

February 20, 2022 Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Genesis 1:1-5 John 1:1-9

"John: A Portrait of Jesus"

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For the past three weeks in this sermon series we have discussed how Jesus is portrayed in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, or what are called the synoptic gospels. I have talked about Jesus as the inspiring teacher in Matthew challenging us to be our best. Jesus as the man of power and action urgently intervening on our behalf in Mark. In Luke, we heard of a Jesus who is the master host, ever welcoming us and widening the circle of who is invited to the party.

Each of these three gospels begin the story of Jesus with his human origins. We get a genealogy and a couple of birth narratives, and Jesus being baptized. In the gospel of John it is as if we are given a view of Jesus with a wide angle lens. The conversation does not begin with Jesus in the flesh. There is no cooing infant to be found here. Instead we are transported back to the dawn of time. Echoing Genesis we hear, "In the beginning..." We are told that Jesus Christ was present at the creation of all that is and in fact all that is was created through him. His work did not begin in the dusty streets of ancient Palestine but before there was even a world to walk upon. And the metaphors begin to cascade as they will throughout this Gospel. Jesus will refer to himself as the "bread of life," "the door," "the good shepherd," "the true

vine," "the resurrection and the life," and "the way" among others. Here at the start of the gospel, Jesus Christ is called "the Word" and "the light."

The gospel of John is less concerned with giving us some form of accurate biography of Jesus. John has rearranged the events of Jesus' life that the other three gospels agree upon. Instead he is seeking to grapple with the metaphysical mystery of Jesus' identity as one who is both fully God and fully human.

Perhaps the most telling of the metaphors that John uses to explore this mystery is "light." In John, Jesus the Son, and God the beloved parent, are bound at the hip. Over and over again we hear Jesus say such things as "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." In the other gospels there are moments when Jesus appears to struggle with a potential distance from God but this never happens in John. When you are in the presence of Jesus you are always undoubtedly in the presence of God.

When John speaks of Jesus being the light of the world he is telling us that Jesus illuminates God's presence in our midst. Jesus allows us to see God. In John, when Jesus calls the disciples, he says to them, "Come and see." In John, the miracles that Jesus performs are called signs because they provide a picture of God's power at work in the world. When Philip asks Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." Jesus responds, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

It is light that lets us see. It is interesting in Genesis when we hear about the creation of the world, God creates light

before we need it. Light is created before any creature with eyes even exists. It is a proleptic gift, a gift in anticipation of what we will need. And so it is with John's description of Jesus' origins. We do not hear of his birth into a broken world. We hear of his existence before the world began. Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God's grace, existed before we even needed grace, before anyone at all had ever made the smallest mistake, had ever even had the opportunity to turn away from the divine. Redemption was woven into the very fabric of creation.

In the gospel of John, the victory over all that threatens us, our broken-ness, our mistakes, even death itself, is already assured. In the presence of light, darkness will never prevail. Since those ancient days electricity has made light more prevalent and accessible.

Yet as common as light has become in this world we still do not fully understand it. Scientists still debate whether it travels as a wave or stream of particles. Could it possibly be both? As vital and important as it is to our basic existence, it is still a mystery.

We can see why light is the perfect metaphor for John to use for Jesus. It is something we need so deeply and yet we still do not fully understand it. Was Jesus merely a man who was a wise teacher? Was he God only pretending to be a man? Could he possibly be both? Yes, indeed. But as vital and important as Jesus Christ is to us, he is still a mystery.

Here is the other thing about light. It may literally allow us to see but it does not guarantee what we see. In a

short story by Eudora Welty she has one of her characters, a traveling preacher, utter this plea, "Lord, give me the strength to see the angels when I am in paradise...Do not let my eyes remain in this failing proportion to my loving heart..." Jesus may be the light of the world. He may be illuminating the divine in our midst. But our eyes are not always all that good at recognizing God in the midst of the everyday.

I am continually struck by how many different perspectives people can have when they are looking at the same thing. Our fractured political climate is a potent demonstration of this. And I am even more taken by how, depending on our mood, we can see the same scene in vastly different ways. One can come home at the end of the day and walk into a house strewn with children's toys and despair the clutter and chaos. And that same person can walk into the same scene with a different attitude and experience joyful gratitude for the blessing of a bustling family.

The writer Neil Gaiman captures this reality in his usual dark manner. A character in one of his short stories says this, "I've heard we see the world not as it is but as we are. My landlady told me she would not willingly walk upon the beach for it was littered with weapons: huge, hand-fitted rocks each ripe for striking." (Gaiman, p. 67) Later in the story the landlady murders the narrator. An absurd and disturbing example but it does speak to how much who we are affects what we see. One person's resort location is another's potential murder scene.

What do we see when we look at the world? The preacher Tom Long once said, "If you can see the kingdom of Heaven, you'll

drop your nets and follow.” He goes on to suggest that our failure to follow Christ is not really so much a failure of will but a failure of religious imagination.

Some days my religious imagination has its mojo going. As I meet and speak with people I have the sense that the Holy Spirit is indeed at work. The possibility of God’s presence is tangible. And then there are other days when I am doing the very same things, sitting in the same meetings, speaking to sometimes the very same people and I struggle to sense God’s presence.

My personal antidote to this malaise is to slip into the sanctuary and sit up in the balcony for a few minutes. The sanctuary can be a distinctly different space depending upon the time of day and the nature of the sunlight coming through the windows. In the early hours of the day, the fresh brightness of the morning light streaming through the eastern windows makes the room gloriously pop and glisten. In the late afternoon the light coming in through the western windows is a golden, almost sepia, tone, that makes the room feel soft and warm. The morning light awakens me to God’s glory in our midst and the afternoon light reveals the divine’s intimate loving care. The sunlight feeds my religious imagination to the possibilities of God’s presence. In ancient times it was custom to orient all churches toward the east so they could welcome the arrival of the light and the Lord on each new day.

Life is not always easy and certainly the past two years have come with more than their share of darkness which threatens to dampen our religious imagination. But even in the midst of

this, we are reminded that redemption is indeed woven into the very fabric of creation. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it." Before time began a promise was made that all would be redeemed and made whole once more.

When we cannot find the presence of God in our world or in our lives; when we cannot see how God is possibly present; when our imagination refuses to allow us to find the divine in our daily comings and goings we can turn to the gospel of John.

In the gospel of John, Jesus is that sunshine streaming through our sanctuary windows. He is the light. He is the one who provides the illumination that we may see divine possibilities. Jesus is the one who is so enmeshed with all of whom God is that his presence illumines for us a very different way to see the world. Jesus sparks our religious imagination. Jesus brings us a vision of the world that is infused by its loving Creator.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Gaiman, Neil, *Trigger Warning: Short Fictions and Disturbances*, HarperCollins, New York, 2015.