The Down and Dirty God

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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John 1:1-14

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Friends, it’s a fact—there are only 298 shopping days left before Christmas; so what are you waiting for?

Christmas, you ask? Last week, in the Story, we ended 21 weeks in the Old Testament. Today, we begin the Greatest Story Ever Told, moving now into the New Testament. It is the Story of the ultimate subject of the Gospel, Jesus Christ, Who is the ultimate object of the Gospel that He came to rescue and save, by His life, death, and resurrection. So we begin first, even in the season of Lent, with the Birth of Jesus.

Just days before Christmas, two brothers were spending the night at their Grandma’s house. At bed time, they knelt down to say their prayers. As they closed their eyes, one boy said in a LOUD voice, “Dear Lord, please ask Santa to bring me a Wii, a telescope, and a new pair of cowboy boots.” His older brother said, “Why are you shouting? God isn’t deaf.” His brother replied, “I know, but Grandma is!”

A new pair of Cowboy boots. Do you like Cowboy Westerns? At one time these movies were called “spaghetti” westerns, because many of them were filmed in Italy. (The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, 1966—can you believe my parents let me watch that when I was a wee-lad of 6?) I’m sure you have your Cowboy Westerns favorites (Dale Bruner’s John Commentary, page 59). Maybe 1952’s High Noon with Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly. The hero-sheriff, Will Kane (played by Gary Cooper), is newly retired because he’s newly married to “Amy” (played by Grace Kelly). They’re off on their honeymoon, but urgent words get to Sheriff Kane that there’s big trouble brewing back in town. This is when Sheriff Kane says to his new bride, “Amy, I’ve never run away from any man, I’m goin’ back there.” The carriage they’re riding in suddenly stops; it turns around, and in a great cloud of dust they go racing back into town!

The 1972 movie Jeremiah Johnson begins with Robert Redford coming off a riverboat in some out-west town, with this voice-over saying, “His name was Jeremiah Johnson; he wanted to be a mountain man; nobody knows his whereabouts; but that didn’t seem to matter.” Seemingly out of nowhere Jeremiah Johnson shows up to restore harmony on the Great Plains of the Wild West.
There’s also the 1992 Oscar’s Best Picture, *Unforgiven*. Tough opening scene. There’s evil on the rise in the town of “Big Whiskey,” Wyoming. A retired gun-slinger-turned-hog farmer, Bill Munny (Clint Eastwood) is living a simple life outside of town with a young wife and two kids. The people of Big Whiskey come to him and ask him to come back into town, to save the day and rescue the people!

Surely you’ve got your favorites; *The Lone Ranger?* OR maybe *True Grit* – U.S. Marshall “Rooster Cogburn,” played by John Wayne (1969) or Jeff Bridges (2010), either one works for me.

You may remember that biblical scholar Dale Bruner did a weekend Bible teaching for us here three years ago. He’s got a brilliant commentary on John’s Gospel (1,304 pages!). Bruner calls the Introduction to John, John’s Prologue, and the “overture to the symphony of the whole gospel of Jesus Christ.” (p.3). Here’s the Christmas verse, the Birth Verse, John 1:14: *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

Do you notice how the cowboy hero, who comes to rescue the people and save the day, always comes from outside town? Here is God, who, from outside us, comes into town to be with us, to fight for us, to rescue us. Eugene Peterson translates this verse, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.” This is a sweet, stunning verse! The Invisible God comes visibly down to earth. The Almighty God of the heavens and every celestial galaxy lands on planet Earth and becomes a peasant-born babe in a barn. The divine Word comes “down and dirty” into mortal flesh, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth! (Bruner, p.7). There is NO other faith, none, that can stand on this shocking, wonderful claim. With all respect, Islam’s Allah is out there and too distant to do this. With all respect, Judaism’s Yahweh (the great I AM) gets us to the door—but it is Jesus, the down and dirty God, in flesh and bones, Who OPENS the door wide!

Here are the first 3 verses of John’s Prologue: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”*
What audacity from John. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; (and better yet) the Word WAS God!” John presumes to go BEFORE even the beginning of Creation. When the Earth was still only a “formless void covered in utter darkness,” even before this God’s Word WAS! Here John names for us the Who and the What that precedes all time, all creation—Jesus Christ, the Eternal Creating Word!

How cool! Even before Adam and Eve, God already knew that we would be longing to KNOW God. God already knew that we humans would be longing to know what God is thinking and what God is doing. Way before God made us, God knew we would hunger and thirst to connect with Him, to relate to Him, to be with Him. So God gave us, gives to us, His Very WORD. Jesus is God PERSONIFIED, Who spoke and speaks to us in the most human way possible (Bruner, p.11).

God, You are amazing. We glorify You. We praise You for this Good News. We are in awe of You! The Creator becomes a creature. The Word Himself becomes a real perishable human being! The Absolute becomes Relative for us. The Almighty becomes a Baby! Heaven comes down and moves into the neighborhood, and we get to talk with Him and hear about His thoughts and understand His heart. We get to SEE Him in action. Jesus’ actions are as potent as His words, words like “Love the Lord your God with ALL your heart, mind, soul, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:25-28). “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). The WORD gives us His very words that we might live by them, act on them.

This huge, invisible God comes to our eye-level, so that we can SEE what He does and what He is like (p.41). But what does SEEING Jesus’s life have to do with our lives? Here are the last two verses for the morning, John 1:4-5: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind (of all people). The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

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The Creating Word, the Divine Life “condescends” to us (Augustine). Jesus of Nazareth IS the revelation and reality of God’s Light. Amidst the world’s death and darkness His Life was and is the Light of all people. Jesus gives us life and light; He made us, He rescues us; He loves us AND Jesus calls us, therefore, to BE Life and Light for others here on Earth.

The Samaritan woman at the well knew this; the healed blind man who regains his sight knew this; Jesus’ friends Mary and Martha knew this; Lazarus knew this—that we are to be Jesus’ life and light for others. “May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who has loved us … strengthen you for every good word and work,” Paul writes (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17). Like John, we are to bear witness to the Light. We are to be light. My grandmother lived in a patch of rural Pennsylvania mostly all her life, and every night she would keep her outdoor porch light on, all night long—winter, summer, rain, stars, snow. When I was teenager she told me why, saying, “You never know when someone might show up and need something.” That’s compelling. Light on a dark night, it’s inviting. Light communicates warmth, comfort, constancy, no matter the weather, or especially in the worst weather. Light is inviting, and I think people are looking for the Light amidst a gloomy, cynical world (ThinkOrange, p.31). Will you be a Light—Jesus’ Light—that glows, that comforts, that shines in your place of work, on your devices, in your face-to-faces, for your family, your neighborhood, your church? Will you be a Light?

Another movie, in 2013, The Man of Steel, is about another hero who comes to town from outside here, from Planet Krypton to be exact. Great special effects, great redo of Superman. Lois Lane, played by Amy Adams, said this about the “Superman appeal”: “Who doesn’t want to believe that there’s ONE person out there who could come here and save us from ourselves?” (Our Daily Bread, 2/24/15). Jesus IS the “point man” of all creation and of our very salvation (Bruner, p.15). You and I have not only been made by Jesus Christ; you and I have been rescued by Jesus Christ. Even on Good Friday, the Cross of Darkness has not overcome the Light. And on Easter morning, the Light will indeed SHINE in the Darkness. This is how greatly Jesus loves us. Jesus, the Word, IS Life and Light. And, as they say in ShowBiz, “THAT’S A WRAP.”