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John 1:1-18

Flesh Became Word

OK...there's this problem with the Gospel of John and the progressive Christian community. We don't really like to touch it. Mostly because you have to do some much with it. It's like every sermon would be 35 minutes long because you have to do all of this prep work before dealing with John. John has been so hyper-literalized that all of his metaphors seem like descriptors, all of his imagery taken as factual data. So we do what the progressive church usually does, we stay away from it. As Eric Elnes, co-founder of Crosswalk America once said, "we have a tradition in the moderate to progressive church and that is that anything the fundamentalists do badly, we won't do at all. The Bible? Ignore it. Evangelism? Ignore it. Prayer? Ideas about Jesus or Christ? Well, we'll just walk away." And that's no longer tenable to either ourselves or the millions of people who have walked away from the church because the only answer they get about resurrection, the nature of the Christ or the life and purpose of Jesus comes from the fundamentalists...even if that's not the church they go to. And that's because we're silent on a lot of the issues we shouldn't be silent on. So in this new year there are some of us who have rededicated ourselves to being alternative voices to the most common, the most fundamental, doctrines and to re-imagine what Christianity was, is and might be.

In the beginning when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

That is, of course, from the first chapter of Genesis...the creation story...or one of the two creation stories found in Genesis. You may notice the key phrase that

John's listeners would have noticed right away: "In the beginning". There are many scholarly papers that show the intricate similarities between these two sections of scripture, but the real kicker for me is that they are both creation stories. John is telling the Christmas story as a tale of creation, and he is using the framework of Genesis to say that a new kind of world now exists.

This immediately produces a problem for us, though. In the ancient world, this kind of language would have been second place. Oral narratives do not share the same adherence to concrete detail that our post-enlightenment narratives do. Ancient Judeans did not believe in a literal old man in the sky blowing on nothingness and changing it into somethingness anymore than Native Americans believe an actual coyote stole fire from fantastic beings who guarded it in the sky. Tales of creation are myths – not as in false, but as in mythic – what the father of myths for our time, Joseph Campbell, called "metaphor that opens the possibilities of human experience and the fulfillment of culture."

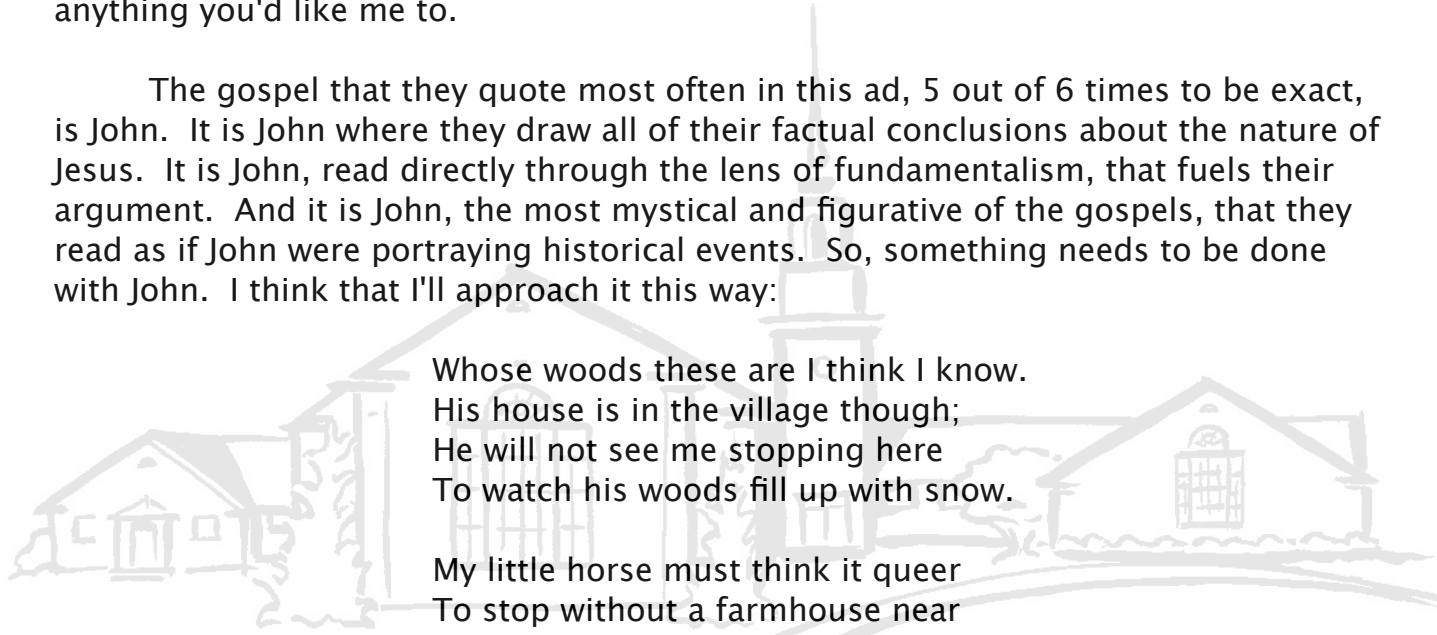
But we are lost in this sickness in our time and place where our post-enlightenment minds, so married to science as they are (and rightfully so), cannot reconcile myth and fact so we end up believing that in order for the Bible to be "true", it must be factually, historically and scientifically accurate. And when you match that with the house of cards that fundamentalism is, where if any part of the house is proven false the whole thing comes down, then you have a recipe for major anxiety. Dealing with that anxiety is how we come up with museums with dinosaurs next to humans and a movement to have students read Genesis like it was a science textbook.

There is a distinction to be made, and it is crucial that we make it. Why is all of this distinction so important? Well, it is because of our scriptures, largely. It seems almost blasphemous for a Protestant to say this, but I cannot justify sola scriptura any longer – Martin Luther's claim that all anyone needed was to read the Bible has led us down some very dark paths. No good teacher would let a student wade into Shakespeare unprepared or dive into Tolstoy or Joyce without some serious groundwork, so too the Bible requires some foundation. If you simply "dive in", especially if you are seeking definitions of Jesus or some solid evidence to solidify your theological certainty, you can end up God knows where. Scriptures are best read in community, where other people can help nurture our best ideas and temper our own prejudices. There is nothing so deadly as a religious zealot fueled by a certain and inflexible interpretation of the "word of God". When we cannot discern between a piece of poetry and a journalistic account, bad things begin to happen.

Just last week the Oklahoman ran a full page ad from the Church of Christ in Elk City that was titled, "Let the Bible Speak" and subtitled, "What About Islam?" This ad uses deceptive references, very questionable and vague sources (like, and I quote,

"The Internet") and, most critically, direct scriptural quotes taken out of context to attack, disparage and spread outright lies about Islam. They clearly disparage Islam and treat it, as I'm sure they do all other religions except Christianity as they see Christianity, as inferior. They've done some research and read at least portions of the Qur'an, but it appears they have granted that study the same amount of scholarship that they have their Biblical studies. Give me any text and let me pick and choose, what I call "line item reading", and I can support or refute almost anything you'd like me to.

The gospel that they quote most often in this ad, 5 out of 6 times to be exact, is John. It is John where they draw all of their factual conclusions about the nature of Jesus. It is John, read directly through the lens of fundamentalism, that fuels their argument. And it is John, the most mystical and figurative of the gospels, that they read as if John were portraying historical events. So, something needs to be done with John. I think that I'll approach it this way:



Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

When Robert Frost told gave us this image in our heads, he was not meaning to tell us of the nature of New England winters or the qualities of a good horse and buggy for the cold months, nor was he trying to convey an accurate description of a Currier and Ives print. He was talking about the slow crawl of death and the nature of our mortality as human beings. But this is how poetry handles these tough issues. It dances with them, not seeking answers, just interaction.

John, unlike the other gospels, is not interested in an eyewitness report or an historical accounting of the events in and around Jesus' life. John is writing decades past that time, most think late in the first century and John is uninterested in following any pattern set forth by Mark, Matthew or Luke. John is out to cover new ground. And he is also primarily interested in doing one thing: encouraging the reader/listener to "believe" that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. I place quotes around "believe" because the Greek word is pistis, which really means something much more like trust or faith, though I think that these days faith and belief are pretty synonymous so that's not a great translation either.

And because this is poetry, the words are critical. It would take a long lesson in Greek to uncover this thick poetic passage, but there is one thing I can't let pass. This, for me, is why experiencing this as poetry versus obeying this as law is a crucial argument. The passage hinges on this phrase: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us...", as the NRSV translates it. First there is the "Word", which is Logos in Greek and originally means "to gather". But by the time John is using it, Logos means the creative power of God, the force of wisdom. It echoes, and is used in Hebrew-Greek translations, the Hebrew word *dabar*, which is also a thick word with deep meaning. Simply calling it "the Word" does two things: It oversimplifies and limits the profound depth of logos and *dabar*. But the more insidious thing is that while the Greek reader would have instantly felt the depth of that word, we hear something else – the invocation of the other thing that we call "the Word", namely the Bible. And then the idolistic worship of this book becomes mixed with the nature of Jesus and of Christ and then we're off to the races. It's an issue with metaphors...they rarely translate cultures and, over time, begin to appropriate new meanings.

So we must recapture this term Logos, and find a way to make that metaphorically tangible. In fact, that's what I think that John was doing. According to biblical scholar Frederic Godet, "Asia Minor, particularly Ephesus, was then the center of a syncretism in which all the religious and philosophical doctrines of Greece, Persia and Egypt met together. It has been proved that in all those systems the idea of an intermediate divine being between God and the world appears, the *Oum* of the Indians, the *Hom* of the Persians, the *Logos* of the Greeks, the *Memra* of the Jews. If such were the surroundings in the midst of which the fourth Gospel was composed, we easily understand what John wished to say to all those thinkers who were speculating on the relations between the infinite and the finite, namely, we Christians see this link in Jesus, the one we call the Christ. And, for evangelism's sake, if you trust in him the way that we do, you will see what we see.

John was plugging into an already widely accepted belief that God was mediated to us...infinite to finite...by something that came in-between, and that thing was addressed by many cultures in the region. He called this the Logos. And

then the Word (or usually what I do now is just translate Logos as wisdom)...and then the Wisdom became flesh and en hamin with us...basically "tented" with us. This evokes the imagery of the Hebrew Bible in which YHWH "tents" with the people and resides with and in them. This language means that God is indwelling with us. And this is where poetry is crucial, especially during the Christmas season. Now this is a new step. Not only is the mediator there, but this mediation came in our own humanity. It came incarnate...in the flesh.

We're still celebrating Christmas, you know? At least in the church we are. Christmas didn't begin until the 25th, and then the 12 days started. I'm still cleaning up after the turtle doves and french hens, but the pears are delicious and with the price of gold these days, what better gift than 5 rings worth of the stuff? This 12 day run culminates on January 6th with Kathy Moore's birthday...also known as Epiphany. Epiphany marks the revelation of the manifestation of God in Jesus to the Magi, the wise men. I think that John knew this story because he seemed far less concerned with tying Jesus to the house of David and far more concerned about manifestation. Fred Craddock says that, "Whatever else John 1:14 means, it does state without question the depth, the intensity, and the pursuit of God's love for the world." God comes manifest to us in Jesus.

Now, this is the way that doctrine has taken this...God made manifest in Jesus means that Jesus is God and God is Jesus and the Holy Spirit fits in there somewhere and they are all one, but three as well. I don't happen to believe that Jesus is God as a factual statement, but if you say that Jesus in his humanity represents the best image of God that I know...that the presence of the unknowable, indescribable, eternal, ground of our being is made most clear to us in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and the continued presence of the Spirit then yes...that I can accept as beautiful, poetic truth. That is God made manifest.

Being made manifest is the fuel of poetry. Poetry takes words and makes them real and living. John is using his poetic language to convince people not to have a one-time transactional ceremony where they evoke Jesus' name and get sprinkled or dunked the right way. He's not trying to increase the membership. John is vying for our hearts, that we might give them to something mysterious and amazing, the resurrected Christ. And this Christ is manifest – now we know that God is embedded with us in the human condition. If we are to know God more fully, it will only come by embracing our humanity, not rejecting it...by being human, reaching into the human experience...which involves just as much suffering as it does joy. Manifestation is found at the hospital bedside, in the arms of our loved ones, in our broken-hearted crying, in the empty chairs and the celebrations, the closed doors and the rebuilt bridges, in our deaths and in our resurrections. It is found in painful separation, joyful reunion and in lying in a chair with a sleeping infant on your chest, or walking the dog on a cool afternoon while the sun begins to set.

That is the power of poetry. Frost doesn't grip us with information or data, he connects us viscerally to our own experience. And in times that I weave among the suffering and the joy, I often think of these lines just as when I experience the power of resurrection and the mysterious presence of Christ in the darkest of circumstances, I think of these words: What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Jesus, in John's mind, represents what we can know of God...God made manifest. And that is not some new version of God, this "Word" was with God at creation, the essence of God from the very first, not a new plan or aspect. God's vision of justice and peace, of enough for all, was there from the very beginning, though we may claim to see it most clearly in the person of Jesus and the experience of Christ.

This ends up being a great text for the new year and for Epiphany. Because the manifestation of God being revealed is the whole point of a life of faith and trust to me, and what better reminder as we enter a new year – to be on guard, to watch closely, to be aware that God has been made manifest in the world and is "tenting" with us.

This is my task for you this new year. New year's are good times for resolutions, for adding new tasks to our list. Well, here's one that is easier than 10 pounds – or maybe it's not – open yourself up to look for the manifestation of God in the world. Where in the flesh do you see the Word? Where do we make more room at our tables for the manifestation of God to peek in?

We are called to that Epiphany because we are given the power to be children of God when we trust in the wisdom that we find manifest in Jesus the Christ...when we trust that the light of compassion, grace, inclusion and hope shines in the darkness of hatred, vengeance, selfish exclusion and despair and that darkness cannot overcome it. That's what I call epiphany.

Come to the table.