

“The Word Became Flesh”

Introduction: You may have noticed that each of the four gospel accounts begins a bit differently as their authors prepare their readers for the arrival of this Jesus. Matthew begins with the family tree of Jesus, going back to God’s promise to Abraham to bring blessing to the world through one of Abraham’s descendants. He then lets us in on the struggle that Joseph went through upon discovering that Mary was pregnant. Mark begins with Jesus as an adult and the preparatory preaching of John the Baptist, as Jesus comes to receive the baptism of John. Luke begins with the birth of this Baptist fellow, and then lets us in on some of what was going on in Mary’s mind and heart as she prepared to be the mother of the one an angel told her was the Son of the Most High.

We’ll think more about those narratives as the season of advent unfolds. But we’ll begin today with John’s advent narrative, one that is not just a bit different but is markedly different from the other three. In it we find no mention of a birth, no Mary or Joseph, no shepherds or kings, and there is not a sheep, camel, or donkey in sight! Instead, John begins by giving us a cosmic view, taking us back to a time before time, to a time before the creation of the world, to a time when nothing existed except, as the old hymn has it, “God in three persons, blessed trinity!” Right from the start, John wants to clue us in to the fact that Jesus is a king like no other.

I. In the Foyer

A. As we consider this, one suggestion that’s been made is that the introduction or prologue to John’s gospel is like the “foyer” or entrance hall of a magnificent home that we’ve been given the opportunity to inhabit. It’s a place where we are welcomed, where the owner first meets us to show us around. It’s a place where, as we look around, we begin to get a sense of the beauty and majesty of the owner who is ready to receive us.

What, as we make our way to Christmas, does John help us notice? Let me offer you a handful – 5 – of items.

1. In the beginning (2x)

The first item is found in the phrase “in the beginning,” with which John begins. If we recognize that phrase, we’re meant to. It’s the phrase with which the whole Bible begins: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Ge. 1:1). What this pair of “in the beginnings” alerts us to is that if, in the beginning, God brought something new into being, John is hinting that this same God is up to something new again, a new creation we might call it. And if, in Genesis 1, the description of the “old” creation ended with the arrival of the first human pair, God’s new creation ends in John 1 with the arrival of the image of God himself. What new thing will he be about? We’re invited to wonder, to listen, even to ponder (!) this new beginning

2. Greek & Jew

A second item to notice arises as John identifies the one who has arrived, Jesus, with the name *Word*. This term has a couple of backgrounds that would have had meaning for both John’s Greek and Jewish readers. To his Greek audience, who had a more philosophical bent, the word referred to the rationality or reason that lies behind the way the universe has been ordered. To his Jewish

readers, whose minds were steeped in the OT, the word was associated with Wisdom, which was alongside God during creation, as well as with the way God continues to act powerfully within his creation – healing, revealing, judging, and delivering. As the Word, John was putting Jesus forth as the governing and sustaining force behind all things.

### 3. With & Was

A third observation comes from the words *with* and *was*. To be *with* God means that the Word is distinct from him. That the Word also *was* God means that there is a unity and identity of being that exists between them. John tells us that this Jesus was both God and yet is to be distinguished from God. Though divine, he is a distinct person from God the Father. It leads us to the mind-bending conclusion that the Son is not a created being, but that he has been with the Father forever, in a relationship of love and communion, before the beginning of time. At his very core, then, God is a relational being.

### 4. The Word became flesh

A fourth piece in our “handful” of notices is that the Lord of heaven and earth, as a relational being, is not an abstract principle but a person we can come to know. And we come to know him through Jesus as he, the Word, becomes flesh and describes God to us. He has “moved into our neighborhood,” as Eugene Peterson puts it. So, if we wonder what God is like, we simply need to look at, and listen to, Jesus. We don’t need to wonder if anything is out there. Further, we can know that God doesn’t just want to observe us from a distance, he really wants to be with us.

Illustration: One of the last items on our list, as we’ve been winterizing our house in NH, was the purchase of and wiring for a generator. These machines come in handy, I’m told, for keeping your pipes from freezing and food from spoiling during those winter storms when the power is lost. Now, some of you know that when it comes to things electrical, I’m pretty clueless. Talk of watts and amps and volts sounds like a foreign language to me! And, until just a few weeks ago, I have had no experience with how one operates, or even sets up, a generator. So you might imagine all of the questions I had for our electrician as we went through this process. For the period of about a month, we texted back and forth. He would explain one aspect of the project to me, which I would partially understand, and then I would ask another question. Sometimes he’d get right back to me while on other occasions he would not answer for a few days. It was a very frustrating process.

Finally, I simply asked, “Dominic, would you have some time to stop by in the next week so that we can talk through this project in person?” “Yes,” he said. Rama can testify to the joy I felt when this meeting was arranged. He came, we chatted for about 20 minutes, and all became clear. I picked up the generator up from Lowe’s last Tuesday and Dominic will be setting everything up in the week ahead. As wonderful and helpful as all of our technology is, there is nothing like meeting with someone in person, face to face, especially for clarity’s sake.

Something like that, and a whole lot more, is what happened on that first Christmas day. “The Word became flesh,” John tells us in his gospel account, “and made his dwelling among us.” The writer of Hebrews, incidentally, makes much the same statement as he begins: Ultimately, he talks about God coming in person, in Jesus, to give us light and to help make sure everything is clear. As the writer of Hebrews begins:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . . (Heb. 1:1-3).

Kind of like my electrician, in the past, God texted, but in Jesus he has come in person!

#### 5. Grace & Truth.

A fifth observation that completes our handful comes from the concepts of grace and truth, with which John tells us Jesus has come with and is filled with. Grace is his unconditional, undeserved acceptance and favor. Truth is how he calls us to live. We need both. If we only had grace, we'd have forgiveness but no direction. It would be like telling your child that you forgave him for hitting his sister, but you didn't tell him not to do it again. Likewise, if we only had truth, we would have direction but end up living a life of frustration as we would always find ourselves to be falling short, never measuring up. Grace without truth brings confusion. Truth without grace brings oppression. We need both. Jesus brings us both. We are accepted and directed, a gift that only comes in the package with the card signed: Love Jesus. It's a gift that we can receive by believing in his name, by trusting in who he is – the Word made flesh. It's a gift we find waiting for us at the cross, to which we now go.