

Thankful to be Swimming With Elephants

John 1-12

I. The Introduction

A. Elephants

Good Morning! My name is Shawn Reese. I'm one of the pastors here, and today we continue our studies in the Gospel of John. You're probably wondering what the Gospel of John has to do with elephants. Well, many commentaries on John will typically have a quote something like this: The Gospel of John is like a pool that is "shallow enough for a child to wade and deep enough for an elephant to swim" (Morris, 7). On the one hand, this Gospel is commonly given to new believers and even inquirers to explore the Christian faith. I remember many years ago after doing an Advent message on the prologue to John, a lady who knew nothing about Christianity called me and said she was interested in learning more. So I said, "Just read the Gospel of John." But as I said that, I remembered there are some really deep texts in this Gospel. So, I quickly told her that when she gets to something that doesn't make sense, just skip to the next chapter. Forgive me Lord! It probably wasn't the best answer, but that's the only thing I could think of in the moment. So, yes, this Gospel is shallow enough for a child to wade. But, on the other hand, as Leon Morris says, "Years of close study of this Gospel does not leave one with the feeling of having mastered it, but rather with the conviction that it is still strange, restless, and unfamiliar" (Morris, 7). This Gospel welcomes the humble and endlessly challenges the wise. And, we say of course it does. Because it's the story of Jesus, and Jesus is for all people. And, for this, we are eternally thankful.

Let's pray. Father will you touch all of our hearts this morning and make us fall in love more with your Son Jesus through your Spirit. Amen.

B. The Structure

I need to explain what we are doing today. Advent begins next week, so today is our last week in John this fall. We will pick up John again in April. Last week we finished chapter twelve, which *is* the great division of this book. Chapters 1-12 is "The Book of Signs." Chapters 13-21 is "The Book of Glory." Since I finished John 12 last Sunday, I didn't want to go into chapter 13 for only one week. So, today, we will review chapters 1-12, and we will leave time at the end for a story and communion.

C. The Prologue

And to begin, I want to go to the prologue, one of the most magnificent pieces of literature ever written. It is much more than simply a preface to the Gospel. The prologue is more like an overture to a great musical. It's a bit like the first song in *The Sound of Music*. That first song, *The Hills Are Alive*, introduces all the great themes for the musical. Likewise, the prologue to John introduces all the great themes of his Gospel. In fact, it's been said that you should read the prologue before any text in the Gospel as an introduction for that text.

I'm not going to read the whole prologue, just a few verses. But I want us to try something this morning in the spirit of thankfulness. After I read a scripture text this morning, I will say, "This is the Word of the Lord." To which you all will respond with, "Thanks be to God." Let's try this with the prologue.

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...

14 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...

18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.
(ESV)

The Word of the Lord
<Thanks be to God.>

Why is the Gospel of John deep enough for elephants to wade? Because the Word, Jesus, who was with God and who was God, became flesh and dwelt among us, and has made the living God known. The exceedingly majestic, immortal, infinite, invisible, living God now has a face! And that face is Jesus.

II. The Mighty Words

A. The Introduction

I don't know about you, but as I've studied the Gospel of John, I've imagined myself being invited to go on the Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon. And, as we talk, he asks me what I do, and I say I'm a pastor. He then asks me what kind of church, and I tell him a Bible-believing non-denominational church in the Bay Area. He responds, "So you believe in the Jesus from the Bible?" And, I say yes. And, then, he asks, "Why? Why do you believe in Jesus as opposed to any other religious figure out there?"

If you're a follower of Jesus, how would you answer that question? Here is how I would answer it: "I believe in Jesus because no one ever said the things Jesus said. And, no one ever did the things Jesus did.

And, of course, I would go to the first 12 chapters of John to explain.

B. The Mighty Words

And, I'll begin with the words Jesus said. It's actually in John, chapter 7, where some policemen are sent to arrest Jesus but they come back without Jesus. And, why? Because in their words, "*No one ever spoke like this man!*" (John 7:46).

C. The I AMs

Indeed, no one in history ever spoke like this man Jesus. And, it's in the Gospel of John where we hear best his unique claims about himself, captured in seven "I Am" statements. These seven statements go a long way in describing Jesus' identity as the great I Am, as the one who "was with God and was God" (John 1:1). Jesus makes the living God known through these words. But, also, in these "I Am" statements, we hear the unique gifts Jesus brings us as the I AM, gifts for which we are eternally thankful.

- Jesus says, *"I am the bread of life"* (John 6:35). Along with water, bread is essential for life. So, Jesus is saying that he is essential for life. Even more, belief in him will bring us satisfaction and contentment.
- Jesus says, *"I am the light of the world"* (John 8:12). By saying this, Jesus is saying that with him, we will not walk in darkness, and the fear, confusion and disorientation that comes from walking in darkness. By believing in him, we now have a light to navigate our post-modern, confusing world.
- Jesus says, *"I am the good shepherd"* (John 10:11). With this saying, Jesus is claiming that he will lead his sheep in love, kindness, grace and mercy. He will even lay his life down for the sheep. And, by listening to his voice above all other voices, his sheep will follow him to abundant pastures.
- Jesus says, *"I am the gate"* (John 10:7). Maybe the most enigmatic of Jesus' sayings, but, as the gate of a sheep enclosure, he will provide safety and security for those who believe in him. And, this safety and security lasts through the grave into eternity, for Jesus also says that no one will snatch his sheep out of his hand.
- And, standing before the grave of his dear friend Lazarus, Jesus says *"I am the resurrection and the life"* (John 11:25). Right now, this is my favorite I AM saying. With this saying, Jesus is claiming to give his resurrection life to those who believe in him. As he went through the grave and came out the other side, so will all those who put their trust in him. Yes, death is real and awful, but it is not final for those who believe. A believer's life is no longer bound by death.

There are two more I Am statements coming in chapters 14 and 15. We'll talk about them when we get there.

For now, have you ever heard anyone speak like that? No, because, as those policemen said, *"no one ever spoke like this man"* (John 7:46).

"I am the bread of life.

I am the light of the world.

I am the good shepherd.

I am the gate.

I am the resurrection and the life."

The Word of the Lord.

<Thanks be to God.>

III. The Mighty Deeds

A. The Introduction

No one ever spoke like Jesus spoke. But, no one ever did what Jesus did either. In the first twelve chapters of John, Jesus also makes unique claims about himself through six mighty deeds that are called “signs.” John calls them signs, because they point beyond the miracle to an underlying spiritual truth. They “signify” something deeper.

B. The Six Signs

Of the many John could have picked, he picked six **astounding** miracles. Jesus begins by turning 125 gallons of water into vintage wine. He then heals an official’s son from a distance. He feeds some 10,000 people with five loaves and two fish. He heals a lame man, a blind man and brings Lazarus back from the dead. Indeed, they are unbelievable mighty deeds!

So what is John trying to show us through them? What is the deeper truth? Well, in each one, Jesus makes God known by revealing His glory. As I said last week, glory is a way of speaking of the character of something. Therefore, in each mighty deed, God signs his name, as if to say, “This is me!” Because in each one, his character is being made known.

But, I think there are three character traits that are especially revealed:

1. **Love:** Each one is done with the loving word or touch of Jesus. “Jesus loves me this I know” is the foundational truth of life. And each mighty deed demonstrates Jesus’ love and his Father’s love.
2. **Hope:** In each one, a person or people reach the end of their rope. They stand before Jesus in utter helplessness. And, Jesus responds as if to say, “I got this! I’m sufficient for this. In fact I’m sufficient for every need you have from now through eternity.” It’s like in each one, I hear Jesus say, “*With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible*” (Matt 19:26).
3. **Abundance:** In each one, there is a hint, sometimes subtle, of the exceeding abundance of life with Jesus, the with-God life. Jesus really has come to give life and life abundantly eternally and each deed reveals it (John 10:10).

C. The Seventh Sign

But, there is one climactic sign still to come, which, of course, is beyond chapter 12. As the days of the week have six days, plus one of extra significance, so with John, there are six signs with a final one of extra significance. Other people have done amazing deeds similar to those first six signs. But, no one before Jesus or after Jesus ever did what Jesus did on the weekend that changed the world.

In chapter 1, John the Baptist pointed at Jesus and said, “*The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29). No one, except Jesus, has ever died for the sin of the world. No one, except Jesus, has ever bled for the forgiveness of sins. And, no one, except Jesus, has ever went through the grave and came out the other side alive into an eternal body.

This is, of course, ultimately why we can believe Jesus when he says, *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live”* (John 11:25).

The word of the Lord.

<Thanks be to God.>

IV. James Garcia’s Story

V. Do You Believe?

A. Who is Jesus?

The truth is that every one of us, *like James*, is confronted with the reality of God, which means a decision about Jesus. What will you do with him? The most important question in life is “Who is Jesus?” And, specifically, who is Jesus to me? I wonder how you answer that question this morning?

This is actually John’s purpose for writing this Gospel, to confront us with this question. In every single text in the first 12 chapters, John implicitly or sometimes explicitly confronted each one of us with the question, “Hey reader, after reading *this* text, who is Jesus to you?” He will clearly state this purpose in chapter 20, *“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name”* (John 20:30-31).

The Word of the Lord.

<Thanks be to God.>

Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? I pray your answer is yes. I pray Jimmy Fallon’s answer is yes. And, if your answer is yes, then as John says, *“you will have life.”* That’s a promise! You will have eternal life because of who Jesus is and because of what he has done.

B. Thankful

And, so, we are thankful to be swimming with elephants in the book of John, because we do see so clearly the majesty of Jesus, the gift he is and the life he gives, as he makes God known. And so, as we enter Thanksgiving and the Christmas season, we remember to be thankful for Him. Even while we eat our turkeys and open our gifts, we remember that He is the greatest gift of all and the giver of all good things. We remember to keep him at the center of life, and with him at the center, the center holds.

So, I want to give us a chance to reflect. I want to read the last verse of the Psalter: *“Let everything that has breath [thank] the Lord”* (Ps 150:6). The word there is actually “praise” but I want to say thanks this morning.

And, here’s what I’d like to do. I’m going to repeat this three times, with a short time between each one.

- After the first time, can you think with thanksgiving about your own heart and your own breath, of your desire to thank the Lord. Perhaps you feel the Lord speaking to you this morning and this might be a time for you to invite the Lord into your life?
- After the second time, in your own way, can you think with thanksgiving about who Jesus is and what he has done.
- After the third time, in your own way, can you think with thanksgiving about your longing that all creation, everything that has breath give thanks to the Lord.

“Let everything that has breath [thank] the Lord.”

“Let everything that has breath [thank] the Lord.”

“Let everything that has breath [thank] the Lord.”

Amen.

Benediction

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. All glory and honor and power are due him forever and ever. Amen.

Resources

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching the Gospel According to John* (Regent College Course)

Klink, Edward, *John (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*

Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to John (NICNT)*