



John 1:1-18

“He Came For You And Me”

December 22, 2013
4th Sunday in Advent

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“Following Christ from City Center”

JOHN 1:1-18
"HE CAME FOR YOU AND ME"

			Encomium, Narrative Order Is Not Temporal Sequence
BIBLICAL			
STORY:	A. vv.1-2 THE WORD WITH GOD "IN THE BEGINNING" (Gen. 1:1 LXX).		[Wisdom Myth]
1	1	'In the beginning'	Prologue Begins In Eternity, Not With Creation
ETERNITY	2	was THE WORD (Gk. <i>logos</i>),	(Pre-existence: Where he comes from) [Prov.8:22-31]
	3	and the Word was with GOD ,	(Distinction: <i>with God</i>) 17:5, Lit. <i>pros</i> , towards
	3'	and the Word was God.	(Identity: <i>was God</i>) //Phil. 2:6-11, Col. 1:15-20, 1 Tim.3:16
2	2'	This (i.e. Word) was	The Word Is/Does What God Is/Does
1'		'in the beginning' with God.*	(Pre-existence: Not exhaust God) Spirit In 1:33, [Proverbs 8:30] [Wis. Sol. 7:25-26]
		B. vv.3-10 THE WORD AND ALL CREATION: LIGHT.	The Word Is God's Self-Expression Word = Instrument Of Creation, Life
		1) vv.3-5 All Things Through Him Were Made: Life And Light (General Rev. Present) 5:1	
3	a	All things through him were made ,	(Creation) [Prov. 8:30, 3:10]
CREATION		and without him was not anything made that was made.//	(Comprehension)
4	b	In him was <i>life</i> ,	(Source) Jn. 5:36,6:35,11:25,14:6
		and the <i>life</i> was the light of men (all people),	(Universal) [Proverbs 8:35]
5		and the <i>light</i> shines in the <i>darkness</i> ,	(Activity) [Wis. of Sol. 7:29-30]
EVIL/FALL		and the <i>darkness</i> has not overcome it.//	(Victory Over Evil) Jumps Over Much History
		2) vv.6-8 John's Testimony To The Word/Light's Primacy.	Grand To Simple Style
6		There was a man sent from God whose name was John./	(Special Revelation)
7		He came for a witness (testimony),	
PROPHETS		in order to bear witness to the light,	(Evangelism, Model)
		in order that all might believe through him.	(Conversion/Repentance)
8		He was not the light, but came in order to bear witness to the light.	(Focus: Role Of Preacher) Correct John's Status
RESISTANCE		1') vv.9-10 World Made Through Him: The Light Rejected (General Rev. Rejected).	
9	b'	The true light , which illumines every man was coming (continually) into the world.	Apology
10	a'	He was in the world, and the world was made through him , but the world knew him not.*	[Wis. Sol. 6:13, 16] (Ignorance) [I Enoch 42:2]
COMMUNICATION		C. v.11 THE WORD AND HIS OWN: NOT RECEIVED (TRAGEDY: REJECT).	
IS CONTINUAL		Unto his own he came,	Aorist = Once In Past History
REJECTION		and his own people received him not.	(Jewish Rejection) Drama Of God
		C' vv.12-13 THE WORD AND HIS OWN: RECEIVED (COMEDY: ACCEPT).	Benefits
12		But to all who received him,	(Faith/Trust) [Wis. of Sol. 7:27]
BENEFITS		he gave power (authority) to become children of God,	(Adoption, Restoration)
		to those believing in his name,	(Conversion, New Birth)
13		who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*	Assumes Like Is Known By Like
NEW BIRTH		B' vv.14-17 THE WORD AND THE BELIEVING CHURCH: GRACE AND TRUTH, 5:1	Incarnation Is A Permanent Union
		1) v.14 The Word Brings Grace And Truth (Revelation Received By Community: Us, We).	
14	a	And the Word (<i>logos</i>) became flesh and dwelt (tent) among us; full of grace and truth ;	Permanent Union
INCARNATION	b	And we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father,	[Baruch 3:37, Wis. of Sol.7:22,25] (vs. Docetism, Gnosticism)
NEW COMMUNITY		2) v.15 John's Testimony To The Word's Pre-Existence And Primacy.	
15		John bears witness to him and cries out,	Speaks From The Grave! Witness To Pre-existence, Validates v.14
		"This is he of whom I said,	Now Dead, First Public Witness
EVANGELIST		'He who comes after ranks before me, because before me he was (existed).'"	Eternal & Temporal (Preaching Jesus)
		1') vv.16-17 The Word Brings Grace And Truth (Old and New Covenant Communities).	
16	b'	Because out of his fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. (New Covenant)	
17	a'	For the law through Moses was given, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*	First use of his name! Better Than The Best Of Torah, See Jesus = See God!
TORAH		A' v.18 THE SON WITH GOD & MADE KNOWN IN HISTORY (EX. 33:20).	[Wisdom of Solomon 8:4]
FULFILLED		'No one has ever seen GOD ,'	Ex. 33:20, Lk. 5:37, 6:46, The One Who Made You = One Who Saves You! God Reveals God!
THEOLOGY		THE ONLY GOD , who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.*	Known As Never Before, P66 et. al.

A Brief Treatment Of John 1:1-18

John opens with a majestic summary of the person of Jesus and what happened through him for the world’s benefit. The Prologue previews the major themes of the Fourth Gospel. The closest literary model is an ancient Encomium/Hymn, a composition of praise for a human being of great deeds. Jesus fulfills Jewish thinking about God’s *wisdom* that mediates the divine purpose. John the Baptist precedes Jesus as witness, and Jesus is the Father’s agent come to bring light and life, grace and truth, and to enable those who believe to become God’s adopted children. The Son assumes human flesh (v.14) for the sake of his mission.

This thought unit has an extended 6:2 concentric structure (A-B-C-C’-B’-A’). At the center is a contrast between those who *received him not* (v.11) and those who *received him* and his benefits (vv.12-13). Conversion is the tipping point, and God upholds our ability to reject the offer. The inclusions are the titles *the word* (v.1) // *the only God* (v.18b), *God* (v.1) // *God* (v.18a), and the idea that Jesus has the ability to *make him* (i.e. the Father) *known* because of their eternal relationship (vv.1-2). An echo of Gen. 1:1 is in vv.1-2 and an echo of Ex. 33:20 in v.18a. The rhetoric is grand and interrupted by two parallel sections on John the evangelist; he bears witness to the light (vv.6-8) and to Jesus’ greater honor (v.15).

Verse 1-2 (A) are concentric and open and close with the phrase *in the beginning* in echo of Gen. 1:1. John retells the story from the start. Before creation (vv.3-5) there was *with God* (thus distinction) *the logos* who *was God* (thus continuity). This is a critical move using Jewish wisdom speculation to tip the church’s thinking about Israel’s God in the direction of Trinity. Within the single circle of divine life is personal communion, not isolation. *Father/Son* and *Sender/Agent* are the core metaphors into which the deity and actions of the Holy Spirit will eventually be welcomed and formulated.

In the next section (B. vv.3-10), the witness of John (vv.6-8) is framed by statements about creation (v.3a, *All things through him were made* // v.10, *the world was made through him*) and *light* (vv.4-5 // v.9). Everything bears the marks of God’s agent, nothing excluded (v.3b). A cosmic conflict is assumed with God represented as *life* and *light*; and in the end darkness loses. The resistance of creation is evidenced in its ignorance of the light that always shines (vv.9-10). The world is lost, and John the Baptist is God’s mouthpiece to point to the One who is the light (vv.6-8). The goal is that *all might believe*.

The historical presentation of Jesus to his people is summed up in the phrase *Unto his own he came* (v.11a). The response is tragic, *and his own people received him not*. But the Son finds the receptive who are restored as God’s children (v.12). The phrase *believing in his name* is shorthand for welcoming the full divine revelation in Jesus. To be reborn is not through one’s genealogy or human generativity; it comes from God alone. The center of John’s Prologue (C//C’) is an altar call, a plea to respond to Jesus.

In the next section (B’ vv.14-17) John’s second round of testimony (v.15) is framed by assertions about *grace and truth* (v.14 // v.17) and the church’s testimony of *we beheld* and *we received* (v.14b // v.16). The historical coming of Jesus (v.11a) is preceded by the Son/logos assuming flesh (v.14) and setting up camp in our midst. John the Baptist is now seen to be the church’s first evangelist who tells us where the glory originated (v.15). Jesus builds on but is superior to the revelation of the law through Moses which shaped Judaism. The only Son makes the unseen Father visible (v.18). The unit that began echoing Gen. 1:1 now echoes Ex. 33:20. Revelation is now secured; God has self-revealed in Jesus.

HE CAME FOR YOU AND ME

*“But to all who received him,
he gave power to become children of God....”*

The final restoration for which we have longed.

JOHN 1 : 1 2 b

Like me, I bet one of your favorite Christmas specials is a conversion story. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is a movie based on Dr. Seuss' poem. The ole Grinch, a hairy, green, cantankerous beast, looks down on the town of Whoville from his cave atop a mountain of garbage, and what he sees disgusts him. The *Whos* love Christmas and all its trappings: gifts and decorations, lights and parties. In the movie we learn that the Grinch's disgust originated when he was mocked as a child because of his odd looks and a Christmas gift he hand made. The *Whos* hate the Grinch, and he loathes them. The Grinch is a disappointed and shamed ex-Who.¹

Intent on destroying Christmas, the Grinch devastates Whoville by stealing all the presents and Christmas trees. Tucked in his hideaway, he prepares to destroy all the loot now stuffed in his gigantic pack. But then he hears the townspeople singing down below, as the narrator explains the scene: "Then the Grinch heard a sound rising over the snow. It started out low and it started to grow."

The Grinch grimaces as the narrator continues: "But the sound wasn't sad, but merry...very. Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small, were singing without any presents at all." The Grinch is bewildered by the *Whos* who are robbed of their possessions, yet happy and singing.

So explains the narrator: "He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming. It came. Somehow or other it came just the same. And the Grinch with his Grinch feet ice

¹ For an insightful analysis of *wounded theists* and the anger of the new atheists, see Dinesh D'Souza, *GOD FORSAKEN: BAD THINGS HAPPEN. Is There a God Who Cares? Yes! There's Proof* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2012), Chapter 2, "Wounded Theists: The Indictment of God," 17-38; Alex McFarland, *10 Answers to Atheists* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2012), "The Injured Atheist," 22-23.

cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling how could it be so."

Finally, the Grinch speaks: "It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes, or bags. Maybe Christmas doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more."

Then something happens inside the Grinch. His eyes then grow warm and soft, big as saucers. Suddenly, he throws himself to the ground, convulsing as his heart grows three times the size it was before. He laughs. He cries. He claims to feel all toasty inside. Unfamiliar with tears, he thinks he's leaking, while a brilliant shaft of sunlight bathes his green face and reveals a sincere smile.

He then remembers that the stolen gifts are about to slide off the mountain and be destroyed. For the first time, he actually cares and risks his life to keep the gifts from falling off the precipice. His changed heart is matched by changed behavior.² He repents; he turns around on the inside and the outside.

The Grinch, it appears, was soundly converted, *born again* from above, his heart invaded by a love he had long stiff-armed in bitterness. He who was a long term outsider to Whoville became a cherished insider. Sounds almost Christian, doesn't it? Dr. Seuss, the theologian of conversion. Makes me want to go back and reread *Green Eggs and Ham* for its deeper meaning!

Whether it's the Grinch of Dr. Seuss, or Charles Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge, or the slave trader John Newton become a preacher and author of the hymn *Amazing Grace*, or the story of your own pastor, a once back-slidden Methodist brat who at age nineteen returned to the faith he knew as a child, conversion is a change that can be likened to an earthquake. There are tremors detectable beforehand by those with sensitive equipment and significant aftershocks later on, but there is a moment when the landscape changes and the world is different thereafter.

You walk out of church into a new world, or perhaps after a dream you wake into a new one. Life has changed, and with the new truth you can never go back to where you were before, and if you try (as many do), you'll be utterly miserable because now you know too much. You inhabit the same space but a different world, one with spiritual depth in all directions. You've been forgiven, the slate wiped clean, the records first shredded, then burned. Freed. Called. Named and chosen. Anointed with the Spirit. Re-dignified and newly gifted. Burdened with a new set of God-eyes to see the beautiful and fallen world. Loved just because. Intellectually

² Universal Pictures, 2000; www.Preaching.com under John 1.

hungry with questions you never asked before. Finding your voice in prayer and your story in God’s book. Drawn towards Jesus Christ like iron filings to a magnet. By an unseen hand the pieces of your puzzle have been rearranged to form a new picture.

Jesus now stands at the center, no longer around the edges and paid off with unkept promises; he’s worth worshiping and getting to know, never to be exhausted. A stream of pure, living water wells up in the soul, flowing to and through you in a cleansing flow, washing away the grime and the shame attached to it. You’ve been converted, or perhaps reconverted at a deeper level. It is the work of God on the inside of life, and if you do not deliberately block it, it cannot help but show and raise awkward questions with others who will ask, “What’s happened to you?” You then have a decision. Do I tell them, or not? And if you say, “Why hide the gift?” you’ve made the right decision. God may use you to seed someone else’s garden.

Now it’s possible to overdo the earthquake analogy; the fact is that not all conversions are datable the same way. Not all are so clearly seismic. For some the light dawns gradually with certain marking points of increased intensity, whereas for others it’s like stepping out of a dark cave into the midday sun. Some have spiritual eyes that adjust more slowly to the light of Christ while others are seemingly blinded in a blast of intense illumination. The pivotal issue is *new life* in Christ and *new light* in the soul, not the speed through which you passed through the birth canal or how quickly the pupils of your soul dilated. We all know that some deliveries are fast and furious, others long and tedious. Some more painful than others; some more dangerous. Why should we expect spiritual births to be any less complex or diverse?

Not every one has to come forward at an altar call, though some will. Not all have a dramatic story of turning from moral degradation, though some will. Not all will be accompanied by supernatural signs, but some will. Some are calculated and intellectual, others all frothy with crashing waves of emotion. For some the will is the battleground and the final place of holding out against the assaulting waves of divine grace. All must be born, but not all are born alike; and all must be born again, but not all are born again alike either. There are predictable patterns in conversion, just as there are in standard medical textbooks and messy delivery rooms, but within those constants is a wide range of diversity that must be honored and respected by the church.³ To say, as some still do, “that you must come to Christ just as I did,” is to

³ A good treatment of the New Testament evidence is Richard Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns,1999). For

restrict ones circle to the like-minded. It is perhaps one of the reasons people cluster in various churches and denominations, because there they find others who understand their style of religious experience.

Each week I share the fruits of my study and demonstrate the literary structure of the text in a Scripture Sheet. Beauty is a part of the truth of Scripture. Mapping the text helps me follow the flow of the author’s thought. We put the main idea first and the conclusion last. They put the focus at the center and surrounded it with supporting ideas. The goal was to be persuasive and memorable, and creative repetition was one way to do that.⁴

Verse 18 at the end is important, “No one has ever seen God, the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known,” but it is not the center. All that God the Son has done in taking on flesh and revealing himself in Jesus is for one central reason. So that people might say *No* or say *Yes* to becoming God’s adopted kids. God’s grace allows for either response and upholds the freedom of both. First the tragic *No* in verse 11: “Unto his own he came, and his own people *received him not.*” We must honor the freedom of those who reject our Savior and go some other way. It’s why John put it first. Only then the *Yes* in verses 12 and 13, “But to all *who received him*, he gave power (or authority) to become children of God, to those believing on his name....”

Conversion. Receive and believe, believe and receive: two sides of one transaction. Open yourself in trust and watch what happens. John the Gospel writer had seen it often, first in his own life, then in the lives of those who never saw Jesus

an integrative study of the social sciences, see Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1993). For essays from a Wesleyan perspective, see Kenneth Collins and John Tyson, editors, *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2001). For a study of conversion in reverse (i.e. those who have consciously left faith) see Ruth Tucker, *Walking Away from Faith* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2002), and on those who have drifted, Mary Hammond, *The Church and the Dechurched* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001); for conversion in both directions, see Scott McKnight and Hauna Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith: Stories of Conversion and Apostasy* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2008).

⁴ For a rhetorical reading of the prologue, see Jo-Ann A. Brant, *John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 23-42; Charles Talbert, *John* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992).

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in the flesh.⁵ The first eighteen verses of John Gospel are a majestic tribute to the fact of Christian conversion and to the difference Jesus Christ makes because of who he is. He will always search beyond the No's of indifference and rejection and find a receptive audience. In the end everyone is a convert, meaning that they have turned, either *away from* Jesus Christ or *towards him*. Either way you're a convert, though with differing consequences. Reject him and you have rejected your Maker and the ground of your own being. You have rejected divine rescue. You have declared yourself a permanent orphan. It's pulling the rug from under your own existence and guaranteeing that in the end your life will be labeled *trivial*, no matter how much you accomplished according to this world's standards.

There are a number of different ways to open a biography of Jesus. Mark jumps in and has John the Baptist and Jesus walk onto the stage of baptism as if from nowhere. They just appear. Twenty years later Matthew and Luke add birth stories to explain the special origins of a most unusual life. They agree on the virginal conception, the name of his parents, the hometown, and not much else. Matthew traces the family line down from Abraham the first Jew to demonstrate that Jesus has Jewish credentials. Luke, in the other direction, traces the genealogy backwards from Jesus to Adam, the first man, so that all peoples are included, not just Jews. Jesus is an equal-opportunity Savior. Mark: suddenly showing up at the Jordan. Matthew: a virgin momma and Jewish family tree. Luke: a virgin momma and an all humanity family tree. What's left for John to say?

With John there's a leap of imagination and theological insight, and a big one. Back to the beginning, back before creation, back before time into the mysterious depths of eternity past, when there was only God and alongside God not a second God, for that would be polytheism, but *the Word of God*, as inseparable for us as a thought and the words in which it's formed. God and God's Word, God's wise speech. John is moving us towards what will eventually become the full-blown doctrine of the Triune God, that within the one God is a triune communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God in three mutually indwelling persons. But for now it's enough to reveal that God is not a simple, undifferentiated unity but a dwelling together of God and the Word, *logos* in Greek, who both *was God* and *with God*. Only later will the third member of the divine community, the Holy Spirit, be unveiled as co-equal and co-eternal. It will take the church the better part of four centuries to work out the details of the relationships within the Trinity and set proper

⁵ John 21:29-30.

guards against its misunderstanding.⁶

Whatever the rest of the story, this much is now clear. Whatever else happens, Jesus is rooted in the being of God from eternity before time. The human mind can go no further back. John does not argue for God but assumes God and then shows us that God is a dynamic intra-personal unity. Verse 1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. This was in the beginning with God.” And if you hear a deliberate echo of the first words of Genesis, John intended it so. It’s a bold move on his part, to tell the church that his account of Jesus goes back beyond and behind the revelation given to Moses and that the One who spoke creation into existence is a complex unity.

You and I know what it’s like to use a tool. A tool enables us to do one thing by means of another. My hand turns a screw with a screw driver and sets a nail with a hammer. The tool is an extension of my hand and also an instrument at one degree of separation. So it was with God’s *Word*. It was *through this Word* that all things were made. Creation bears the marks of the Creator through the means of his Word. The Creator remains transcendent even in the act of creating because it is *through the Word* at a distance of one that the work is done. The One who showed up in Jesus was instrumental in creation; all that is bears his thumb print.

Genesis tells us God spoke creation into being, and it was effected. All things through the Word and nothing, not one thing, without it. Physics, chemistry, astronomy, big and little bangs, the immense inorganic and organic complexity of all that is, visible and invisible, moving towards human beings as the pinnacle, the only ones who bear the image and likeness of God. This Word is not only *with God*; this Word *is God* on the move, shaping, creating, calling out of nothingness into being.

You too bear the marks of his craftsmanship, signed and sealed by the Maker, an original. God is not into clones, only originals. First the personal God, then the comprehensive creation seen as a whole. To the child’s question, Why is there anything? the Christian answer is God and his Word and the Holy Spirit. God did not create out of a need for love; love is already the inner life of the Trinity. God created

⁶ For a history of the doctrine of the Trinity, see Roger Olson and Christopher Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2002); or for a brief systematic treatment Roger Olson, *The Mosaic Of Christian Belief* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2002), Chapter 6, “God: Three *and* One,” 133-154.

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to express and create a stage for the human drama of salvation. So if you are looking for a theological grounding for the sciences, this is it. Order in the universe is not accidental. It is a function of the Designer.⁷ And if you are looking for an ecological angle this is it. Every species we obliterate is one less voice in the cosmic orchestra. And if the Word who became incarnate in Jesus made it, we ought to care about it. He owns it, not us. Now precisely how we that it is a matter of legitimate debate between Christian tree-huggers and believing oil explorers, but that we conserve and supervise and seek to understand is not an option.

If you had only one word to describe the person of Jesus and what happened in and through him it would have to be the word *Life*, variations on which might be *vitality* or *animation* or *energy*. And if you needed a second term it would be *Light*. *Life* is always in tension with death and decay, and *light* is the avowed enemy of *darkness*. With sin comes death to extinguish life, and with evil comes darkness to pervert and distort the good creation. The world that came from the Word has now become resistant. We are already on the far side of Eden's paradise.

It's already clear in verse 5 that the creation is not as it was in the beginning. An alien power has been let loose. Warfare has broken out, first in the heavens and then in Paradise. To the careful reader it is clear that John is mining the creation stories in Genesis to speak about Jesus. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men, and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." He puts it in a word chain to make it memorable. The resistance is real, but the outcome is not in doubt. The darkness of Good Friday was swallowed by the light of Easter morning. Where sin abounded, grace abounded even more. Sin and evil are present and real, but they are not ultimate, which is why despair is finally a sin, and why hope is the church's most powerful antidote for the depressing toxins of this world, "and the darkness has not overcome it." That is the faith that helped people sing, "We shall overcome. Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day." There is no tool that can crush a people who will not give up hope.

Twice in these eighteen verses there is a seeming interruption, as if an

⁷ On design, see Mark Mittelberg, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask* (Carol Stream, ILL: Tyndale, 2010), Chapter 1, 1-26; Rice Broocks, *God's Not Dead: Evidence For God In An Age Of Uncertainty* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2013), Chapter 4, "There Was A Beginning," 66-87; Alister McGrath, *Mere Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), "Clue No. 2- Fine Tuning: A Universe Designed for Life," 98-100.

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historical report was inserted into poetry. It bothers some scholars who take it as a later insertion. I do not. The two brief sections on John the Baptist in verses 6 through 8 and in verse 15 were there from the beginning. They are arranged in perfect balance. The Word of God is active not only in creation but also in human history, in the raising up the last great Hebrew prophet, “There was a man *sent from God* whose name was John,” whose greatest privilege was as a pointer to the One who is the light

God sent a preacher as a prophet. He knew what others did not and saw what others did not see. But John did not mistake himself for the message, verse 8, “He was not the light, but came in order to bear witness to the light.” John was a billboard announcing the superiority of another, verse 15: “This is he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me (in time) ranks before me (in dignity), because before me he was.’” A prophet humble about himself, but bold about the message.

In verses 9 and 10 we have a peculiar blend of hope and realism. The first is that there’s no human being who is without the light and grace of God. It is the light of *general revelation*, and at a minimum it consists of the intuitive knowledge that the world is not self-existent and that behind the sheer fact of creation is a spiritual world that upholds it. The visible is not all there is. This is the insight behind the diversity of world’s religions, that people have been groping in the dark for a long time and seeking, as best they could, to feel their way towards the truth. Thus no human being, however morally depraved or religiously confused, is ever totally void of the grace of God. Methodists call it *prevenient grace*, meaning by this the work of God in each person that precedes and goes before any knowledge of Jesus Christ.⁸ Verse 9 states this truth clearly, “The true light, *which illumines every man*, was coming (continually) into the world.” Every life is illumined, and if you pay attention long enough, the Spirit will reveal it.

Unlike the sun which illumines only half the world at a time, the grace of God shines everywhere, always, and within all. If you listen to people’s stories with an open ear, you’ll find evidences of this common grace and have a place to begin building a bridge towards Jesus Christ. The first act of witnessing is not speaking but listening and discerning where God had a beachhead in the life of this person before

⁸ For a fresh Wesleyan read on grace, see Don Thorsen, *Calvin vs. Wesley: Bringing Belief In Line With Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2013), Chapter 4, “Grace: More Prevenient Than Irresistible,” 44-57.

I showed up. For some it is an ethical concern, for others a sense of having been preserved and not knowing why. Listen; God will show you where to start.

The flip side is that people do not know their status. They are blind and ignorant and self-willed and spiritually deceived. This is the realism and the battle of verse 10: “He was in the world and the world was made through him, *and the world knew him not.*” The non-recognition of Jesus is not just that he looked like every other man in Nazareth, which he did. There was no halo, no glow, no far-off otherworldly gaze. Their *eyes* were blinded from the inside and *their ears* closed from within, just as Isaiah said. Never underestimate the secret workings of God’s grace, and never minimize the stubborn, blinding power of sin and evil, of habit and custom and the sheer *stuckness* of people in their destructive patterns of thinking and living. This is why they need a new birth into a new world. As Jesus said, “You must be born again. You must be born from above. You must enter a new world. You need a new life,” says Jesus, “you need my life in you!”

And if people resist him, they continue in the darkness down to death and beyond, “Unto his own he came, and his own people received him not.” But for those who cooperate with the inner workings of divine grace, there’s a moment when Jesus *is seen* for who he is. They trust, they surrender, they pray, something happens. The risen Jesus is received. He comes within by the power of his Spirit to give new life, and so radical is the life that the only adequate image is being born a second time. It’s not human technology. It’s not from your ancestors, “not of blood.” It’s not generated from within the bodies or wills of women and men, “nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man.” It’s not from within but from without; it is “of God.” It is the miracle of a spiritual rebirth.⁹ And it is universally available to all who respond with trust to God’s presence in Jesus Christ. It’s turning to face the sun that has long been shining in your back and choosing to walk towards it. It’s being raised from the dead. It’s getting to start life over afresh. It’s Jesus on the inside guiding your life and joining you to other Christians in his movement.¹⁰

A good illustration of this comes from the mission field and the work of Bible

⁹ For a Wesleyan read, see Fred Sanders, *Wesley on the Christian Life* (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway, 2013), Chapter 2, “Born Again: and the Pastor Who Wasn’t,” 51-72.

¹⁰ For how new life is shaped in community and by spiritual disciplines, see Ben Witherington III, *A Shared Christian Life* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2012).

translation. When translator Des Oatridge, working in Papua New Guinea, came to the words *born again* in John's Gospel, he asked his native co-translator to think of a good way to express it. The man explained this custom:

"Sometimes a person goes wrong and will not listen to anybody. We all get together in the village and place that person in the midst of us. The elders talk to him for a long time. 'You have gone wrong!' they say. 'All your thoughts, intentions, and values are wrong. *Now you have to become a baby again and start to relearn everything right.*'"

It's the answer Des needed. Today the words of John 3:3 in the Binumarien New Testament read, "No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he becomes like a baby again and relearns everything from God's Word."¹¹ Born again. New life from God.

That is the center of John's prologue. Some say *Yes* to continued blindness; some say *Yes* to new sight. Some believe that being born once is enough; others go through a second birth. Some remain cosmic orphans; others are adopted as God's children. And it makes all the difference, in this world and in the next.

Let me go for broke here and reveal my own prejudices through a testimony. I believe that on Easter Sunday 1954 when faithful parents presented me at the baptismal font that some marvelous things happened *to me* and *for me* and *in me*. New life in Christ was given as a gift, and just as I intuitively trusted my parents, so I met the Jesus available to me in their faith. I received the benefits not just in principle as a promise but in fact. I do not believe that a certain level of abstract rational development is required for living interaction with the Lord. John the Baptist knew and rejoiced in Jesus while still in the womb.¹² I grew in that faith as a child in all the conventional ways: Bible stories, bed-time prayers, Bible school, the love and care of an ordinary church and of faithful parents. I remember some mystical encounters at the Lord's table as a child when I strongly sense the presence of Jesus but did not have language to describe it. My grandmother Lida prayed for me often.

I also believe that in the post-puberty years that something went wrong. Conventional, small-town, racially-tinged, southern get-all-dressed-up-on-Sunday

¹¹ *In Other Words* (Mar/Apr 1993), www.PreachingToday.com search: *John 1*.

¹² Luke 1:39-56.

Methodist piety was not strong enough or deep enough to sustain me in what I was facing within and without. It was mainly about appearances and morality and not about living with God. There was no real youth ministry to speak of and few adult friends. No one to answer troubling faith or personal questions, so I went it alone and generally made a mess of things.¹³ So while I continued in church till I went to college, there was development in my life of which Christ was not a part. It was as if additional rooms were added to the house of my soul and he was not invited into them. He was in the front rooms of the house, but he was not allowed in any of the new rooms. So when I returned to him at age 19 in a late-adolescent crisis conversion experience, it felt as if I was being born again. The experience of him occupying and cleaning up the new rooms was exhilarating. And for a while there I believed that I was not a Christian up to that point, a conviction my Baptist friends encouraged and one that put all my earlier training and experiences under a cloud of doubt. I was even talked into being re-baptized by an Episcopal priest who should have known better since he was violating the canons of his own church. I later forgave him for his pastoral malpractice. I was down on the church in those early days, “Why did they never tell me before about Jesus?” They did; I just wasn’t listening very well. I was looking at the pretty girl in the pew in front of me and mentally practicing my next golf match. During prayers I worked on my grip! To paraphrase verse 10, “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, *but Phil knew him not.*”

Now this did not have to happen as it did. I was first naively *in the faith*, then *at the edge of the faith* through neglect and personal rebellion, then suddenly *back at the center* to my great relief. I was found and then nearly lost and then found again. It happens often with church kids. Some never return. With a good youth ministry or even a single, solid Christian mentor other than my parents I might have asked Jesus to fill each new room that came on line developmentally. So I believe I was born again in baptism,¹⁴ and that I was born again *again* at aged nineteen, and I confess that six months past my sixtieth birthday I feel the need to be born again *again*, that I need a fresh experience of the risen Lord to sustain me for the different challenges this part of life presents. I don’t want any new rooms in my

¹³ For a thoughtful map of the ups and downs of the spiritual journey, see Bob Whitesel, *WAYPOINT: Navigating Your Spiritual Journey* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2010).

¹⁴ The preface to our baptism service clearly teaches this in its phrase “*and given new birth* through water and the Spirit...” (*Hymnal*: 33). This angers some evangelicals.

house of which he is not a part.

It is the ideal for new religious experience to closely coordinate with human development across the life cycle and for us to move deeper and deeper into love with God as we move across life towards death. But it doesn't always happen so smoothly for all sorts of reasons: the health of the church, your own history of sin and resistance; all sorts of things visible and invisible postpone and block fresh appropriations of grace. There is no one single experience that can sustain the whole of your Christian life unless it is regularly updated and refreshed. And if updates have been postponed for years, even decades, then catching up on them all at one gulp can feel like meeting Jesus for the first time. It's all new again. The danger is in despising and discounting what came before, a sin of arrogance I had to repent of later. At my ordination the Lord whispered, and not so politely, "You are now a pastor in the church you once despised." Gulp!

We must become much more sophisticated here at Main Street in learning to cooperate with the risen Lord and the Holy Spirit so that children, adolescents, young adults, middle adults, and older adults can stay on track with Jesus Christ and not be so easily diverted into the dead ends of life. We ought not be embarrassed to ask one another, Where are you in your experience of Jesus, and where does he seem to be working in your life now? And if you are embarrassed by such a question as being *too personal*, it tells me just how far behind you have gotten in the curriculum of God's grace. You need remediation! You need a booster shot. The early Methodists did this all the time, weekly in fact, in their class meetings. They asked, How is it with your soul? This is what kept us so strong as an early movement. You either stayed up to date with Jesus and one another, or you got out! Habitual sin was just not tolerated. You were either growing, or you were gone! But when we went from being personal to being private something essential was lost. Accountability was lost. Encouragement was lost. Community was lost. Living the faith became a solo struggle instead of a group effort with multiple cheerleaders. Is it any wonder so many wander away and so many others are discouraged and wonder privately why Jesus doesn't work for them?

There is simply too much truth in verses 14 through 18 for us to cover in the rest of this sermon. But two things must be mentioned. In verse 14 the speaker shifts from third person description to first person plural testimony. John moves from speaking of *He* to speaking of *We*. "*We* have beheld his glory.... Because out of his fullness *we* have all received, and grace upon grace." Who is this *we*? It is the

John 1:1-18 16

church, the confessing community that receives new life and fresh grace in Jesus Christ. This is the community across time that does what John the Baptist and John the gospel writer did; we bear witness to the light, but we are not the light. That is important to remember, especially when a church or pastor disappoints you.

The second item is simply stated but not simply understood. If you want to know who Christians think God is, gaze at Jesus. He's the spittin' image of the Father and the alter-ego of the Holy Spirit. If God was a statue so massive you couldn't see its outline but only its shadow, then Jesus is an exact miniature and replica than can be held in your hand for close inspection.¹⁵ In Jesus God becomes physically and personally present, come to look you in the eye and reclaim you for God.¹⁶ If you wanted to save ants or slugs you'd have to crawl inside their world as one of them. But it was to save us humans that Jesus came as the Word and Son from the Father by the power of the Spirit in real flesh. "And the Word became meat and dwelt among us, setting up his pup-tent in our neighborhood." That is what verse 14 says in the vernacular. Remember that no one is without hope, and that everyone needs Jesus Christ in their life. The faulty community that keeps this message public and available is the church. It's not the treasure, but in it is hidden all the treasures of the knowledge of God. It is a good thing to be able to say *We* with the church. Conversion is incomplete without it. You can't be a Jesus follower alone.

Yes is the word that God, in his tireless pursuit of us sinners, wants to hear. Yes to Jesus Christ. Yes to forgiveness. Yes to a new life. Yes to his people, and Yes to our mission in the world. Today you could be born again, or, if you have some catching up to do, *born again again*. I want more of what God has for me, not less, and yesterday's provision is not enough for tomorrow's journey. If even the ole Grinch can be converted, so can any of us, and anyone else we know. Is there a stirring in your heart today? Is there a voice telling you that what I'm saying is true? Then for Christ's sake get off your butt and do something!

¹⁵ An analogy used by Origen (3rd century) and referenced by Dale Bruner, "Is Jesus Inclusive or Exclusive?" *Theology, News, and Notes* (Oct. 1999), 4.

¹⁶ For a presentation of the classic, ecumenical consensus on the incarnation, see Thomas Oden, *The Word of Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1989), Chapter 4, "The Incarnation," 93-132.
