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New Year's Communion  
1:1-18  
January 3, 2010  
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John

### **THE HEART OF GRACE**

The prologue to John's gospel is among the most familiar passages in the Bible, and represents a soaring, mystical, and all-encompassing testimony to what the writer believed God had accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It has the sound and feel of poetry. In fact some scholars think large chunks of it are adapted from a poem.

One thing is certain. It presents Jesus as not just supernatural, but pre-existent with God, the "word that became flesh" which is the source of all creation and all wisdom. Because I have a life-long fascination with rhetoric, and try to teach it to my students, the prologue to John's gospel is a supreme example of the divine regard that Greek culture had for what they called "logos" — the divine principle of reason that gives order to the universe and links the human mind to the mind of God.

In Jewish traditions, the term would be divine wisdom, which links the two ideas together — the Jewish concept of wisdom, and the Greek concept of the word. What the writer is saying is that in the life of Jesus, God has fused what is true with what is wise through the incarnation. This is a linguistic view of the incarnation, Jesus as God's best and wisest word. He did not come just to make us smarter or more enlightened (as the philosopher might try to do), or wiser and more devout (as the rabbi might try to do), but more loving, more alive, more grounded in the mystery of that unconditional love we call God.

John's gospel was the last gospel to be written (that is the last of the four that made it into the Bible), and it bears the marks of the Jewish Christian divorce, which is imminent, and the continuing debate over who was greater, John the Baptist or Jesus. There is also a thoroughly Gnostic mysticism in John, where only those who have the capacity to see the divine understand who Jesus was, and that's why so many who looked at him but did not accept him are rebuked as being spiritually blind. Those would be the Jews, of course, who did not convert.

John's gospel is markedly different from the other three synoptic gospels. The teaching Jesus has completely disappeared in John — no parables, no sermon on the mount, no Socratic dialogues with his disciples to get them to understand the new Ethic of the Kingdom of God — in fact the kingdom of God itself isn't talked about much in John. Jesus is on a mission of salvation, and it's time for everyone to choose — do you believe this is the Messiah or not?

Nicodemus comes to visit one night and just can't understand this whole business of being reborn from above. He does the worst thing any of us can do when reading this gospel, and that is to take the metaphors literally — “Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?” Then Jesus says again, to paraphrase in the vernacular, “Duh — there you people go again, being smart while being blind. He even says, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

It is this gospel, more than any other that fueled anti-Semitism in the church. And it is also this gospel, when literalized that has persuaded the fundamentalist wing of the church to believe that one can only be saved through Jesus, and therefore one can only get to heaven if one is born again. John's gospel, with some of the most surpassingly beautiful images of new life in the Bible, has been stolen from us by people who don't know how to read poetry.

It might be more accurate to say that John's gospel gives us *Jesus as God's best metaphor*. Something so close to the heart of God passed this way that one might even go so far as to say that he must have lived with God all along. And while Moses wasn't allowed to see God, in Jesus one could gaze right into the heart of God. Not God's backside, but God's heart. Don't you see, this is all about getting the Jews to say, “Surely this was the Messiah. We didn't get it because we were spiritually blind. If we convert, the scales will fall from our eyes.”

I long ago stopped reading the Bible literally — in fact, growing up in the house of an English literature professor, it was never considered the right way to read any great literature. It would be like reading Robert Frost's poem, “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening” and then interrogating him about the exact name of the horse in question, who owned the farm house he was near, and whether the weather service could verify that on the night in question, there was indeed winter precipitation in the form of snow. No, it's a poem about death, and our longing to go ahead and lie down to it early, but we can't because “we have promises to keep, and miles to go before we sleep, and miles to go before we sleep.”

Well, how many miles, exactly? Get out the Atlas and the calculator, and let's nail this thing down, shall we? No, no, no — let's let the poetry have its way with us. What does the writer of John's gospel mean when he says, “From his fullness we have received grace upon grace.” That sounds to me like a heaping mess of grace, as one might say in the south. A big old bowl of grace. An extra helping of grace. Grace upon grace — what does that mean?

Well I can only speak for myself, but I think it means this. Sometimes we are in the presence of something so extraordinary, so luminous, so tender and so connected to all that is beautiful and true that we would need to put a sack over our eyes not to see it. We would have to turn away. We would have to stay busy, move on, check out, get on down the road not to see it — but if we miss it, we are lost.

I believe that Jesus of Nazareth was both a human being, like you and me, and the Messiah — not because of myths that have been used to express this paradox (the virgin birth, the miracles as suspension of natural law, the blood atonement, the bodily resurrection, or the second coming), but because I believe that when he passed by, we came as close to the heart of God as one can get.

Have you ever heard the sound of Canadian geese passing overhead, and found yourself stopping whatever you were doing, and tracking them with your eyes? If they fly right over, you just can't help it, you stop and roll your head as they arch in the sky, the pitch of their honking changing as they approach, then as they are directly overhead, and then again as they fly away to wherever it is they are going. And then you don't know what to think, or what to say, except (perhaps quietly to yourself), "that was beautiful."

I believe that John's whole mystical, magical gospel is meant to say exactly the same thing. "That was beautiful."

Oh, it's hard for you and me, when we hear metaphors like the lamb of God, because we think Mary's little lamb, or lamb chops, or leg of lamb — because we are not first century Jews for whom the spotless lamb represented the supreme sacrifice — that which could restore us to God's grace and favor. And when he turned water into wine, a miracle for which every wine-growing region in the world gives eternal thanks every day — we scratch our heads and wonder about how he did that. It's a metaphor for how the water of everyday life can become wine when love transforms it, when grace ferments it, when forgiveness ages it.

When Jesus cleanses the Temple, which is the first act of his public ministry in John, instead of one the last as in the other gospels, we are confused by this whole "cleaning" business. But that's because we don't realize that the Temple had become the K-Street of religion in those days. The rich and the powerful lobbied for special favors from God, and the covenant that God had made with the people was in shambles.

When Jesus visits the Samaritan women at the well, he is not only talking to a woman who is one of those hated Samaritans, but to a woman who has had multiple husbands — we have names for those women even today, don't we? And he sees right through her long, broken, abused journey and says to her, (I'm paraphrasing now), "Why don't you love yourself, instead of the self the world has defined for you, or any particular husband would define for you, or even the place where you worship would define for you? Why don't you draw some living water for a change, instead of that bottled stuff you buy at Wal-Mart?"

And she said (and I continue to paraphrase), “But what about this argument we are having with the Jews about where one must worship—they say it must be in Jerusalem, but our ancestors worshipped on this mountain” and he said to her (and I’m not paraphrasing now), “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem . . . But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.”

Did you hear that? God is spirit and truth. Not an angry Sky Daddy, who must be bought off or appeased, flattered or bowed down to. Not Santa Claus, who knows when you’ve been bad or good so be good for goodness sake. Not a divine General with all the stars of the universe on his chest sending young men to die in vain again, believing that war is God’s will. But *spirit*. Invisible energy, in Hebrew *ruach*, the life-conspiracy that has drawn us out of the primal ooze, what I like to call the cosmic insurgency. The truth that is as painful as it is liberating. Spirit and truth. Wisdom and Word. Logos and Ethos.

Jesus the best Metaphor of God. So close to God’s heart that when he passed this way we should have seen it. Did you see it? Don’t tell me you missed it? How could you miss it? Look again. Listen again. Feel again — and all your water can be turned into wine.

Lift up your hearts . . . Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

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Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, January 3, 2010

Lord of Life, they say that a new year has dawned, but it is hard to think of it as anything other than another day in the march of the calendar that we created to measure time and the seasons. What is “new” about it? Have we awakened to a new sense of the urgency of our predicament? Have we resolved only to lose weight or give up some bad habit, or have we also resolved to live differently on the earth, and to protect this garden that we were given? Have we resolved to study war no more, or will we go on investing in death?

Have we resolved to make education our top public priority, or will we go on accepting separate and unequal schools that are only as good as their neighborhoods? Have we resolved to share out of our abundance with those less fortunate, or will we hoard our treasure until the day we die, only to realize that we really can’t take it with us?

Have we resolved to tell the truth and to honor our sacred covenants with one another, or will we go on lying and breaking our promises until no one trusts anyone anymore?

Have we resolved to be part of the solution when it comes to organized religion, or part of the problem? Any faith that does not make us more compassionate, more forgiving, more merciful, and less self-obsessed should be thrown on the scrap heap of history and melted down to make jewelry for the poor.

Let us then resolve to be, even in our imperfection, the beloved community in the year of our Lord 2010. Let us care for one another and for our neighbors. Let us sing about grace, and pray for wisdom. Let us make a new year by first making within each of us a new heart—for the year will be as new as we are new, as different as we are different, as hopeful as we are hopeful.

As the beloved community of Mayflower, we resolve to let our light shine in the darkness, so that in this year, and in this corner of the world, the darkness will not overcome it.

In the name of the one whose life, death, and resurrection rewound all the clocks in the Western world, and gave us a chance to be different in the world, even Jesus of Nazareth, our Teacher and Lord we pray, Amen.



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