



WE BEHELD HIS GLORY: THE ONE AND ONLY

SERIES: ADVENT 2019

John 1:14-18

Third Message

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“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The Bible begins with this well-known verse. “In the beginning God”: in the beginning, before the beginning began, God was already there. “...created the heavens and the earth”: everything else had a beginning when the beginning began. Everything else was created by its Creator, God. “In the beginning was the Word.” Thus begins John’s gospel in a clear echo of Genesis 1. It continues, “All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” There is a fundamental distinction between that which was there in the beginning and that which has a beginning, between Creator and creation, between Maker and made, between God and everything else. But John tells us more than Genesis; his Prologue elaborates, telling us more about who was there in the beginning.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. (John 1:1-2 ESV)

In the opening verses of the Prologue John carefully distinguishes the two realms: the “was” and the “became,” that which has no beginning and that which began. In the beginning there already was something, or rather someone, indeed two persons. Before the beginning began, before there was time and space, before there was *when* and *where*, God and the Word were present. That’s all there was: God and the Word fully present to one another, with the Word being in the same category as God, uncreated, without beginning. Joel covered this when he took us through the opening verses of John’s Prologue (1:1-5) two weeks ago. Last week Brian took us through the middle section (1:6-13).

Today we come to the final section of the Prologue (1:14-18), where we learn more about this relationship between God and the Word.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known. (John 1:14-18)

I. The One and Only

“The Word was with God,” we read in verse 2. In verses 14 and 18 this relationship between God and the Word is elaborated: “the only Son from the Father” and “the only God, who is at the Father’s side.” Two new terms are introduced: “Father” and “only.” ESV confusingly applies “only” to God in v. 18. In both verses I prefer the NIV rendering: “*the one and only Son*” (14), “*the one and only Son, who is himself God*” (18). NASB has “*the only begotten*” in both verses. Last summer I had a conversation with someone here who was concerned that “only-begotten” had been taken out of the Bible. This can be

disconcerting, because it affects what is probably the most famous verse in all Scripture: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his *only begotten Son*, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16 KJV—as I first learnt it). But it is now recognized that “only-begotten” arose from a misunderstanding of the word, which really means “only one of its kind.” This is why I’m using the NIV’s “one and only.” Elsewhere in Scripture it is used of children, of an only child: in the NT of the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:12), and Jairus’s daughter (Luke 8:42); in the OT of Jephthah’s daughter (Judg 11:34), and supremely of Isaac whom God asked Abraham to offer up (Gen 22:2, 12, 16): “Take your son, your *only one*, whom you love, Isaac.”

In our created world sons and daughters are begotten. They are part of the world of change: a father begets a begotten son or daughter who in turn becomes a begetting parent to the next begotten generation. John’s Prologue applies this term to the Word in conjunction with the word “Father” (14, 18). So it is natural for us to think of begetting. But God is outside time, whereas begetting implies change. Nevertheless, this language of begetting is incorporated into creed and carol. We recited the Nicene Creed, with its statement about Jesus:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.

We struggle to get our heads around the language: “eternally begotten” and “begotten, not made.” These seem contradictions. In our world begetting implies something coming into being.

But if we understand the term as “One and Only” it makes more sense. The one described in v. 1 as the Word is now described as the “One and Only.” He is the beloved. God is Love. He has always been Love. This means he has always loved. Love is relational. God has always been in relationship. God and the Word are not simply with each other; they are towards each other. They are present to each other in Love. This One and Only is “in the bosom of the Father” (v. 18 NASB), or, rather weakly, “at the Father’s side” (ESV), or better, “in closest relationship with the Father” (NIV). He is the Father’s beloved, embraced in his love, which he returns. The Father and his One and Only are fully present to one another in mutual love.

Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus will himself use the language of Father and Son: the Father loves the Son, has always loved the Son. The Son loves the Father, has always returned the Father’s love. God is generous with his love; he is self-giving. He gives himself in love to the Son, his One and Only. The Son receives the Father’s love and returns it to the Father. Later theology would understand this love as mediated by the Spirit. The Father loves the Son in the Spirit, and

the Son loves the Father back in the Spirit. The primary role of a father is to love his son. The primary role of a son is to love his father back. This is what Father and Son have been doing since before the beginning. God is Love and God is Presence. This is the most important relationship of all: that between Father and Son, between the Father and the Son. What was there in the very beginning was not only two persons, God and the Word, the Father and his One and Only. Just as important as these two persons, was the relationship between them that was there at the very beginning.

2. Incarnation

In a generous act of self-giving love, God chose to create a world to receive his loving care. He created it through the Word, through his Beloved One and Only, in whom was light and life. “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John” (1:6). This man was part of the created order; he came to be. His role was not to be the light, but to bear witness about the light, the true light which was coming into the world. In the verses that Brian covered last week (1:6-13) we know that the true Light is coming, but not how, when or where. In today’s passage we find out.

John begins this paragraph with a surprising statement:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. (1:14a)

“The Word became.” The Word has always been in the realm of the “was,” where words like “always” make no sense for this realm is without space or time. The Word has been beyond the realm of becoming. But the Word became. The Word crossed over into our realm, the realm of space and time, of when and where. He became flesh, human flesh and blood. He became like one of us in a particular moment and a particular place. He entered the world the same way every human enters the world. He was born, but nine months before that he was conceived. This conception was not through man and woman coming together. Both Matthew and Luke state that it was the work of the Holy Spirit. The angel told Joseph, “Fear not... that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matt 1:20). The angel Gabriel told Mary, “Fear not...you will conceive in your womb...The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:31, 35).

The Nicene Creed carefully distinguishes the two agents: the Holy Spirit and Mary. We continued our confession of faith,

Who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven,
And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary,
And was made man.

The Word became flesh by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary. The eternal Word entered into our finite world by becoming like us. How like us? He started in a woman’s womb, but unlike us he started in a virgin’s womb. “Lo he abhors not the virgin’s womb,” we sang. Have you ever pondered this line from *O Come All Ye Faithful*? It’s a quotation from a much older hymn, the *Te Deum* (4th cent.): “When you undertook to liberate humanity, you did not abhor the virgin’s womb.” This suggests there were some who thought the womb of a woman was abhorrent. The early church battled many heresies. One of them was gnosticism, which believed, among other things, that the material world is evil, and the non-physical spiritual realm is pure and good. How could a holy God possibly be born into an evil material world? How could a holy God possibly enter into the womb? But the entrance of the Word into the world he had made is a strong endorsement of the goodness of creation. Sin may have entered the world, and darkness may have spread over it, but God is

committed to this world that he made. He likes this world; he created it for a purpose. His purpose for the world is not to destroy it so that all that is left is a spiritual non-material world with us floating around on clouds strumming our harps. His purpose is to restore the world, to release it from the bondage to decay in which it is currently groaning (Rom 8:21). The incarnation is God’s resounding “Yes!” to creation. Creation matters!

The Word did not become incarnate as a superhero. Ancient Near Eastern societies and Greco-Roman societies had plenty of stories about gods having sex with humans, usually a male god and a female human. The offspring was a hero, a semi-divine figure of great strength and ability. Such a figure was needed to liberate or save mankind. Heracles or Hercules is a notable example, but there were many more. Superheroes are plentiful in contemporary comic books and film—figures of superhuman strength and ability who appear in the nick of time to save helpless humans. But the incarnate Word was not a superhero. He was an ordinary human being like us.

The eternal Word did not pull rank and insist on being born into a royal palace with pomp and circumstance. The magi came to the palace in Jerusalem, expecting to find the one born king. But they were sent to Bethlehem, to nobodies, to a homeless couple that had been taken in, to a family who would soon become refugees in a foreign land, fleeing violence and death. The Word did not become incarnate into power, privilege and riches; he gave up all that.

The Word became flesh, became enfleshed, or incarnate. If we narrow the incarnation down to a point in space and time it was conception in Mary’s womb. The early church fairly quickly drew a connection between Jesus’ conception and his death, and between the virgin womb in which he began his life and the virgin tomb in which he ended his life. His life ran from womb to tomb. His death at Passover, Nisan 14 in the Jewish calendar, was calculated as March 25 in the Roman calendar. Then a theological connection was made that Jesus began and ended his life on the same day. Christmas Day is on December 25 not because of the appropriation of some pagan winter festival, but because this is nine months after March 25. When a new calendar was computed, distinguishing between BC (Before Christ) and AD (*Anno Domini*, Year of our Lord), the day of transition between the eras was not Christmas Day, the day of birth, but March 25, the day of conception. For many centuries March 25 was New Year’s Day in Western Europe.

The Word became flesh. He became one of us. Jesus was a man, born male, but he received his humanity from a woman, thereby showing solidarity with both male and female. In 1 Corinthians we read, “For man was not made from woman, but woman from man” (1 Cor 11:8). This verse is often quoted in discussions about the role of women. But what is too rarely mentioned is three verses later: “Nevertheless...as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman” (11:11). Our Lord entered into space and time the same way as every other human, except Adam and Eve: through the womb of a woman. The Word became flesh.

3. Born into Israel

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The *us* here is the Jews. The womb that the Word entered was a Jewish womb. He entered into Israel’s story. This is an embarrassment for some who would rather forget Christianity’s Jewish roots. The church has been guilty of much anti-semitism over the centuries. But the Word

became flesh as a Jew. Jesus was conceived and born as a Jew into Israel's story.

Israel's story has its origins in the call of Abraham. God chose Abraham as an act of grace. He made a promise to this old childless man and his barren wife: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:2-3).

In the medium term God fulfilled this in Israel. He delivered them from Egypt, brought them to Mt Sinai to meet with him, and entered into covenant with them: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." *I will dwell with you*. Israel knew what it was to have God dwelling among them. God came down and dwelt with his people, Israel. "The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days" (Exod 24:16). He commanded the people to build him a tabernacle so he could dwell among them. When the tabernacle was ready, "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Exod 40:34). The Lord's presence accompanied the Israelites through the wilderness and into the Promised Land, where it eventually transferred to the Temple that Solomon built: "a cloud filled the house of the LORD...the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD" (1 Kgs 8:10-11). God was present among his people. But eventually the prophet Ezekiel saw the glory cloud depart from the temple (Ezek 10). The Lord exiled himself from the Land and from his people. For 600 years God's Presence was absent.

"The Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us, and we have seen his glory." The word translated "dwelt" is not the plain vanilla word for "dwell." It is a word deliberately evocative of God's dwelling among his people in the tabernacle. The Word became incarnate as Jesus Christ and tabernacled among his people, the Jews. *We beheld his glory*: the Presence had returned. The Presence once more was on earth among his people. But the Presence didn't return to the temple. It didn't return to any building. When the Presence returned, it was to Mary's womb. The early church reflected much on this. In dedicating the temple, Solomon had prayed, "But will God indeed dwell on earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kgs 8:27). Now God was present in the womb. The early church realized that Mary's womb was "the container of the uncontainable one"; that her womb was "wider than the heavens." This is reflected in the song that Kady wrote for today: *Uncontainable*.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory...*full of grace and truth*." Grace and truth, a phrase repeated in v. 17, also needs to be read in the context of Israel's story. No sooner had God instructed Israel to make him a tabernacle so he could dwell among his people, than they broke covenant by worshipping a golden calf. God wanted to destroy the people, but Moses interceded and God spared them. Moses pleaded with God that his Presence with them was all-important. Then he dared ask, "Please show me your glory." The Lord hid Moses in a cleft in the rock, and proclaimed to him his Name: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in *steadfast love and faithfulness*, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exod 34:6-7). And Moses quickly bowed down and worshiped. "Abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." God's steadfast love is his loyal love, love that is loyal to covenant. His faithfulness is to his character and what he has promised to do. "Steadfast love and faithfulness" is a repeated phrase in the

OT, and is probably the phrase that lies behind "grace and truth" here in John's Prologue.

"We beheld his glory, full of grace and truth...For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (16-17). Grace upon grace: grace has been replaced by even more grace. The law, given through Moses to Israel at Mt Sinai, was a great gift from God, an act of grace. He gave Israel the gift of order, showing them how to live as his people in his Presence. But now God has given a greater gift, a greater act of grace, even Jesus Christ. We beheld his glory: as we gaze upon the Lord Jesus we see God's steadfast love and faithfulness. His faithfulness to his promises to Abraham. The locus of those promises is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Seed of Abraham. This One and Only has made God known (18). He has made him known in his loyal love and faithfulness. God will do what he has set out to do, to create a people for his Presence. He will do so in Jesus Christ, who is the visible expression of the invisible God.

The Jews *were* looking for a superhero. They wanted a king who would lead them into battle, who would overpower their enemies, notably the Romans who seemed all-powerful. They wanted a strong and mighty warrior as their Messiah. But a superhero is not what Israel needed. Israel needed a faithful and obedient servant, one who would faithfully serve the Lord and keep his word. This is what God had commissioned Adam to do in the garden. Adam had failed and been expelled from the garden. This is what God had commissioned Israel to do. Israel had failed and been expelled from the Land. This is what the Father sent his One and Only, his Beloved, into the world, into Israel, to do. The One and Only, who had always delighted in the love of the Father to whom he returned that love, was now incarnate as Jesus. Immediately after his baptism, the Spirit of God descended on Jesus and God spoke from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). Immediately Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. This was the real battle; it wasn't against the Romans. What was needed was not superhero powers, but faithfulness to God and his word. Three times Jesus resisted Satan's temptation to abandon God's word and act for his own benefit. Three times Jesus responded by quoting God's word. Then Satan left him. The victory was won. Where Adam and Israel had failed, this Beloved One and Only had become flesh and won by being faithful and obedient.

As we read in our Call to Worship:

Jesus...

being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—

even death on a cross! (Phil 2:6-8 NIV)

He came and dwelt among us. Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate, came to his own realm, but his own people did not receive him (1:11). Throughout their rejection he remained faithful and obedient to his Father. Jesus told a parable of a vineyard owner who sent a series of servants to the tenants to collect some of the harvest. But the tenants beat them up and sent them away or killed them. Finally the owner

said, "I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him." But the tenants said to themselves, "This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours." They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him (Mark 12:1-10; Luke 20:9-16).

Jesus was obedient all the way to death, even death on a cross, but the victory had already been won in the wilderness. He needed to go all the way to death to live out the full course of a human life: from womb to tomb. He endured the most shameful and excruciating death, rejected, abandoned and forsaken. But he died with his faithful obedience intact. His death was triumph over the enemy, over the forces of evil that would have diverted him from living as a true human, as a true Israelite.

Then God vindicated this faithful and obedient one. As the Creed continues, "he rose again...; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." The Word incarnate is now the risen Lord Jesus Christ. He did not put off his humanity. The risen Lord Jesus went where the Son has always been, in the Father's loving embrace. Then God sent his Spirit, spread his arms wide, and offered forgiveness, even to those who had put his One and Only to death. "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38).

When we come to God in Christ we are adopted through the Spirit as sons and daughters of God. "To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (1:12). This is not believing abstract points of theology. It means orienting our lives around Jesus, making him our center, giving him our allegiance. We become participants in that love between the Father and the Son from before the beginning of time. We are drawn into the bosom of the Father. This is what being a follower of Jesus is about: becoming embraced into the Father's love through the Lord Jesus Christ in the Spirit, becoming his beloved sons and daughters. The Word entered into Israel's messy story. God can surely enter into our messy story. There is no life so messed up that God will not enter it and draw us into his love.

The language the NT church used to describe one another is family language: brothers and sisters. Over and over, the apostles address those to whom they are writing as "Beloved." We are the people who love another. We are brothers and sisters together. We are the new family, drawn from every nation, language, tribe and tongue, from every socioeconomic class, male and female. We are gathered together around the Lord Jesus as the Beloved children of God, brothers and sisters of one another

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth. When we come to him, and give him our allegiance and loyalty, we join him in the bosom of the Father and hear his words, "You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter, in whom I am well-pleased."

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. (1 John 3:1-2)

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Uncontainable

Kady Taylor, written for this Sunday.

God of Love, God of Presence,
Before creation of the world,
You existed in communion,
Face to face, the Father and the Word.

Holy Spirit flows between You,
Pours out Love heaven could not hold.

Uncontainable,
Fully God and fully man,
The One who is the Great I AM,
The promised King, the Holy One,
The God who dwells with us, Emmanuel.

God of Life, God of Wonder,
Eternal Word to see through eyes like mine,
You'd walk the earth Your hands had formed
To make the way for truth and life.

The Holder of the universe
Held within the virgin's womb.

Uncontainable,
Fully God and fully man,
The One who is the Great I AM,
The promised King, the Holy One,
The God who dwells with us, Emmanuel.

The highest heavens can't contain,
You're infinite, enthroned in grace,
And yet you've made this holy space,
Where you have come to dwell;
No tent or mountain, temple, womb
Can hold you God, and yet it's you
Whose love outweighs our weight of sin,
Praise God, Emmanuel.

Holy Spirit flows between You,
Pours out Love heaven could not hold,
The Holder of the universe
Held within the virgin's womb.

Uncontainable,
Fully God and fully man,
The One who is the Great I AM,
The promised King, the Holy One,
The God who dwells with us,
Holy Spirit flows between,
The God who dwells with us,
The Holder of the universe,
The God who dwells with us,
Emmanuel.