

SESSION 1 – The Word Became Flesh - John 1:1-18 (Prologue) and continuing thru verse 29

As we move along, I will be using as guides a commentary on John that my colleague, Gregg Knepp, wrote several years ago The Gospel of John: Church and Culture in Conflict, and also The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume IX: Luke & John, Abingdon Press with Gail R. O'Day writing the John commentary in that volume, and any Greek translations that I might use will be my own.

SOME INITIAL NOTES

Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke - Synopsis – Taking a common view

The Gospel of John is different from the synoptic Gospels – It is different in its chronology and theology - Luther had a high view of this Gospel...I did not...until I taught the narrative sections of the Gospel at the GIG (Gathering In God) program at my first call

We all have our canon within the canon and I am always drawn to the Jesus we encounter in the Gospel of Mark before any other so if you all out there are like me - It would be a good exercise to read your favorite Synoptic Gospel along-side our read through of John

Here are the last few paragraphs of Luther's Preface to his German translation of the New Testament (1522):

Which are the true and noblest books of the New Testament?

From all this you can now judge all the books and decide among them which are the best. **John's gospel and St. Paul's epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter's first epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books.** They ought properly to be the foremost books, and it would be advisable for every Christian to read them first and most, and by daily reading to make them as much his own as his daily bread. For in them you do not find many works and miracles of Christ described, but you do find depicted in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation. This is the real nature of the gospel, as you have heard.

If I had to do without one of the other – either the works or the preaching of Christ – I would rather do without the works than without His preaching. For the works do not help me, but His words give life, as He Himself says [John 6:63]. Now John writes very little about the works of Christ, but very much about His preaching, while the other evangelists write much about His works and little about His preaching. **Therefore, John's Gospel is the one, fine, true, and chief gospel, and is far, far to be preferred over the other three and placed high above them. So, too, the epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter far surpass the other three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke.**

In a word St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to

see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.

The Gospel of John presents a high Christological view of Christ emphasizing his divinity and not so much his humanity – This Gospel has Jesus dialoguing with his Father and his teachings point to himself as the Son of God – Whereas the synoptics talk continually about the kingdom of God

SOME PRESUPPOSITIONS THAT WILL BE THERE THROUGHOUT THE TEXT AS WE READ THROUGH IT TOGETHER

Presupposition #1 – The Gospel was the last one written give or take depending on which scholar you read between 85-120 CE – with most dating between 85-95 CE which is several years after the three synoptics (Mark first, then Matthew, then Luke)

Presupposition #2 – John's theology developed from a diverse landscape including Palestinian Judaism, Hellenistic Greek Philosophy including early Gnosticism – (Greek) Word/Logos - Knowing/Gnosis - Light/Phos – **As well as a dualistic worldview** – seeing vs. blindness or life vs. death or flesh vs. Spirit etc.

We may not think too critically about a Greek dualistic worldview but it can cause some theological problems for us such as this way of thinking - Spirit/Soul good – Material/Body world bad – Remember that Creation is created good and we are created in God's image and Jesus came as God in Flesh as a kind of corrective to this dualistic mindset but it does seep into our way of thinking quite often and we need to be aware of it and that the writer of John's Gospel was living within this worldview

Presupposition #3 - Greg Knepp makes the case that this Gospel is written to help the Johannine community in the belief that Jesus is the son of God in the midst of all the other claims that were around them. This claim would have put them in conflict with the Roman world and with other minority religious groups around them including the Jewish community that they were initially a part of

Therefore, the premise here is that this Gospel was written to and for a group that was itself a minority group, both politically and religiously, and would have viewed itself that way

Gregg Knepp makes an interesting observation worth exploring...**the result of this religious persecution mindset/identity is a Gospel narrative that reflects the conflict, struggle, and passion of a faith community seeking to define itself in the midst of a culture perceived as hostile and threatening.**

Therefore, the stories and theological claims in this writing seem somewhat unnecessarily audacious, assertive, and aggressive to the casual reader – Remember that from the perspective/lens of persecution and threat from the culture around it - this Gospel gives assurance to a group seeking to be faithful to the claim **Christ is Lord**

Ioudaioi Judeans/Jewish Leaders – The Johannine Christian community was a Jewish sect thrown out of the synagogue – They were Jews who believed differently

Interestingly, this Gospel can also be viewed through a feminist perspective – Women are almost universally portrayed in a positive light by the Gospel of John - Ch 4 Samaritan women at well - Ch 11 Confession of Martha - Ch 20 Mary Magdalene to name a few and the prologue (our reading for this session) which is very Greek in its understanding of wisdom (Proverbs 8) Wisdom is considered Feminine and the Greek word for wisdom is “Sophia”

Because of this - One could speculate that this community might have been decidedly more egalitarian than the other groups around it

I am going to echo Gregg Knepp here – It is my hope that reading these stories understood through the historical lens of persecution, conflict and social dislocation WE 21ST CENTURY CHRISTIANS CAN BETTER UNDERSTAND IT AND INTERPRET IT FOR OUR CONTEXT, TIME, AND PLACE.

Which is an interesting pondering for us because how do our brothers and sisters in Guatemala, El Salvador, Tanzania, Palestine, Liberia, Ethiopia etc. etc. view this Gospel as compared to us who are relatively comfortable in our theology and lifestyle etc.

--Greg Knepp is hoping that by reading through the lens of conflict with a dominant culture and all the conflict that can arise from that, we can honestly reflect back on what it means to claim “Christ is Lord” pre-Christendom without all of the Christendom baggage from 2000 years or so that we now have to carry with us

TIME TO READ - YEAH

THE WORD BECAME FLESH – John’s Prologue vs. 1-18 AND THEN 19-29

--Vs 1 – Here we have a classic “docetic” Christ presented to us...Gnostics... Docetic is a fancy way of saying spiritual Christ - John recognized the problem and gave us - And the word became flesh to combat the Docetism present in the rest of the Gospel

--Vs 14 - Clever use of wording and language – John, in verse 14, makes a point that no first century Jewish person could miss. He uses the Greek work “skene” which basically means tabernacle or tent. He is making the claim right off the bat about Jesus the (LOGOS) is now (SARX) flesh and the tent of the ark can now be found in Jesus...

--This God in Flesh is important – It distinguishes from Jewish folks who thought that was blasphemy **and also** the Gnostics who claimed that Jesus was God in Spirit only and just appeared to be human.

--Some other provocative observations/ponderings

1 - In these 18 verses John speaks to a wide variety of audiences during his time
Jewish Wisdom Tradition of Sophia

Gnosticism
Moses – Exodus Tradition of Judaism

Is John identifying Jesus with the feminine partner of God in the Jewish Wisdom Tradition, a piece of which is preserved for us in Proverbs 8:26-27 and Sirach 24:8, also theologically present in the Wisdom of Solomon. Marcus Borg made a compelling case in his Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time around this whole theme if you are looking for a challenge in this area

--Vs 29 – Obviously not even a veiled reference to the Passover in Exodus – We are being invited right off the bat to interpret the Jesus story which is about to be presented in this Gospel in light of the Exodus – The liberation from slavery/servitude to a foreign power! Now Jesus is that for **everybody**!!

OUR GOD IS TOO SMALL!!

Some reflection questions for us

1. The Gospel of John highlights Jesus divinity more than his humanity – How do you typically think of Jesus – More human or More Divine? Why?
2. What do the words...And the word became flesh and lived among us...mean for you?
3. In what ways have you encountered the Real Presence/Incarnation of God in your life?
4. In what ways have you encountered Jesus or seen-the Incarnate Word-in the world?
5. How would you contrast the image of Jesus presented in the first chapter of John with the image of Jesus presented in the birth stories in Luke chapter 2 and Matthew chapter 1? Which story do you find more appealing? Why? (As a side note to this reflection in my favorite Gospel of Mark there is not birth narrative Jesus just shows up ((kind of Docetic)) and yet Mark portrays the most human Jesus)