

In the Beginning Sermon Series
More than a Baby - John
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When I read a book, I like to have some of the backstory to understand a little more about the characters and the plot. A good book provides that for you. When I read “Harry Potter,” it was good to learn about why he lived with his aunt and uncle and what happened to his parents. But I never expected J.K. Rowling to start the book by saying, “Way back at the beginning of time, there were a bunch of rocks floating around in the universe. One of them produced life, plants and animals grew and flourished, civilizations developed, and then God made wizards and they built Hogwarts.” That’s a bit more backstory than I think I would need to understand why Harry had a scar on his forehead.

That’s basically what John does at the start of his gospel. For our Advent sermon series, we’ve looked at how each of the gospels start their story of Jesus. We learned that Mark starts with Jesus as an adult, while Matthew and Luke both give us the birth story of Jesus, but told from different perspectives for different purposes. Today, we conclude with the beginning of the gospel of John.

John doesn’t go back to the baptism and the inauguration of Jesus’ ministry, like Mark; he doesn’t go back to the story of when Jesus was born, like Matthew and Luke; he goes ALL the way back to the moment when the world began. “In the beginning,” John’s gospel starts, echoing the words of the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, which starts the same way as it describes how God the creator spoke this world into being.

John wasn’t giving his readers a remedial history lesson. He was providing answers to some questions that had been raised about Jesus. John’s gospel was the last of the four to be written, as much as 20 to 30 years after Matthew and Luke, and one of the mysteries it sought to answer was the relationship between God and Jesus. In the other gospels, at times Jesus prays to God, but at other times he acts like God, forgiving sins and doing miracles. So, who is this guy?

John clears this up in the first line: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” the Word being Jesus. John’s choice of metaphors here is interesting. His audience would have been new Christians and curious non-Christians, all of whom would have been familiar with the Greco-Roman culture in which they lived. One of the challenges in early Christianity was how to sell the idea of Jesus to a group of people who had no connection to Judaism and were not rooted in that tradition. To the Jews, the concept of a Messiah was powerful. But to the Greeks, it meant nothing. So how do you talk about the coming of the Messiah to folks who don’t know what that means?

You use ideas they can understand. While the Greeks might not understand the Messiah, they do understand the idea of “logos,” which translates into English as “word.” “Logos” in Greek means reason or mind, the intellectual principle that governed the universe. It was a concept that carried a lot of meaning in that rational, intellectual Greek culture. So, when John writes that the “logos” was with God and the “logos” was God, he’s making a statement to the Greeks. The mind of God became a person, a real, touchable, knowable person.

I’m not sure there is any way we modern folks can comprehend the magnitude of what John is saying here. Verse 14 says, “The word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Some of the ancient Greeks were Gnostics who believed that the spirit was good but the flesh was evil, and sought to draw a distinction between the two. But John tells them that God chose to come to us

in the flesh, to get God's hands calloused and God's feet dirty and God's heart broken just like us. The incarnation, Emmanuel, God made flesh, means that God entered into the everydayness of our human existence, transfusing our ordinary with the extraordinary, the mundane with the transcendent, the routine with the eternal. As Eugen Peterson translates this passage, "The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood."

And what the Word brought with him, John says, is life, which is the light of all the people. The light/darkness dichotomy will be one John uses over and over again in his gospel, and for good reason, because in his day and time, they didn't have the benefit of electricity or spotlights. Their cellphones didn't even have flashlights! Even though in the beginning God said, "Let there be light," darkness was a powerful source of fear.

And it still is, in many forms. How many of our kids' rooms have nightlights in them? How many of us have complained about how early it gets dark this time of year? One February when we lived in Chicago, I once called the police about a UFO I spotted. After a lengthy investigation, it turns out it was the sun. But there are other darknesses that feed our fear, as well. The darkness of being alone. The darkness of the unknown future. The darkness spread by hate, by stereotyping, by fear-mongering. It seems like lately everybody seems to be mad at everybody about everything. We live in a dark world.

It's into this world – this world of terrorism and racism and judgmentalism – that the Word bursts forth each Christmas, moving into our neighborhoods and bringing with him the light. But here's the problem with that light. It doesn't just light up the dark places around us. It also lights up the dark places with us, illuminating those parts of us that we want to stay dark. Jesus comes and shines a light in the dark corners of our hearts, exposing the parts of us we'd rather not show to others. If we open ourselves to Christ's incarnation, then that means we have to be willing to be exposed for the ways we have contributed to this world's darkness. Our greed exposed. Our selfishness exposed. Our love of convenience exposed.

By this light we are exposed, but also by this light we are made clean. John gives us the reassuring word that the light that is coming will shine in the darkness, and that the darkness – the darkness of our deepest fears and prejudices – will not overcome it. If we allow him, Christ can drive back our darknesses. One of my favorite moments of the year is coming soon. It's the end of our Christmas Eve service. We light one single candle – the Christ candle – to remind us of Christ's coming into this world. But we don't stop there. Then, we take the light from that one candle and we pass it through our midst, illuminating our own candles, until the whole sanctuary is flooded by our individual lights. We are called to stand in that light, to bathe in it, and then to reflect it into the darkness around us, to take the love and grace of Jesus Christ and show to the world – one person at time – how that light can overcome the darkness.

But that only works if we prepare room for Jesus to move into our neighborhood. John starts his gospel with "in the beginning" because he sees the incarnation as a fresh start for us, as a time of new possibilities. God is doing something radically new in this world by becoming one of us, a flesh-and-blood person who knows what it's like to be us, to deal with our fears, to face our anxieties, to have to love people who do a great job of making themselves unloveable. This Christmas, God is interjecting Emmanuel into our hum-drum existence. In other words, God is interrupting us.

I don't know about you, but I don't like to be interrupted. They mess with my perfectly-laid plans. We like our itineraries, our goals, our routines, our schedules. We like to have control over our circumstances, no matter how imaginary that may be. We don't like things to get off-track. Even if things aren't perfect, when they go according to our plans, they are comfortable;

they are familiar. And into that comfort and familiarity comes the Word made flesh, disturbing our well-laid plans with this cosmic, spiritual interruption.

The word “interrupt” means “to break into,” like a rupture. This Christmas, God is interrupting us with the good news of great joy that Jesus Christ will be born again. God is disrupting our self-serving routines. God’s love is erupting, flowing from the manger into our lives. The Word is coming to bankrupt the corrupt forces that seek to oppress and control. The light is coming into all the world, from Eu-rupt to Rupp-t Arena. Will we let ourselves be interrupted?

There is a light coming into this world that promises to illuminate our paths, enlighten our minds, bring warmth to our coldness, drive away the darkness. We are called to reflect that light in our conversations and our relationships, because that’s where God is most needed. You can’t plan for this; you can only experience it. Many of the most significant, influential and impacting moments of our lives are not on our appointment calendars. Who could schedule the moment you first fall in love, or your child’s first step, or your grandchild’s first word? Who could plan for the moment when Christ comes to you and dwells in your heart?

This Christmas, we are promised once again that the Word will become flesh, the Word that was with God, the Word that was and is and will always be God. And he is bringing with him the gift of light, the true light, which enlightens everyone. And through him, we can know God. Not some abstract form of God, not some theological concept of the Divine. As we get to know Jesus, we are getting to know God. So how will you get to know Jesus this coming year? What will you do differently in your life in response to this divine interruption? Or will you just keep going, giving the manger a cursory glance and then getting back to your routine? The Message translation says, “He was in the world, the world was there through him, and yet the world didn’t even notice.” Will you notice this year?

There is darkness in this world. But we also believe there is light, a light so strong that the darkness cannot overcome it. And that light has been given to us to shine! Christ’s coming reminds us that we already have that light inside of us, and it’s our job to make sure it shines through the bigotry and hate and fear this world throws at us. I know a lot of people who live in darkness and could use that kind of light. I bet you do, too. Reflect God’s love in your life. Live like you believe Christ has come. Let the good news of great joy interrupt you. The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood. Amen! Now, let there be light!