

Marriage and the Incarnation: The Spousal Nature of the Prologue to the Gospel of John

The Gospel of Mark begins with John the Baptist announcing the arrival of Jesus and the beginning of his public ministry. The Gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy. He traces Jesus' lineage back to Abraham and thereby situates Jesus firmly in the story of Israel (Matthew 1:1). He is the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and David. Luke begins his gospel with the miraculous births of Jesus and his cousin John. His genealogy traces Jesus' ancestry back to Adam (Luke 3:38). Jesus is the one who has come to rescue all of humanity.

The Gospel of John begins in an altogether different place. He begins "in the beginning." This is clearly an echo of the opening of Genesis, but it is a beginning before the creation of time, before the creation of the world. John anchors the story in a relationship, a relationship that always existed. Before Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb, he was the Word of God, and "the Word was with God and the Word was God." This is a creation story, or more properly, a story about a NEW creation.

In Genesis, God did not make the world through manipulation, change, or violence, as the gods of the ancient world did. He simply spoke, and the world came into being. God said, "Let there be" . . . light, a dome, waters under the sky, etc., and there was . . . light, a dome, waters under the sky, etc. In the story of the new creation, God spoke again. This time, his Word was a person, his own Son.

We believe that God is not one being among others, as most of the ancient world believed. Rather, he is the cause of all being. We believe that there is only one God, not multiple gods. Still, the remarkable truth, nearly impossible to grasp, is that this one God is a community of three equal persons. It took the church several hundred years, much pain, and, in many cases, spilled blood to arrive at the articulation of this mystery in the form of the Nicene Creed.

At the time of Jesus, the people of Israel "were not just waiting for the kingdom of God, or the coming of the Messiah, or the restoration of the twelve tribes. Above all, they were waiting for the coming of the Bridegroom God of Israel, who [would] forgive their sins and unite them in an everlasting covenant."¹

With the words of Psalm 19:5 in mind, "like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy," St. Faustus of Riez said this about the Incarnation:

*"Like a bridegroom coming from his marriage chamber our God descended to earth in his Incarnation, in order to be united to his Church. . . . By Christ's action in Galilee, then, wine is made, that is, the law withdraws and grace takes its place; fleshly realities are coupled with spiritual, and the old covenant with its outward discipline is transformed into the new. For, as the Apostle says: The old order has passed away; now all is new! The water in the jars is not less than it was before, but now begins to be what it had not been; so too the law is not destroyed by Christ's coming, but is made better than it was."*²

¹ Pitre, Brant, *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told*, Image, New York, 2018, p.27.

² Sermon by Faustus of Riez (*Sermo 5, de Epiphania 2: PLS 3, 560-562*).

The prologue of John's gospel is very rich. What follows is only an introduction to its treasures. In the prologue John introduces many of the central themes of his gospel: light, life, darkness, rejection of Jesus, the glory of God revealed, and the transformation of believers. We will spend three days reflecting on the first five verses of this magnificent poem. The first five verses hinge on two relationships: the first is the relationship of "the Word" to God, and the second is the relationship of "the Word" to creation. The third meditation on the first five verses will focus on the freedom of "the Word's" self-gift. We will repeat those verses each day for three days, but on each successive day, we will highlight different phrases for our meditation.

We will conclude this unit of the Bible study with three meditations on selected verses of the prologue, one meditation on Jesus' baptism (1:29–34), and a final meditation on John the Baptist's role as the best man at a Jewish wedding (3:25–39).



John 1:1–5: The Word Was God

Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: John 1:1–5

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 came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Meditation

The Word was God. Since Israel had only one God, the Word (in Greek, the *Logos*) could not be another god. “The Word” was also not just a way of referring to God when he was acting as creator. The Word was God, but he was not “The God” (in Greek, *ho theos*). “The God” had become something of a technical term that the early Church used to refer to God the Father. So, the Word was God, but he was not the Father. We only have one God, but two distinct persons. As the Church reflected on this mystery, they came to see that the love between the Father and the Word, who was his Son, was also a person. We know this third person as the Holy Spirit.

Can you see how the relationship between two persons who have become one flesh and whose love would bring forth another person could be an icon, even if imperfect, of the community of persons that is the one God?

Quiet reflection: *Reflect on one or two ideas that came to mind in the reading or the meditation. Share one idea with your spouse.*

Prayers and Intentions: *As if talking to a friend, tell the Lord what and who are on your mind.*

Lord’s Prayer: *Conclude your intentions by praying the Lord’s Prayer together.*

Blessing: May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

Unity Prayer: God, make our hearts one. Amen.



John 1:1–5: All Things Came into Being Through Him

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Meditation

The Word and creation. When God created the world, he did it by speaking. There was no cosmic struggle, no violence. God simply said, “Let there be . . .” and there was light and life. Then God said it was good. He filled creation with light (“Let there be light”); he assigned great lights to govern days, nights, and seasons. He flooded that good creation with his glory, his presence, with his life. He gave creation the power to grow, evolve, and produce more life. He made men and women in his own image. That is, he made them persons like himself, persons capable of relationships, with each other, and even more important, with him.

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John 1:1–5: The Darkness Did Not Overcome It

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Meditation

It had always been God's desire to dwell with humans in the good creation that he had made. His light and life flooded the good creation. But the image bearers rebelled, and darkness crept into the good creation. It was a monumental battle. But darkness could not win, because darkness is merely the absence of God, who is pure light. The creature could never overcome the light, because the light is always there. John chose the Greek word *katalambanō*, which is translated here as "overcome." This word is full of meanings, and John intends those who sing this hymn that is the prologue to be aware of them all. In addition to "overcome," *katalambano* means to arrest, to overtake, to seize, to comprehend, or to understand. John will play with all of those meanings throughout the course of his gospel. There are two things to note at this point. First, the darkness of the passion and death will not be the triumph of darkness; rather, it is the moment when God's true nature as pure self-emptying love will be most clearly manifest. Second, in the resurrection of Jesus, darkness itself will be given a death blow, and never again have the final say in human life.

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Reading: John 1:9–13

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Meditation

One of the great truths of the Genesis creation accounts—actually, one of the things that makes this account unique in the ancient world—is that while men and women are different, they are equal. Marriage, then, is the union of two equal persons. The Trinity is also the union of three equal persons. For the Bridegroom God of Israel to take a spouse, he must find one who is his equal. That clearly eliminates ordinary human beings, who could never become uncreated beings. God must make us so, and only God is able to make us so. What must happen, and what is promised here in verse 12, is that we receive the Word by believing in his name, and thus receive power to become children of God—children not by nature, but by the choice and action of God, who transforms us to be like him. As Athanasius said, “God became man that man might become God.” ³ Or, in St. Peter’s words, the Word became flesh to make us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). And St. Irenaeus put it this way, “For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God.” ⁴ This is God’s action, and it allows us to participate in the divine nature as one of his children. So intimate is this participation in his nature that we can become his spouse. As the human and divine natures were united in one person, so will the human and the divine be united in the wedding feast of the Lamb.

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³ St. Athanasius, *De inc.* 54, 3: PG 25, 192B.

⁴ St. Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 3, 19, 1: PG 7/1, 939.



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Reading: John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Meditation

This is the moment when human history turned. As St. Faustus said, *“Like a bridegroom coming from his marriage chamber* our God descended to earth in his incarnation, in order to be united to his Church. . . .” The Bridegroom God of Israel became a human being in order to take a human bride. Two natures in one person reveal the spousal love of our God. God and man united, never to be separated. God committed to being one with us. He took on our nature so that we could share in his. For all eternity, the creature and the Creator are united, bound together in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In him, God has come to dwell for all eternity with human beings. In him, we see the glory of God—not glimpsed opaquely, but seen as clearly as only the Son could make it so. This is the central mystery of our faith. In Jesus, we see the truth about God and the truth about humanity. In Jesus, truth is incarnate. The invisible God is made visible in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

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Reading: John 1:15–18

(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Meditation

The Incarnation of the Word in a human family changed the history of the world. God showed the fullness of his love for humanity by becoming one with us. It is a story in which marriage and marriage imagery figures prominently. It is a story about the union of persons—the Godhead—and the union of God with his created image bearers: the Incarnation of the Word of God, God's only begotten Son. We can talk about these mysteries but will never fully comprehend them. However, there are many signposts along the way. These signs participate in the mystery toward which they point, but never reveal the fullness of the mystery by themselves. Our marriages are one such signpost. As participants in that great mystery of God's union with us, we grow each day in the experience of self-giving love.

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Reading: John 1:29–34

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." ³² And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

Meditation

When the Word became flesh, we learned that the one God is a community of person—but their unity and sharing of one life are so profound that there is only one God. The union of divine and human in the one person of Jesus is an expression of the spousal love of God for humanity. Marriage participates in this mystery, in an admittedly imperfect way, because it is the union of two persons who do not lose their individual identities, yet become one new being. (See Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.") We learn too that the love they share is so real and complete that it too is a person who is God. The Holy Spirit is not another God, but a person who is fully divine, sharing one life with the Father and the Son.

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Reading: John 3:25–30

Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." ²⁷ John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease."

Meditation

It was the job of the best man in a Jewish wedding to bring the bride to the bridegroom when it was time for the wedding. John's task, his preaching, his whole ministry, was to prepare the bride, including providing for the ritual washing, and then to lead her to the bridegroom. He called the people to repent, to confess their sins and be washed in baptism so that they would be ready for the arrival of the Messiah. "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:4–5). John the Baptist was not the Messiah. He was the bridegroom's friend, the best man in an ancient Jewish wedding. We know that any wedding is not about the attendants, as important as they are; it is about the couple. And this wedding is about the most remarkable bridegroom of all time. The long-awaited Bridegroom of Israel has indeed arrived. Marriage of the human and the divine is at hand. What great joy!

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