

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“KNOWING JESUS IN *THE GOSPEL OF JOHN*”

1. God Made Known

(John 1:1-18)

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January 5, 2020

Becky, Kyle, and I all spent three years in seminary, preparing to be ordained pastors. I don't know what you imagine three years in seminary are like. But here is one very distinctive thing about studying for a Masters of Divinity degree – you learn a lot of really fancy-schmancy words.

I don't know why that is. My guess is that it has to do with an inferiority complex in ministers, because we're not studying really hard subjects like physics or computer science or economics. So – my theory goes – in order to compensate, seminaries have developed these million-dollar words to make ministers feel intellectually secure.

For example – ministers need to learn how to preach. But, at seminary, you don't sign up for a course entitled “Preaching 101”, you sign up for “*Homiletics* 101”. “Homiletics” – fancy-schmancy. You might want to take a class in the beliefs that are common among all the various Christian denominations – that would be “*Ecumenics*”. Maybe you want to learn how to rationally defend Christian beliefs – that would be “*Apologetics*”.

But at the heart of every seminary degree are Bible classes – classes about the Bible and classes on how to interpret the Bible. And for that, you sign up for “*Biblical Exegesis*.”

Exegesis – it's a fancy-schmancy word that means “interpreting” the Bible. Now, the process we're taught to interpret the Bible is, in fact, a rigorous method that's been developed over the history of the church. We pastors don't just get up here to preach based on, “You know, this is kind of how this Bible passage spoke to me”. No. Whatever the end product is, we've spent a lot of time in preparation doing “exegesis” – interpreting what precisely this Bible passage is saying.

“Exegesis” is the fancy-schmancy word for this disciplined method of interpreting a biblical passage. The word “exegesis” itself is the anglicized form of the Greek word *exēgeomai*, which means literally “to lead out” or “to guide out”. That is, exegesis is the process where we try to get inside a Bible passage, to understand it thoroughly on its own terms, so that it will lead us out into understanding. So that

we don't "read into" the passage our presuppositions and biases, but that we "read from out" of the passage what it's saying to us today.

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Today we begin our new sermon series called "Knowing Jesus in *The Gospel of John*", and you learn a lot about a book by how it begins. And when we read the four Gospels, what we learn is the church's ever-deepening understanding of who exactly Jesus is. Because each Gospel starts its Jesus story further and further back in time.

- *Mark*, the earliest Gospel, starts the story of Jesus when Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River by John, which is the start of Jesus' public ministry. *Mark* emphasizes Jesus as the one who proclaims and inaugurates the Kingdom of God.
- *Luke* begins with the Christmas story that we know so well, and Luke expresses his understanding of Jesus through the angel's announcement: "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior — yes, the Messiah, the Lord — has been born today." (2:10-11).
- *Matthew* starts his Gospel with a genealogy, of all things, and he traces Jesus' ancestry back through King David — Israel's ideal king — all the way back to Abraham — the father of Israel. *Matthew* emphasizes Jesus as the fulfillment of God's long-time covenant with His people.

But *John* starts even further back: further back than the beginning of Jesus' ministry, further back than Jesus' birth, further back than Jesus' great-great-great-great-great (insert several more greats) grandfather Abraham. *John* starts before the creation of the world — "In the beginning" — when there was only God. And as we read through *The Gospel of John*, it becomes clear that John's emphasis is that when we're talking about Jesus, we're talking about the unique, once-for-all revelation of God Himself. That focusing on Jesus — seeing Jesus in action, hearing Jesus teach — is to have the very nature of God revealed to us.

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Listen to God's word from the first chapter of The Gospel of John:

*In the beginning the Word already existed.
The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He existed in the beginning with God.
God created everything through him,
and nothing was created except through him.
The Word gave life to everything that was created,
and his life brought light to everyone.*

*The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never extinguish it. ...
The Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love
and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only
Son. ... From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after
another. For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and
faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. But the only-
Begotten, who is himself God, and is near to the Father's heart – he has made Him
known.*

John opens his Gospel with one of the most full-throated affirmations of the deity of Jesus. John calls Jesus the “Word” – it’s only here that we find this title for Jesus. Jesus is the “word” – a unit of speech, the means of communication. In other words, our God is not a silent God but a God who speaks:

- God has spoken in creation, such that “the heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1).
- God has spoken through the history of His people, in dramatic moments of guidance, protection, judgment and salvation.
- God has spoken in His Law, the words He revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai, laying out the way to live a God-pleasing life.
- And God has spoken words of warning and encouragement through the prophets.

But before all that – before the prophets, before the Law, before God’s dealings in history, before creation – in eternity past was Jesus, God’s original and unique Word, so intimately connected with God that not only was “the Word *with* God, the Word *was* God.”

Here’s John’s point: God has spoken a decisive word to us – his definitive word, his defining word – in Jesus Christ. Because Jesus is God’s Word himself. And this revealing word is so full of life that it came to life as a human being:

The Word became a human being and made his home with us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

And just to be sure that we don’t miss his point, John sums everything up in verse 18:

No one has ever seen God. But the only-Begotten, who is himself God, and is near to the Father's heart – he has made Him known.

“No one has ever seen God”. It’s one of the challenges of faith. We can’t see God with our eyes, we can’t hear God with our ears, we can’t touch God with our hands. We have to believe, because God is spirit and not tangible to our senses.

Except – in Jesus. Because in Jesus, God has revealed Himself completely and tangibly. The God who is beyond human perception and beyond human comprehension made Himself perceptible and comprehensible in Jesus. Because Jesus is the human face of God:

- When we look at Jesus act, we’re watching God act.
- When we listen to Jesus talk, we’re hearing God talk.
- When we see Jesus cry, we’re watching God’s heart break.

Because, in the literal translation of verse 18, Jesus has “exegeted” God – Jesus interprets God, explains God, reveals God. Jesus makes God known.

* * *

And this is why our faith is called “Christianity”. We believe in God, but specifically we believe in the God who has made himself known, made himself known specifically in the birth and life and ministry and healing and teaching and death and resurrection of Jesus. If you want to know who God is, what God is like, what matters to God, what God wants from you and what God wants for you – you see it all in Jesus. That’s the miracle of Christmas.

Because we’re always tempted to be idolaters. We are always tempted to believe in a God who is the way we *think* God should be. We are constantly tempted to do “eis-egesis” when it comes God, to “read into” God our own values, our own concerns, our own interests, assuming that any God worth worshipping is fully on board with our agenda. But all we end up with is a figment of our imagination, something that has no reality at all.

This approach – shaping God into our preferred image – is famously parodied in the “table grace” scene from Will Ferrell’s movie “Talladega Nights”. Ferrell, playing racecar driver Ricky Bobby, prays to God the way he wants God to be. Ricky Bobby starts his grace like this:

Dear tiny baby infant Jesus, we thank you so much for this bountiful harvest. I also want to take time to thank you for my family, and for watching over us with your baby Jesus powers.

At this point, Ricky is interrupted by his wife: “Honey, Jesus was born a baby, but he grew up to be a man.” To which Ricky replies, “I know, but I like the Christmas baby version of Jesus best, and I’m saying grace.” Ricky’s team member Cal chimes in: “I like to imagine Jesus in a tuxedo T-shirt, because it says, ‘I want to be formal, but I’m here to party, too.’ Because I like to party, so I like my Jesus to party.” And then one of Ricky’s sons adds, “I like to picture Jesus as a ninja fighting off evil Maligna”. So, Ricky picks back up his grace:

Dear 8-pound, 6-ounce, newborn infant Jesus, your golden fleece diapers with your tiny little fat balled-up fist, don't even know a word yet, just a little infant so cuddly, but still omnipotent – thank you for all your power and your grace, dear baby God.

But the *Gospel of John* throws Ricky Bobby's approach out the window. There is a God. And because, as our Creator, He is too immense for us creatures to comprehend in our own capacity, He has revealed himself – shown us who He is – by becoming a creature Himself in Jesus. God has revealed Himself, God has explained Himself, God has interpreted Himself – God has *exegeted* Himself in Jesus.

John could never get over how this was completely good news. He writes about it majestically in the first chapter of his Gospel, but he also almost comes out of his shoes describing it in his first letter:

From the very first days, we were there, taking it all in – we heard it with our own ears, saw it with our own eyes, touched it with our own hands. The Word of Life appeared right before our eyes – we saw it happen! And what happened was, incredibly, this: the infinite life of God himself took shape before us.

“We saw it, we heard it, and now we're telling you, so that you can experience it along with us, this joyful communion with God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)

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John starts off his Gospel pointing us in the right direction – this life you're about to read about, it's the story of God in human form. Because although we can't see God, God became a human being for us in Jesus, such that Jesus makes God known.

It's the starting point of all Christian faith – we start with Jesus. Because when we start with Jesus, by the time we've traveled well down the road of discipleship, we discover that Jesus isn't only enough, he's everything. He's the human face of God.

No one has ever seen God. But the only Begotten, who is himself God, and is near to the Father's heart – he has made Him known.

AMEN

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