

“In the Beginning”

John 1:1-18

January 6, 2008

(Epiphany of the Lord Sunday)

This morning, we begin our walk through the Gospel of John. John’s gospel is different than the other three – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John’s gospel is organized differently, uses language differently, and approaches the revelation of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, differently. Having said that, it is important to note that John’s gospel presents the same Jesus as the other three – enriching the picture we have of God’s grace in Jesus.

In order to understand what it is we are going to be reading and why it was written, we turn first towards the end of the book, to John 20:30-31, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” There is some ambiguity in the translation of this passage and some variants in the Greek text, such that an alternate acceptable reading is, “But these are written so that you may continue to believe and you may continue to have life in his name.” (The difference between those two readings is one letter in the Greek.)

Knowing why John was written is important because it will frame the sermon series. You may recall that we have preached through the Gospel of Mark, looking at the person of Jesus Christ. Then, we spent a number of weeks focusing our attention on the Holy Spirit. Last summer, we studied Daniel to explore the “sovereignty of God.” That’s the Trinity, right there. This past fall, we did a series on “the church.” Now, in this new year, we are going to look at Jesus, so “that through believing you may have life in his name.” It is not only so that you know more, it is so that you may believe for the first time or continue to believe and have life in his name. The church has no other good news to offer, it has no other message to proclaim.

Friends, this is the message for Chula Vista Presbyterian Church. The gospel is *good* news – good news for us and good news to share. We are looking at the gospel of John because of the relational nature of the experiences John describes. We are going to see how real people encountered Jesus. In order to do that, we need to start at the beginning, so that we can see the big picture.

Read John 1:1-18

This passage is generally called the “prologue” to the gospel of John. It is like the overture to a great symphony or musical – you get most of the main themes and a general outline of the movement. It moves from the transcendent God – the God who is sovereign over all and creator of all things – the God who is the same God of Deuteronomy 6, “Hear O Israel, that the Lord your God is One – and arrives at the revelation of the incarnate Word of God. In other words, this Jesus, fully God and fully human, is “God with us.” When he comes into the world, the world did not receive him. But, as the prologue points out, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”

That, friends, is a sentence to unpack. The key phrase here is that those who received him, who believed in his name, “he gave power to become children of God.” There are two things going on:

1. What does it mean to be a child of God?
2. How does one become a child of God?

What does it mean to be a child of God?

Being a child of God means that we have a relationship with God. It is more than a concept, it is a real relationship with the immortal, transcendent God. It means that the creator of everything knows who you are, knows who I am. Not only does he know who we are, he cares who we are.

This can be a stumbling block for a lot of people. How can God know everyone? How can God care about everyone?

- a. How many people do you know personally?

Even for the most outgoing and gregarious of us, the number of people we know personally is fairly small; even the most, most outgoing person would know less than 1% of all the people in San Diego. Some of you may be headed out to Qualcomm Stadium to watch the Charger’s playoff game – you and 70,000 of your closest friends singing in the rain – and even if you knew every single person there, you would know a small percentage of the 3 million people in San Diego County.

- b. More than that, how well do you know anyone?

Some, like a spouse or a best friend or a sibling, we know well. But the truth is that there are plenty of things that spouses do not share with each other, there are plenty of times when friends or siblings surprise us – showing that we do not know each other as well as we sometimes think.

- c. More than that, how many of us know ourselves very well?

How often do we live in denial, hoping that everything is ok and hoping that everyone else will think we are ok?

It is overwhelming then to think about this God – this God who is bigger than all creation, bigger than our sphere of influence and experience, bigger than all the people we know put together – that same God knows and cares for us.

The Bible teaches us that God *does* know you and does know me. God knows each one of us better than our best friends, our spouses, or even ourselves. The Psalmist says it this way,

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

God knows you personally, intimately, deeply, and loves you fully. He knows our frame, he knows our foibles, he knows our failings.

For me, this was kind of a profound realization or re-discovery: God knows *me*. I look around wonder how I even would be a blip on God's radar. But I am not anonymous to him. I am not invisible to him. What I do and who I am matters to God – why? God only knows but it is clear that God does care.

Being a child of God means that I realize and accept that God cares for me. But it is more than that, too. Having the power to become a child of God means that I have been given the gift of living in relationship with this God who knows me better than I know myself.

Living in relationship with God is a gift I have received with mixed reaction. On the one hand, I am absolutely and eternally grateful for the life that I have been given. On the other hand, I am absolutely and seemingly-eternally struggling with what it means to live under the authority of the sovereign God. Oh, how I want to think of myself as God's peer and God's equal. There are the things I would like to hold onto for myself. There are so many times when I do what I want even when I know that God would have me do other; there are so many times when I do what I think is best for me when God has called me to reach out to help someone else.

Living as a child of God means that we engage in the struggle to receive him, to believe on his name in a daily, hourly, moment-by-moment basis. So often in that struggle, we fail.

God does not leave us in failure. He does not leave us alone in the struggle. He meets us in it. This, too, is a little overwhelming – because it says that God not only knows us, he wants us to know him. He wants us to know his heart.

It is exactly what happened when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus Christ. He showed us the Father's heart even as he lived that daily, hourly, moment-by-moment struggle with us and on our behalf. God sent his only Son that whosoever should believe in him would not perish but have eternal life.

Being a child of God means that we are living in relationship with God who wants us to know him. When we live in that relationship with God, our eyes are open to see ourselves how he sees us. We can grow into the creation He intended us to be: righteous, pure, holy, fulfilled. It means we are living eternally even now. The things we do today matter because we are participating in building the kingdom we ultimately inherit as co-heirs with Christ.

How exciting is that? That is good news more than we can keep bottled up – it is news to share!

How does one become a child of God?

So, what do we do? Receive him, believe on his name, and rejoice in being born of God. There is a conviction and commitment involved.

In other words, it is a relationship God seeks; a relationship where God is God and we are his children. John makes it clear that there is no other option. If you look again at verse 13, it talks about being born as children of God, “not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”

Children of God are not born of blood; that is, made by heredity or inheritance.

We did not biologically evolve to become children of God. It is not something that you could identify under a microscope in our DNA markings. In short, just because your family goes to church, it does not mean that you have received Jesus or believed on his name. As your pastor, my relationship with God does not mean that you have a relationship with God; just because I like you does not mean everything is good with God. It is important that you have that personal relationship with God. Children of God are not born of blood.

Second, children of God are not made through the will of the flesh; that is, human common sense, natural instinct, or by satisfying the flesh.

Indulgence, self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment do not make children of God. Some of you may have seen the front page article in yesterday’s Union-Tribune about Joel Osteen being here. He is the pastor of a mega-church in Houston. He was in San Diego to promote his new book, “Your Best Life Now.”

Now, I am convinced that God works through Joel Osteen’s ministry to draw people closer, but I have grave concerns about the prosperity gospel message that Osteen shares: that God wants to make you happy and fill your life with good and pleasurable things. The problem is that God’s blessings are presented as being fulfillment of the will of the flesh. That approach underplays or ignores the consequences of our sin and the fact that being a Christian will often put you at odds with the values of the world – forgetting that the Word was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” What the world sees as wisdom, God sees as folly. What the world sees as strength, God sees as weakness. And the reverse is true, too; what the world sees as folly (namely, the cross), is the wisdom of God, and what the world sees as weakness is the power of God. Children of God are not made through the will of the flesh.

Third, children of God are not made through the will of man; as in, you cannot decide that you are going to be a child of God and force your way in on your own terms.

Many people think that if they are good enough, God will have to let them into heaven. Friends, adoption as children of God is a matter of grace, it is a gift, it is something that has been provided to us, not something we have earned. Further, heaven will be God’s heaven, where the glory of God is fully revealed and only those things that fit within God’s holy and perfect will are going to be there. There will be no rebellion, no sin, no competition for sovereignty or

authority. Our wills completely submitted to God's perfect will – and his will is greater and provides for things so much better than we can imagine anyway.

None of the ways of men make children of God. John says we are born Children of God by the will of God through believing in Jesus' name. We receive him as Lord and Savior. We follow him so that he can show us the Father's heart. We trust him because he is trustworthy. We have a relationship with him because he knows and cares for us and invites us to know and care for him.

Conclusion

One of the things people do when they know and care for each other is to share a meal together. God is no different. Jesus would later gather his disciples around the table and break bread with them. He invited them, he invites us. It is a table Jesus has prepared, it is an invitation he has issued because he knows you and cares for you; it is an invitation for you to know and care for him. It is life he is offering. How will you respond to his call to you?

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. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

8:45 invitation and communion
10:00 #508