus, but that does not make it less relevant to those of us who already believe in Christ.

[2:34] After all, we intend to keep on believing in Christ, do we not? By God's grace. And I've found that in my walk with the Lord, that I am always learning more about who Jesus is, what it means to believe in him, and what it is to have life in his name.

We never grow beyond the Gospel. If we think we have, then we are off target. We don't grow beyond the Gospel.

We grow more deeply into it. Talk for a second briefly about the author's stated purpose in writing. Let's talk for a second, just very briefly, about who the author is.

There's been a lot of scholarly debate about this question. And just to let you know, I intend to spend the first sermon in this series exploring that question, starting with the testimony of the early church fathers in the second century.

I'm kidding. Now, if you do want to wade deeply into those waters, please see me for some extra reading. I'll hook you up with some homework. But a couple of things that we should note.

[3:41] The Gospel itself is anonymous, meaning that John didn't sign his name, the original manuscript. I think, however, that there is considerable evidence within the text, as well as historical evidence outside of the text, to suggest that the author is none other than John the Apostle, and that the author is the same beloved disciple mentioned throughout the book.

If John were the author, and I believe that he is, he probably would have written the book in his old age, in the latter half of the first century. Not to worry, though, if John were not the author, that does not diminish the authority and the trustworthiness of this gospel.

So no worries either way. So there's our crash course on the purpose and the authorship of this book. I tried to condense a number of hours of study on that topic into a short introduction, so I hope I did it justice.

Now let's turn to the text itself. Look with me in John chapter 1. The first 18 verses form what is called the prologue.

It serves as the introduction to the basic themes of the book. One commentator said that it's like the overture to an opera. I know we have at least one opera fan in the house, right? Looking at you, Stephanie.

[4:59] We're going to be looking at the prologue this week and next, doing half of the prologue each week. Each week. We're going to go verse by verse through the text, and then talk about how what we have read applies to us, what it means, why it matters, all that good stuff.

I'm going to warn you that there is some theological heavy lifting to be done here, but it is really worth it, and it's really necessary. The stuff that we're going to talk about really matters.

So our text begins with almost with what we can think of as the biblical version of a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, except our story begins before time and before the creation of galaxies.

Look with me in verses 1 and 2. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. In the beginning. Does that sound familiar to you? Where else have we heard those words?

[6:03] Genesis. Yes. I'm glad you got that right. We've heard it in Genesis. That's not an accident. John is deliberately alluding to the creation account in Genesis.

And what he's doing that for is to tell us that the Word of God, the Son, existed before everything that was created. We'd put it this way. There never was a time when he was not.

The Word of God was with God, has been forever, and has been God forever. I remember the kid wondering when it was that the Father created his Son.

Now clearly someone was not paying attention when we covered this stuff in Sunday school.

Shame on me. I was an accidental heretic. But we need to get this right. We'll come back to this multiple times through our series.

But we'll see that if we have a Jesus who is less than fully God, as well as fully man, but who isn't the eternal Son of God, then we are in real trouble.

[7:06] We must get this right. Now what does the author mean here when he describes the Son as the Word? It's become a popular theory that the author is appealing to Greek philosophy here, as he's using the Greek word *logos*, which translates to word.

And that word has a long history of being used in philosophy. You look at commentaries, you can find all kinds of potential sources for what John is alluding to here.

The explanation I find most convincing for what John is getting at is a lot simpler. The author is primarily appealing to the Word of God, particularly as it's alluded to in the Old Testament.

Think about what the Old Testament tells us about the Word of God. God creates through His Word. God reveals Himself through His Word. God saves His people through His Word, right? So what John is telling us is that this Son of God who existed eternally, this Word, is the one through whom the Father created everything.

More on this in just a second. He's the one through whom God revealed Himself. John's point is that Jesus is the Word, is God's fullest revelation of Himself. And Jesus, going back to the Old Testament, is the one through whom God redeemed His people.

[8:24] Isn't that astonishing? Interestingly enough, we're pointed in the direction of the doctrine of the Trinity in these couple of verses as well.

Because this Word, who is God, is also with God in personal relationship. We're seeing a description here of the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son. Moving on to verse 3, we read, All things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made.

Again, the Son or the Word is identified with the God who created everything. And John emphasizes here that everything that God created was not created apart from the involvement of the Word.

In essence, we see that the Son was not created, He's existed eternally, and that He was active in the creation of everything that exists. You may be wondering why any of this matters.

I'll say for now that it does, and we'll come back to that. For now, let's look at verses 4 and 5, where we read, In Him was life, and the life was the light of man.

[9:35] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Now, what do we make of that? A couple of things, I think.

This reference to light is about the Word, or the Son giving life, in creation. Now, in John's Gospel, as we'll see, life means a lot more than simple existence, but we still have creation in view in this section, as well as the Word continuously sustaining everything that exists.

Likewise, the light reference here certainly refers to the light triumphing over darkness when God created the world, but we would also have to say that the language of light and darkness points to darkness as evil, and light as goodness.

The reference to light being the light of men probably has to do with the fact that in the creation and in the human conscience, God reveals Himself to all human beings so that we are without excuse if we do not honor Him.

The next few verses present a little bit of a jump for us. We've gone from eternity to creation. Now we're getting ready for the Word of God to enter human history, to take on flesh.

[10:49] John the Baptist enters the picture when he does because his ministry prepared the way for Jesus as his immediate forerunner. So we read, There was a man sent from God whose name was John, and he came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him.

He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. In this jump from eternity to human history, we see what I think is a deliberate major contrast between John the Baptist and Christ.

John was undoubtedly a great man and a great prophet used mightily of God. But what does our text tell us? John was not the light. There was a time when John the Baptist did not exist, but there was never a time when the Son of God did not exist.

The Word of God who took on human flesh is eternal, and He alone is the light. John's ministry, like every faithful ministry, is simply about glorifying Jesus.

It was the Word who is the light who is the Son of God. This is where our story, the story of John's gospel, picks up in human history. Why does that event matter so much, this Word becoming flesh?

[12:14] We'll get more into that next week, but we'll catch a glimpse of it in our closing verse this morning, verse 9. Where we read that the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

The reference to giving light here is talking about something beyond creation. It's talking about God becoming a man, ultimately to live a perfect life, to die for our sins, and to rise again, to become the source of eternal salvation for all who trust in Him.

We see that Jesus is the true light. What do we mean by that? First, we see that Jesus is truth and not falsehood. That's immediately obvious.

But beyond that, we'd have to say that Jesus being the true light means that He is the light in the fullest sense. In a way, no other thing or person in this world has ever been.

He is nothing short of what it looks like when God reveals Himself fully. Jesus is the full revelation of who God is and what God is like.

[13:24] He is also described as giving light to everyone in this verse. Now, how do we understand that? Because we'll see in John's Gospel that some people refuse to receive the light.

Some people prefer darkness rather than light. So how can we say that He gives light to everyone who comes into the world? The most convincing answer I have found is this.

The light of Christ who revealed Himself as God in the flesh now shines on all people now that He has been revealed. Some receive the light. Some try to hide in the darkness from the light.

Some people cherish the light and some people are afraid of the light. At this point, we might be scratching our heads and wondering, after all of this lofty theologizing, what any of this has to do with us and why it matters.

In truth, it has a whole lot to do with us. What do I mean by that? Here's our first point of application. We are called to know Jesus, are we not?

[14:32] Yes? Isn't it great to be in relationship with Christ? Isn't it great to know the Lord? But how can we know Him without wanting to know more about who He is?

It would be like me saying to my wife, Elaine, I love you dearly, but I'm really not interested in knowing anything about you. I've never said that, just for the record.

The Church Father, St. Athanasius, once said, that Jesus, whom I know as my Redeemer, cannot be less than God. That's where it gets personal, doesn't it?

In the first half of the prologue, we have seen that the Son of God, the Word of God, was in relationship with His Father from all eternity and was God from the very beginning. I want to know more about this Jesus, who is no less than God, whom I know as my Redeemer. What about you? I want to see His glory.

[15 : 38] What about you? We cannot know Jesus as our Redeemer without knowing Him as the Word who was with God and to His God. Which brings me to my next point.

Knowing what we have read this morning really impacts our reading of the Bible, doesn't it? In a number of ways, but I want to focus on one way in particular.

There is a popular preacher who caused a stir recently because he suggested that we don't really need the Old Testament. It's this old document that's kind of getting in the way.

We need to unhitch ourselves from that. In light of what we have read and heard today, why is that a problem? Because Jesus here is identified with the God who created all things and revealed Himself in the Old Testament, isn't He?

We can't claim to believe in Jesus and then toss the Old Testament out. The Word who became flesh was with God and was God not only from eternity, not only in creation, but also throughout the Old Testament.

[16 : 52] It's common in our culture for people to say that Jesus in the Gospels never said anything about whatever you can fill in the blank, whatever it is you're trying to defend. But keep in mind, when God spoke in the Old Testament, the Word spoke.

That's why it is nonsensical to claim that the teaching of the Old Testament somehow lacks the authority that we find in the teachings of Jesus. And that means for you and me, if we love Jesus, we should love the Old Testament.

Brush the dust off of it. Pick it up and read it as you do the New Testament. Because you will find Christ there, front and center. And if you don't find Christ there, it simply means that you have missed the point.

Next, I want us to think about Jesus in relation to John the Baptist. Our passage draws a distinction between the light, the Son of God, and someone like John the Baptist, whom our text makes a point of saying was not the light.

John the Baptist was a great man of God. He was a great prophet. He had the unique task of preparing the way for the ministry of Jesus. But what does our text say about him?

[18 : 10] He was not the light. There is only one man in history who could rightly claim to be the light.

And that is our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a popular claim in the world that we are living in for people to say that Jesus was merely a good moral teacher.

It's been popular to say that for a long time, not just recently. Usually people who say that sort of thing will put him in the same camp as Buddha or Plato or Confucius.

Although I'm not sure that the people who say this sort of thing have actually read any of them, but that is beside the point. Muslims will claim that Jesus was a great prophet.

But that is all they will claim. But our text this morning does not allow us to stop at calling Jesus a good moral teacher or a prophet.

[19 : 11] John the Baptist was a faithful teacher. John the Baptist was a prophet. John the Baptist had the unique ministry of preparing the way for the Lord's ministry. But even John the Baptist cannot compare with Jesus.

Jesus is more than a good teacher. Jesus is more than a prophet. Jesus is the Son of God, the Word who was with God and was God from all eternity.

He cannot merely be a good teacher. He cannot merely be a prophet. We need more than a good teacher. We need more than a prophet.

We need no one less than God Himself to save us. We'll talk more about that next week. But I want to say finally, if Jesus is the light, He and He alone can show us if we are in the light or if we are in darkness.

If we trust in Jesus, if we know Jesus, we know that we are in the light because we know the one who is light. But let's be clear, there is no middle ground.

[20 : 28] There is light and there is darkness. If we do not know Jesus, if we refuse to put our trust in Jesus, then there is no way around it.

We are in darkness. In closing, I want to say this. If you've ever wondered why I talk so much about Jesus when I preach, here's why.

He is the Word who has been with God from all eternity, who has been God from all eternity. He is God in the flesh.

He has revealed to us who God is and what God is like. He is our Savior and He is our only hope. Praise His holy name.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.