



# WE BEHOLD HIS GLORY: THE LIGHT

SERIES: ADVENT

John 1:6–13

2nd Message

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It was Christmas Eve in 1962 when I came to understand what I really wanted for Christmas. I was 11 years old and we were celebrating our first Christmas in the new home my parents had recently purchased. It was perched on top of a hill with an incredible view that overlooked the San Fernando Valley. Christmas Eve was a formal occasion at our home. We would all dress in our finest attire, the table would be beautifully set, and we would enjoy a festive meal with close friends. But for me this was all just prologue to the REAL DEAL—the presents. I could hardly contain myself, waiting for the adults to finish their dinner and conversations so we could get down to the business at hand. Every parent knows well a child's impatient cry, "Are you done yet?"

But that year everything changed. Just as I was about to exhaust my parents' patience the doorbell rang. I ran to open the door and discovered several wrapped gifts on the porch. Looking up, I saw a yellow pickup drive away—the 1956 yellow Ford pickup that belonged to Bob Munson. Earlier that month, my mother had hired him to do some carpentry work in our new home. With a flattop haircut and sidewall sideburns, this 6' 3" man's man was the complete package of a boy's dream: a former football player, truck driver, cabinetmaker, fly fisherman and deer hunter all rolled into one. He had two daughters but no sons, and for two weeks I was his over eager carpenter's "helper" for the work my mother hired him to do. For two weeks I stuck to his side like glue, fetching his lumber, writing down measurements, spilling his coffee and tripping over his tools. Each morning I would stare out our front window like a puppy dog, waiting for the yellow pickup to appear. The appearance of that truck was the signal that my world was about to be transformed, for when Bob Munson came into our home, my world got very, very large.

Staring into the stillness of that starry night, I couldn't believe Bob, who had little money, would buy me gifts and then hand deliver them on Christmas Eve. When I opened them, I discovered these were no ordinary gifts. They were not toys or games to entertain a rich kid from the other side of town. These were "man" gifts—real tools that I would learn to use during the countless hours I spent working alongside Bob in his garage.

That Christmas Eve I learned that most valuable gift we can give another human being is "presence," not presents. It was the gift of this relationship that gave me the freedom to ask God to invade my world years before I ever heard that "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." So, what is it like to have God's presence dwell among us? John's prologue to his gospel certainly gets us going in the right direction. Like an overture to a symphony, the prologue to John's gospel is the story of the whole gospel in miniature, introducing the major themes that are about to unfold. It is written in a Hebraic style of poetic-prose with profoundly simple vocabulary, yet it is dense with layers of meaning, ambiguity and especially surprise. Last week Joel led us through the first five verses.

## I. A Beginning Before Time (John 1:1–5)

- 1 In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.
- 2 He was in the beginning with God.
- 3 All things were made through him,  
and without him was not any thing made that was made.
- 4 In him was life,  
and the life was the light of men.
- 5 The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1–5 ESV)

Knowing your history gives you roots and grounds you in your identity. My grandmother was extremely proud of her Welsh heritage and often told the story of how my great grandfather, David Morgan, emigrated from Wales in 1859. At age 15 he pulled his blind mother in a handcart clear across the country to South Fork Utah. She would always end the story by saying, "You come from good stock!" But my Welsh heritage pales miserably compared to the depth and life in our spiritual roots.

As Joel mentioned last week, each of the four gospels has a different beginning that anchors us in God's story. Mark opens with the announcement of John the Baptist at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Matthew begins thirty years earlier with the conception of Jesus and ties it in to Israel's history with a genealogy that goes back 2000 years to Abraham. Luke pushes his beginning back six months earlier to the conception of John the Baptist. When Jesus begins his ministry, Luke inserts a genealogy that traces the line of Jesus all the way back to Adam, the son of God.

One would think 4000 years of history would be sufficient to anchor us, but John stretches back even further, flying past the "in the beginning" of Genesis 1 to a time before time. As N. T. Wright notes, "John, by contrast, takes us up the mountain, and says quietly: 'Look—from here, on a clear day, you can see forever.' *We beheld his glory, glory as of the father's only son.*"<sup>1</sup> The Word that was preexistent, Creator of all things, equal with God, yet distinct from and supremely beloved by the Father ("in the bosom of the Father," v. 18) has now come among us, bringing light and life to all who believe—the ultimate gift of presence. With profound simplicity, clarity and brevity, John casts a vision of a new creation so charged with light and life it triumphs effortlessly over the darkness. My Welsh heritage is nothing compared to being rooted in an eternal beginning that is relational, intimate and at its very essence, love. As Bernard Bell concludes, "This is where all joy and gladness start, in the joy and gladness of the Father in the Son and of the Son in the Father."<sup>2</sup>

After we are captivated and seized with awe by John's exalted view of the Word—*preexistent, creator of all things, equal with God* (John 1:1–5)—we can't help but wonder: How will the Eternal Word make its entrance into history? What would you expect if the Creator God

of the universe was to “touch down” on earth? Will there be a fiery volcanic display as there was on Mt. Sinai? Will a magnificent royal procession announce his arrival? And how will he be received? The answers John gives are not what we would expect, but they give us a realistic expectation and understanding of how the light of God’s kingdom overcomes the darkness of a hostile world.

## II. A Witness to the Coming Light (John 1:6-8)

**There was a man sent from God,  
whose name was John.  
He came as a witness,  
to bear witness about the light,  
that all might believe through him.  
He was not the light,  
but came to bear witness about the light. (John 1:6-8)**

All of the gospels announce the inauguration of Jesus’ ministry with the coming of John the Baptist, but none are as understated as John’s prologue. For 400 years, Israel lived in darkness with no prophetic word. Then suddenly John broke the silence, sent by God “as the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah had said” (John 1:23). John had a privileged and pivotal role as the last and greatest of Israel’s prophets, the one who would anoint her final King, who was “the supreme manifestation of divine glory, grace and truth.”<sup>3</sup> In our world that would thrust anyone into the spotlight, not to mention fame and fortune. But, like the moon eclipsing the light of the sun, it is totally inappropriate in the kingdom. Lest there be any confusion about their respective roles, John makes it emphatically clear, “he was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.”

John’s role was that of a witness, to give testimony to the light “that all might believe through him,” a daunting task when you think about it. Belief is not intellectual assent, but an active trust and allegiance. You’re all in, giving God your full weight (like a mountain climber rappelling down a cliff who must lean back and give his full weight to the rope). The account of John’s witness is given in 1:32-34 and is verified as true in 10:41.

**I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:32-34)**

And many came to him. And they said, “John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.” (John 10:41)

Throughout his short lifetime John remained true to his role as a witness to the light and never exalted himself. When his disciples were jealous that Jesus was baptizing and his popularity was drawing all people to him, John humbly responded,

**The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:29-30).**

The best man doesn’t go on the honeymoon! It’s a beautiful thing when a human being knows who they are and who they are not. John the Baptist’s supreme joy was leading others to the Messiah and having Christ formed in them. As John later wrote, “I have no

greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 4).

John the Baptist becomes the first of many witnesses throughout the book. There is also the witness of the Father:

**There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true...And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. (John 5:32, 37)**

The witness of the Son:

Jesus answered, “Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going.” (John 8:14)

The witness of the Spirit:

**But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. (John 15:26)**

The witness of the works of Christ:

**But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. (John 5:36)**

**“I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep.” (John 10:25-26)**

The witness of the Scriptures:

**You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. (John 5:39-40)**

The witness of the he disciples:

**And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:27)**

I was in court last month to be with my daughter, who was giving testimony on behalf of a friend. The atmosphere in a courtroom is markedly different than the marketplace. When you walk in, everyone is subdued and quiet. There is no laughter or levity, because the matters being discussed are weighty issues argued in the presence of the judge, whose decision is binding. No one testifies without taking an oath and everything is recorded, so you must be very careful what you say and how you say it. My daughter was so concerned for her friend, she recruited 35 people to give their written testimony about her friend’s character. The evidence was overwhelming, and the judge ruled in favor of my daughter’s friend.

My daughter’s actions gave me a taste of how passionately God wants the world he made to experience the light and life that his Son offers. He will not rest until he has brought every possible witness to court to testify on his behalf. And now we must take up the torch. Being a witness isn’t just something we do; it is who we are in relation to the world. It’s how we bring God’s kingdom to earth. As Christ’s witnesses, our job is simple: telling the truth about what we have seen and heard directly. The venue isn’t grand—it’s just building relationships in everyday life. I’m not a great fan of spreading the gospel through tracts, social media soundbites or cold-contact evangelism. The biblical model seems to me to be through relationships that are personal, intimate and trusting. To a world

obsessed with grandeur it may seem simple and pedestrian, but an army of personal witnesses is more effective than media evangelists.

Moving from John the Baptist's role as a witness to the light, John highlights the response the light received in the world.

### III. The Rejection of the Light (John 1:9–11)

The true light,  
which gives light to everyone,  
was coming into the world.  
He was in the world,  
and the world was made through him,  
yet the world did not know him.  
He came to his own,  
and his own people did not receive him. (John 1:9–11)

When the true light came into the world, the world was again in darkness, not physically but spiritually. John's gospel portrays the world as humanity in rebellion against God, which gives more meaning to the verse that "God so loved the world."

**I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. (John 12:46)**

The true light invaded the world that he made, and though the world was made through him, the world did not know him. Then he journeyed home to the family he had birthed, nurtured, strengthened and protected for centuries, but when he knocked on the door, it was slammed shut in his face (John 4:44).

**And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God." (John 3:19–21)**

With agonizing pathos, our King is shut out in the cold, unwelcome, disowned and homeless. This speaks volumes about God's character. Though he loves the world and has come save the world, he will never force his loving, life-giving presence on anyone. He simply walks away. He goes wherever he is invited and seeks out those who are lost. Yet, even when he is forced out of the house, he leaves the door open with the invitation:

**The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." (John 12:35–36)**

The situation is grim. This new creation doesn't look very promising. But out of this dark and depressing beginning, John reshapes our expectations in paradoxically new ways.

### IV. The Reception of the Light (John 1:12–13)

But to all who did receive him,  
who believed in his name,  
he gave the right to become children of God,  
who were born, not of blood  
nor of the will of the flesh  
nor of the will of man,  
but of God. (John 1:12–13)

When the word is received, it gives birth to new children. Those who receive him, who believe in his name are given "the right to become children of God" with all the rights and privileges of full family members. In response to the rejection by his family, the Creator-King recreates God's family with a brand-new DNA. In this new family children are born not of natural descent, nor of bodily desire, nor of a husband's will, but of God. Now every "birth" is an act of God as miraculous as the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah—life from the dead! Peter brings us back to the beginning when he writes, "You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, *through the living and abiding word of God*" (1 Pet 1:23). We had nothing to do with it. Even our act of believing was a gift of God. As John writes in 1 John 5:1 "Everyone who *believes* that Jesus is the Christ *has been born of God*." As John Stott explains,

The combination of present tense (*believes*) and perfect tense (*has been born*) is important. It shows clearly that believing is the consequence, not the cause, of the new birth. Our present, continuing activity of believing is the result, and therefore, the evidence, of our past experience of new birth by which we became and remain God's children.<sup>4</sup>

After that magical Christmas Eve in 1962, I couldn't get enough of Bob Munson. Looking back on it, for seven years he was my John the Baptist. Though he was not a Christian, he modeled for me how Jesus disciplined his men **by being with them**—teaching them, feeding them, stretching them, encouraging them and taking them places they never thought they would go. In essence this is what John's gospel of John does with the Son of God. Some scholars are surprised that John's gospel, unlike the other three, does not mention Jesus' transfiguration. Tom Wright suggests that,

There is a sense in which John's whole story is about the transfiguration. He invites us to be still and know; to look again into the human face of Jesus of Nazareth, until the awesome knowledge comes over us, wave upon terrifying wave, that we are looking into the human face of the living God. Part of the point, then, is that John is teaching us to discern the presence of God in the mess and muddle of historical reality.<sup>5</sup>

So, what was it like for the disciples to have God's presence dwell among them in human form? In developing this theme, John's gospel has the most prominent use in the New Testament of God's personal name "I AM". This name, which God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:14), had become so revered in Israel that in the post-exilic period Jews did not pronounce it when reading the Scriptures. Instead they substituted the term '*adonai* (Lord) or *hashem* (the Name) for the divine name "I AM". Seven times in John's gospel Jesus unashamedly applies it to himself, and he adds a predicate to fill in the details of who he is and what he came to do (John 6:35; 9:5; 10:7; 10:11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1).

- Did Moses give bread to Israel in the wilderness? Jesus gives the bread from heaven that gives eternal life.
- Was God in search of a new shepherd for Israel who would not exploit her but sacrifice his life to feed the flock (Ezek 34)? Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.
- Was Israel's priesthood and sacrificial system the way to God found in the Torah? Jesus opens up a new and better way. Unlike the law, which brought death, Jesus by his death gives all immediate access to God, and then gives the Spirit that brings life. He is "the way, the truth and the life."

- Did Moses come to Egypt with ten plagues of death, culminating in the death of the first-born? Jesus comes to Israel with seven signs of life. Instead of turning water (the Nile) into blood, he turns water into new wine. And instead of killing the first born, he raises the first born from the dead. He is the resurrection and the life.
- Was Israel once a choice vineyard that had become fruitless, producing only worthless grapes (Isaiah 5:1-7)? Jesus is the true vine that gives abundant fruit to all who abide in him.

God's name, that elusive "I will be, what I will be," continues to become more personal, inviting and exciting in the person of Jesus. In chapter 8, he completely removes the veil when he says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58). We may miss the implication of that statement, but the Jews who heard him did not: They picked up stones to stone him for blasphemy.

Jesus is "very God *and* very man." What is so amazing about all this is that the revelation of the name did not occur in a burning bush or with the fiery thunder of Sinai. No, it took place in the most ordinary of circumstances—through *leisurely* and *intimate* conversations. Deep, lasting and intimate relationships don't happen any other way. This suggests, that while technology aims to connect us with everyone and everything, it actually disconnects us more than ever from authentic relationships and God's presence. To connect with him, we must be vigilant to completely disconnect from the world and its distractions.<sup>6</sup> It isn't easy, and it won't happen accidentally, but as the Scriptures promise, "I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me" (Prov 8:17), and "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him" (John 14:21).

I will close with "A Sonnet for the 27th of December: The Feast of St. John" by

Malcolm Guite.<sup>7</sup>

This is the gospel of the primal light,  
The first beginning, and the fruitful end,  
The soaring glory of an eagle's flight,  
The quiet touch of a beloved friend.

This is the gospel of our transformation,  
Water to wine and grain to living bread,  
Blindness to sight and sorrow to elation,  
And Lazarus himself back from the dead!

This is the gospel of all inner meaning,  
The heart of heaven opened to the earth,  
A gentle friend on Jesus' bosom leaning,  
And Nicodemus offered a new birth.

No need to search the heavens high above,  
Come close with John and feel the pulse of Love.

**See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are... Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. (1 John 3:1-3)**

1. N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in its World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 648.

2. Bernard Bell, "Hail, Gladdening Light," Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, December 6, 2009, [https://pbcc.org/sermon-archive/?sermon\\_id=1379](https://pbcc.org/sermon-archive/?sermon_id=1379)

3. Wright and Bird, *The New Testament in its World*, 654.

4. John R. W. Stott, *John's Letters* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 175.

5. Wright and Bird, *The New Testament in its World*, 648-9.

6. For a practical guide on "putting technology in its proper place" see Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family, Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017).

7. Malcolm Guite, "A Sonnet for 27th of December: The Feast of St. John," Dec 27, 2018 <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2018/12/27/a-sonnet-for-27th-december-the-feast-of-st-john-3/>