

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
John 1:1-18

God's Love—from the Get Go

As people of the book—the Bible that is—we are fortunate that when it comes to the story of Jesus' life, we have not just one account or testimony, but four such sources. The first four books of the New Testament are known as the four gospels that each tell the story of or bear witness to Jesus.

What is fortunate about this is that each of the four gospels, that while having the same overall purpose of revealing who Jesus is, they also each have their own take or perspective on that. This is particularly evident when starting at the beginning of each of the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each of them begins at a different starting point.

Back in December, we had a chance to jump into the beginning of Luke's gospel as we do each year in the Advent season leading up to Christmas. Because it is this gospel that provides several stories that *precede* the actual birth of Jesus. It's in Luke's gospel that we read about the heavenly angels that appear to announce not just the coming of Jesus, but the coming of John the Baptist first. This is the gospel that tells the back story before it tells the Christmas story. And tell it so well it does. Without Luke's gospel we would not have the nativity scene with its various players and characters that have inspired countless Christmas pageants over the ages. For Luke, it was important that his readers understood that Jesus' birth was part of a grand plan laid out by God that culminated in Jesus' birth. We could sum up the beginning of Luke's gospel by saying that God's love came down at Christmas.

Last Sunday, we took a closer look at how the gospel of Matthew begins its telling of the story of Jesus. In this case, Matthew was keen on verifying that Jesus was the one who had been promised to the Jews over the course of 42 generations, from Abraham to David to Joseph, Jesus' earthly father. We read the detailed genealogy in the first chapter of Matthew with the understanding that while we, in our day, may not recognize the succession of names as anything more than a novelty, the first readers of Matthew's gospel would have found it gripping to the point that they would be all ears for what would follow in subsequent chapters. And there were some specific references in the 42 generations that would have piqued the interest of Matthew's readers in that they were hints of how God's love was revealed to be broader and more inclusive than previously assumed. We could sum up the beginning of Matthew's gospel by saying that the coming of Jesus was rooted and grounded in God's love.

Today, I want to take up the beginning of John's gospel—the last one in the lineup as they are laid out in the New Testament.

But before I do that, let me say a quick word about the gospel of Mark, of which we have not spoken in recent weeks. Mark is by far the shortest of the four gospels. As a result, its beginning as well as its ending are very different from the other three gospels. As for how it begins, there is absolutely no mention of Jesus' birth or childhood. The gospel begins with John the Baptist proclaiming that there is one who is coming who will be more than had been expected. One of the statements of John sums it up when he says, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mk. 1:7-8) This then leads into the actual baptism of Jesus by John himself, the event that was our focus in worship two weeks ago. It's like the good news of Jesus is just too good for Mark to do

anything but cut right to the heart of God's incarnation in Jesus. Mark's beginning could be summed up as the good news of God's love.

So then, back to John. One of the distinctive features of John is that while it tells the story of Jesus, as do the other three gospels, it is more different than it is similar to Matthew, Mark and Luke. There are no glaring contradictions with the others, but John's telling the story as far as the chronology or order of events can be quite distinctive from the others.

Interestingly, the time line of Jesus begins in John's gospel the same way that it begins in Mark's—with the testimony of John the Baptist who speaks of the one who is coming after him who is so much greater. John has no stories of Jesus as a baby, child or young adult. But unlike Mark, John precedes this testimony of John with what is most often referred to as the prologue.

In some ways this prologue is like that first part of a TV show that starts at the top of the hour where the story of the episode is laid out in such a way that the viewer is hooked into committing to watching the full hour-long show. It's kind of like a hook that catches viewers so that they'll stick it out through the opening credits and the first commercial break to watch the rest of the show.

This prologue of John could also be likened to what is sometimes called a prequel to the larger or main story where the back story is laid out so that the main story makes more sense. For J.R.R. Tolkien fans, the smaller book, *The Hobbit*, can be understood as a prequel to the much longer and more in depth story in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

In the case of these opening words of John's gospel, they go back to the original starting point. In fact, John's gospel commences exactly as the book of Genesis commences at the start of the Old Testament. They both start with, "In the beginning. . . ." In the case of Genesis, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, . . ." (Gen. 1:1) And in the case of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (Jn. 1:1)

It is not a coincidence that both John and Genesis begin with the same words. John was making a clear connection to the Hebrew scriptures. Furthermore, Genesis is part of the 5-volume Pentateuch—the first five books of the Old Testament—which is the heart of the Hebrew bible. It's as if John is catching his readers' attention by recalling this basic starting point and augmenting it with this reference to God's Word.

Unless you were following along in your Bible as I read this passage from John this morning, you may not realize that the word, "Word," is capitalized. "In the beginning was the Word (capital W), and the Word (capital W) was with God, and the Word (capital W) was God." This is an example of John's style of writing that has much nuance and depth of meaning behind the words on the page.

It doesn't take us long, as we read further on into this first chapter of John that he is clearly referring to Jesus as the Word, hence the capital W. Jesus is the Word. While Jesus is referred to as the Word, or Word of God, in many places in the New Testament, what is really significant about this reference in the opening sentence of John's gospel is that the Word was in the beginning—at the start of it all—and furthermore that the Word and God are one. John is making two very important theological assertions right from the get-go. First, that Jesus existed before the birth of Mary's baby that we celebrate at Christmas. It's not that Christmas is not important—actually it is very important and will soon be referenced. But before John gets to that, he wants to say that just as he will say at the end of his gospel, that Jesus lives beyond his earthly life in eternal life, Jesus also lives from the beginning of time itself.

And on top of that, and closely related, Jesus and God are one and the same. This is not a reference to the full Trinitarian assertion that God is three and God is one—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Rather this points to this more full and complete understanding of God.

And all of this rich and robust theology in the very first sentence of John. For those who are paying close attention, it's like John is telling his readers to fasten their seatbelts, because the story I'm about to tell is full of surprises that testify to the amazing depth of God's love from the get go.

I mentioned earlier that Luke's gospel is where we get all the good Christmas material for our celebrations each December 24th. The one other place that we get some good material is the added story of the wise men coming to see Jesus that we read about in Matthew. Interestingly, those churches that typically worship on Christmas Day itself, following the Christmas Eve services the night before, often read this first part of John's first chapter. There is a fleeting reference to the Christmas Day event in verse 14. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (Jn. 1:14)

This is yet another statement jam-packed with theological assertions. This declares that Jesus is the incarnation of God—understood as God taking on human form, human flesh, to live among the people so as to show God's love. This sentence also prefigures what is likely the most famous verse in John's gospel if not in all of the Bible. John 3:16, "For God so loved that world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

My friends, it's hard to overstate the significance of John's gospel as far as its contribution to the full picture and understanding of who Jesus was in his day as well as who Jesus is in our day. What comfort we receive from this gospel when we consider that God's love for the world is deeper, broader, and higher than we can comprehend. What John makes so clear is that God's love for us and for the world has been there from the get go.

Taking these opportunities over the last few weeks to take a closer look at the origins of love as we encounter them in the four gospels in the New Testament have been a wonderful way to continue to engage our year-long theme of "Learning and Living God's Love, Together."

The challenge before us today, as it is the challenge before us every day, is to wrestle with the implications of God's love on how we live our lives. The world in its most basic and raw form does not necessarily have love at its core. Perhaps this is our fundamental call as those who follow Jesus as his disciples today—to show and share God's love in Jesus at home, at work, at school, in our leisure as well as in our vocation.