

imperfect

&

invaluable

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Introduction

We read Scripture to meet God with the desire that it will speak directly to us. We must keep in mind however that if we are reading a book of the New Testament, it was written at a specific time for a particular church or regional cluster of churches. In other words, it has a particular situation or setting in mind when it was written. My best read on what experts think is that the Gospel of John was written 90-100 CE. This means that it was written to a second-generation church. By that I mean adult converts to the Christian faith would have children and even grandchildren who grew up in Christian homes. The work of evangelizing was still vital and important at least for the next two centuries until Christianity was legalized by Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire because it challenged Caesar as Lord and the pantheon of Roman gods and goddesses. This meant that Christians could be viewed as a threat to the Empire, as unpatriotic and even rebellious.

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, France (who lived about 125-200 CE) knew Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey and who lived about 69-155 CE) who was a disciple and ordained as bishop by John the Apostle (the fisherman brother of James who were sons of Zebedee and were called as disciples by Jesus). Irenaeus wrote that he had been told by Polycarp that John the Apostle wrote the Gospel of John for the church in Ephesus, the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire at that time. Like Smyrna, Ephesus is located on the Western coast of Asia Minor.

The Spread of Judaism and Christianity

Since 1000 B.C., Jews traveled and relocated for the sake of commerce during the reigns of King David and King Solomon. The large relocations of Jews (the Dispersion) happened during the invasion and conquering of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) by Assyria in 722 B.C. and Judea (the Southern Kingdom) by Babylon in 587 B.C. The end result of this resettlement of the Jews in distant lands is that when they were freed to return to their home land (as told in the Hebrew Scriptures of Ezra and Nehemiah), many chose to remain in their new land.

right after winter solstice as light begins to increase. John the Baptist's birth is celebrated on June 24 following summer solstice when light begins to decrease.

According to the Jewish law, a person cannot serve as a witness for themselves (5:31). John the Baptist was a "burning and shining light" as a testimony on Jesus' behalf (5:35). But an even greater witness for Jesus is the signs, works or miracles that Jesus performed. Like *Moses who lifted up the serpent in the wilderness* (3:14; Numbers 21:9), or the prophets Elijah and Elisha, Jesus healed the sick. There was a Messianic expectation as expressed in the last chapter of the last prophet in the Old Testament: *See, the day is coming...for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings*, (Malachi 4:2). Even the preparatory work of John the Baptist, the new Elijah, was foretold in the last two verses of Malachi 4:5-6.

While the words of John 5:37-47 sound despairing for the Jews who did not believe in Jesus, these same verses can speak words of encouragement to our faith. We can hear the voice of God or the Holy Spirit because his word lives in us (vv. 37-38, even now it lives in us as we meditate on his word). The Scriptures do testify to Jesus and encourage our faith (v. 38). We do have the love of God living in us because we do believe, accept and follow Jesus (vv. 42-44).

Discussion Questions:

1. Who or what has been a major witness to you in your faith in Jesus?
2. What is it about their witness that has influenced you?
3. What encouraged you in this reading?
4. What is your prayer today?

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Week 8 (John 5:30-46) Testimony

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?” Being asked that question in the Oswego County Courthouse in New York grabbed my attention and made my heart pound in my chest. I choked out the words that I would only speak truth, so help me God! I was on the witness stand for a frequent worshiper at the mission church I served. Millie was about forty years old and facially impaired because of a hit-and-run accident. She came from a very large family with many siblings like her with learning disabilities. Millie was illiterate, lived on government assistance but was extremely resilient and street smart.

The District Attorney was also a member of the church I served. The irony in this story is that Millie and the DA often worshiped God together and now we were in his courtroom. I gave testimony to what I had seen. The whole truth and nothing but the truth.

John the Baptist returns to the stage in chapter 5 as a witness to Jesus. John first gave his testimony to Jesus in John 1 and then again in John 3:22-4:2 in a conflict story about who is baptizing more disciples: Jesus team or John’s team. John 4:2 makes it clear that Jesus himself was not the one who baptized but it was his disciples who baptized new followers. While the only reason given for John to baptize in chapter 1 was to reveal Jesus as the Lamb of God, we must infer from the other three gospel accounts that John and his disciples were baptizing as a ritual cleansing for repentance (Mark 1:4). We must also infer that Jesus’ disciples were baptizing for repentance as well (3:22-4:2). Our understanding of Christian baptism was initiated after the death and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6:3-8). In the waters of baptism, we buried and raised to new life as we participate in the life-giving actions of Jesus. Similar to John 1, John the Baptist makes it clear that he is not the Messiah (3:28). In John 3:29, Jesus is the bridegroom, the church or believing community is the bride and John the Baptist is the friend of the bridegroom. John rejoices in the words and actions of Jesus. The Greek words for “increase” and “decrease” in John 3:30 is noted by Raymond Brown in his commentary on John (The Anchor Bible, volume 29, p. 153), to be the same Greek words used to describe the “waxing” and “waning” of the celestial bodies in the sky. This verse impacted tradition so that Jesus birth is celebrated on December 25

By the time Christianity began to spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, Jewish synagogues were scattered across the Empire. Millions of Jews lived outside of Judea by the time of Jesus. Jesus was believed to be the long awaited Messiah by his twelve disciples and the early evangelists like Paul, Barnabas and Silas. . Because Jesus and his first followers were Jews, Christianity initially grew up within Judaism. It was only natural that preaching and witnessing about Jesus was often begun in Jewish synagogues as they traveled from city to city (like Antioch in Asia Minor: Acts 13:14ff; Thessalonica in Macedonia: Acts 17:1-2, etc.). It was later (time unknown) that due to disputes within Judaism and persecution by the Roman Empire as a result of the misunderstanding of the teaching and practices of Jesus’ followers that the mission to Gentiles (non-Jews) began.

The tradition of John the Apostle was strong in Asia Minor, in specific the western Roman province called Asia with its capital of Ephesus. According to the New Testament, the Apostle Paul was from Tarsus, in south-central Asia Minor, and his missionary journeys were primarily in Asia Minor. The Apostle Paul, the great early church evangelist, traveled to Ephesus (Acts 18-19). Paul spent nearly three years developing the house churches in Ephesus.

Ephesus, together with the rest of Asia Minor (Turkey), had a long history of being conquered by outside powers like Persia (modern day Iran), Greece and Rome, the city was filled with temples and practitioners of various gods and goddesses. One example is the Greek goddess Artemis (Acts 19:34 ff; or Diana in the Roman cosmogony; who was the Greek goddess of hunting, hills and wilderness, virgins, protector of young girls, virginity and childbirth, as well as the daughter of Zeus and twin sister of Apollo). This is the multi-religious practices of the society into which the Apostle Paul, John the Apostle and others came to share the gospel of Jesus.

In addition to the religious communities noted above, John’s gospel addresses a group of disciples that continued to follow the teachings and practices of John the Baptist. While other gospels mention John the Baptist in passing, in John’s gospel there is a continued emphasis on raising up Jesus as Messiah and a subservient position and role of John. On a practical level, the gospel may serve as an encouragement to the Christian community of the primacy of their message.

Creating Christian Community: Belong, Behave & Believe.

While our society expresses skepticism about “organized religion” and does its own secular thing, there is a hunger for “spirituality,” an experience of something greater than ourselves. In response to this new spiritual market, programs and resources have emerged to sell spiritual positivity; processes to discover your soulful selfhood; the return of Eastern meditation; and much more. The question is: where is the church in this moment of interest? How is the Holy Spirit directing and leading us as we gain our footing in this new landscape?

The same Holy Spirit that led the Jewish persecutor of the early church to become God’s greatest evangelist, the Apostle Paul, wants to lead us as well! The Spirit opened Paul’s eyes to look beyond everything he knew and loved as a Jew to discover that God wanted to use him to be an evangelist to the Gentiles. That was a radical shift of thought and understanding for Paul and could only happen by the power of God. Paul wrote: *I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some*, (1 Corinthians 9:22c). God is able to do what God wants us to do, if we are willing!

The same Holy Spirit is leading you, me and a church called Grace to participate in God’s mission in our community. In 2014, I picked up a book called *CHRISTIANITY AFTER RELIGION: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, by Diana Butler Bass, 2012. Butler Bass confirms what I have been experiencing at Grace for the past nine years: that no matter how hard we work, what used to work in the 1980’s and 90’s is simply no longer effective.

In fact, Butler Bass helped me to see the need to reverse the order in which people experience and enter a relationship with God and the church: *Belong, Behave and Believe. Does anyone go to a knitting group and ask if the knitters believe in knitting or what they hold to be true about knitting? Do people ask for a knitting doctrinal statement? Indeed, if you start knitting by reading a book about knitting or a history of knitting or a theory of knitting, you will very likely never knit...In knitting, the process is exactly the reverse of that in church: belonging to a knitting group leads to behaving as a knitter, which leads to believing things about knitting. Relationships lead to craft, which leads to experiential belief. That is the path to becoming and being someone different. The path of transformation,*

that there were many people with physical challenges but it only mentions this one man who Jesus healed, not everyone. The man did not ask Jesus to heal him. There is no mention that the man he healed had faith that Jesus could heal him. He did not even know who Jesus was after he healed him (5:13). This healing was a pure gift.

When rules, tradition or the status quo is disturbed, people in authority often respond in an attempt to eliminate the disturbance and restore order. Both Jesus actions and teachings caused concern among Jewish leaders to the point of trying to eliminate him (5:18). This verse serves as a foreshadow to all listeners where this narrative is leading.

In the final section for this week’s reading (5:19-29), Jesus speaks a lengthy monologue addressed to his opponents. The imagery of the actions of Jesus mirror what the Father is doing in heaven. It sounds like he are shadow dancing with God. Jesus tell them that bigger things are coming down the road that will “astonish” (5:20, 28) you. The point this section makes clear is that Jesus acts in accordance with God’s will and he is the life-giver, even life after death. To all who believe in him, eternal life is already ours (5:24).

Discussion Questions:

1. What did you discover in the story of the Bethesda healing story?
2. Is there anything holding you back or that has a grip on you that serves as a limiting factor to you?
3. What do you believe about the power of God to heal today?
4. Do you have anything from which you would like to be set free or healed?

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water (another use of this image in John) known for its healing qualities (when the Spirit stirred the waters). Here lay one man among many who were lame, blind and paralyzed. This man had been ill most of his life, thirty-eight years. Jesus disarmed him when he asked: *Do you want to be made well, (5:6)?*

Before we launch into criticism of the man who did not immediately say “yes” but made excuses why he was still sick, do you ever use the drama of your situation to garner the attention of others? Do you use excuses to justify why things are the way they are? Could it be possible that you have limited yourself in what you can do or how you perform by the limits of your own thinking? In case you think I am being critical of you, I am actually asking myself these questions.

I recently listened to a woman tell me that she did not realize how much work and time it took to care for her dying husband at home until he was gone. She slept most of the next week following the funeral because she was so exhausted by the grief and all the weeks of work. For the past few months, she has reawakened and began to imagine how she will invest her time. Breaking free from the impact of a lengthy illness and daring to embrace a different future can be very difficult. I have buried many couples who have lived a long life together who die very soon after their spouse dies. Being sick can define our life.

The man was healed but he failed to ask the name of the one who healed him. There seems to be link between this man’s illness and sin (5:14). This is not always the case with illness in John’s gospel (9:2-3). The truth is that sometimes our own ignorance or irresponsibility can be the cause of our illness or impairment. On the other hand, it may be the irresponsibility of another driver who was drunk, distracted or texting who brought harm to us. It simply could be that our genes or DNA dictates that we are more likely to be diabetic or hearing impaired. It may be that we grew up in a home where there was lead paint, asbestos or maybe we just will never know.

Jesus is again a rule breaker for the sake of extending the grace of God to people. It was a Sabbath day when Jesus walked by the “house of Grace” or Bethesda and healed a man. The story tells us

(p. 203). The surest way we find our footing to a positive life change is to follow and learn from someone (that would be you) who is following the leader who is Jesus Christ.

Jesus called a community of people to follow and learn from him. These disciples (followers and learners) were knit together by Jesus into a servant community that loved the Lord and trusted each other. After the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit filled the believers (Acts 2), they were sent to share the story of Jesus with the people they met and knew. Weekly, they came together in homes to be strengthened and encouraged by reminding each other of the teachings of Jesus and to celebrate his meal.

Many of us at Grace have grown up hearing the stories of Jesus and practicing this faith daily through prayer, study of the Scriptures, generosity with the gifts of time and money God has given us as well as worship. Yet this is not true for all of us at Grace. It is honest to say that some of us are not yet knit together into a small community or small group where we have gotten to know and be known by others, as we discuss and practice Scripture study, prayer and sharing our faith story. This is Jesus’ vision for the church and if we are willing to embrace it, to participate in a small group, God will renew our faith and empower our witness in our community.

Prelude

The Gospel of John holds a unique place and message among the four gospels. John begins with an eighteen verse introduction that may have once been an early Christian hymn that includes verses about Jesus and John the Baptist. Unlike Matthew and Luke who begin the story of Jesus with stories about Mary and Joseph, wise men, shepherds and angels, John begins with the incarnation: Jesus the Word takes on human flesh and becomes one of us! Jesus mother is mentioned several times in John but is not referred to as Mary.

The major teaching section is broken up in two parts: 1) the Book of Signs: John 1:19-12:50 and 2) the Book of Glory: John 13:1-20:31. John 21 is thought to be a later addition as John 20:30-31 functions as an ending to the gospel when it says: *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the*

Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

John is filled with some of the longest stories in the gospels many of which are unique to John like the Wedding feast in Cana (John 2), the story of Nicodemus conversation with Jesus (John 3), Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), Jesus healing of the blind man in Jerusalem (John 9) and the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11).

While the gospel of John tells stories about Jesus who reveals himself through miracles and “I am” sayings like “I am the good shepherd,” other common gospel characteristics are noticeably absent. In John’s gospel Jesus tells no parables (like the parable of the mustard seed, the good sower or the parable of the yeast), casts out no demons and offers little sense that the Kingdom of God is almost here right now.

In some sense, the final editor of the gospel of John reveals he knew the end of the story of Jesus life before he wrote the first word because he leaves clues about Jesus all over the walls of the gospel from the lobby to the exit door. Keep your eyes open as you read and study and you will begin to pick up the editor’s clues. Put away your expectation of following Jesus’ itinerary or ministry schedule, otherwise, you will get frustrated. John is clear that Jesus did many other miracles that are not written down (20:30; 21:25). The stories that John did record are intended to point to one major emphasis: that Jesus is the Messiah (20:31).

Week 1: (John 1:1-18) God in the Flesh Appearing

John brings some big philosophical concepts to the landscape of his gospel in this introduction that will be picked up and further explained in his writings: life, light and believe. Also noteworthy is the testimony of John (called the Baptist in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but only called John in John’s Gospel) about Jesus. John the Baptist will reappear several times throughout the gospel in a clear role: to point people to Jesus. This point is further emphasized when John says: He (Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease (3:30).

Week 7 (John 5:1-29) Questions

Needing to improve my GPA in my first year at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, I took a class called “The Bible as Literature.” It was taught by a professor who looked old enough to know Jesus personally. He was a slight built wisp of a man with incredibly thick glasses, so much so that it had the effect of magnifying his eyes. Thirty-three percent of the class grade was based on classroom participation. I needed a 4.0 in this class to pull myself out of the GPA cellar.

On one of the first days of class, the professor asked “what are the three contributions to history made by the Phoenicians?” My hand wildly shot up to earn some points. He first called on a student sitting right in front of his line of sight who said “the alphabet.” Waving my hand even more, he called on a student right in front of me who said “sailing.” There went the two answers I knew as my hand slowly sank. Before I could get my hand all the way down, he called on me. What am I going to say? My heart was pounding. Then I heard my mouth say “Phoenician blinds?” The class broke out in a roar. He gave me a point for creativity!

Asking questions can lead to a great conversation, help to build relationships, brainstorm an idea, solve a problem and see something from another perspective. Some of my favorite questions are: “What do you think?” “Why do you think that is?” “Is there anything you would like to add?” “What are some other possibilities we should consider?” “Is there anyone else who should be included in this discussion or decision?” Open-ended questions stimulate conversation and result in new insights.

One of the benefits of participating in a small group is the opportunity to listen and learn from each other. We all bring to a group a myriad of stories and experiences that have shaped our lives. Like bringing a dish to share at a potluck dinner, we enrich each other as we together share our stories. A second benefit of a small group is we grow together as a community that cares for each other.

Jesus uses questions to cut to the heart of the situation. In Jerusalem, near the temple, was a set of pools called Bethesda (or Beth-zatha) which means in Greek: house of grace. It was a pool filled with

Chapter 4 concludes with Jesus return to Cana in Galilee (4:46) with a second sign (4:54): the healing of the royal official's son (a similar story to the centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10, both the son and the servant being in Capernaum). Like the Samaritans, whether Jew or gentile, anyone who worked for the Roman Empire was an enemy. Similar to the first miracle in Cana, there is back and forth conversation until Jesus heals. While the disciples believed because of the first miracle (2:11), the official and his household believed in Jesus because of the healing of his son (4:53).

Discussion Questions:

1. What new understanding have you gleaned from the stories in chapter 4?
2. How does the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman challenge you to think and act?
3. What holds you back, if at all, from participating in God's harvest, used by God to bring people to faith or back to worship?
4. Who comes to your mind as you think about question 3? Pray for them and for the courage to love them to Jesus.

NOTES

As stated earlier, it seems apparent that when John's gospel was written, there existed a community of John the Baptist's disciples who continued to practice his way of life (see in particular Acts 18:24-19:7). This explains the underlying conflict the gospel addresses by exalting Jesus and placing John the Baptist in the supporting actor category of this drama. The message is abundantly clear in this gospel that John the Baptist is the way-maker and Jesus is the Way.

In the beginning... what an epic start to the gospel of John by building on the foundation of the creation story from Genesis 1:1. We all love music. We sing along with favorite songs, whistle tunes and quote song lyrics in conversation. Music is a great way to express concepts and teach lessons. We learn the alphabet, patriotic ideals, books of the Bible and Bible stories that have been put into song.

What are your favorite hymns or songs about creation? Think about that, search it out and share it with you group. One of my favorite old hymns says: *O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the works thy hand hath made. I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder, thy pow'r throughout the universe displayed; Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art! How great thou art!* The last line bears its name to bring the Creator praise.

There are also new songs that sing God's creative praise:

Verse 2: *You're the only God whose power none can contend. You're the only God whose name and praise will never end. You're the only God whose worthy of everything we can give.*

You are God, that's just the way it is.

Refrain: *You are God alone, from before time began. You were on your throne, you are God alone. And right now, in the good times and bad. You are on your throne, you are God alone.*

Bridge: *You're unchangeable. Unshakable. Unstoppable. That's who you are.* The title of this 2011 creation song is: *You are God Alone*, by William McDowell.

It comes as no surprise that lyric writing would be used by a gospel writer to introduce Jesus to the world as the Word. All we are missing is the tune. Raymond Brown, in his commentary on John, breaks these first eighteen verses down into a four verse hymn with some later additions by the final editor of the gospel (using the NRSV Bible):

Verse 1 (John 1:1-2)

In the beginning was the Word,
And the Word was with God,
And the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.

Verse 2 (John 1:3-5)

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

(Insertion of the purpose of John the Baptist John 1:6-9)

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

Verse 3 (John 1:10-12a, c)

He was in the world,
And the world came into being through him;
Yet the world did not know him.
He came to what was his own,
And his own people did not accept him.
But to all who received him,
He gave power to become children of God.

{...*That is, those who believed in his name...who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God,* John 1:12b, 13; editors' addition}

Verse 4 (John 1:14, 16 with an insertion regarding John the Baptist in v. 15)

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

while many of us travel around the west side of Rockford, I suspect that Jesus would have to go through and even stop at the local well on the west side.

This story can really get under your skin. Here is Jesus talking with a woman who suspiciously is drawing water at the well in the heat of the day. Tradition held that men were not to talk with women especially in public.

This unnamed Samaritan woman (like all Samaritans, an enemy to the Jews) was unscrupulous on top of it. Jesus uncovered the truth that she had been married five times and was living with her sixth man outside of marriage. Hmmmmm, the imperfect number six appears again, just like the six water jars of purification in John 2.

Added to this story are the disciples who show up at the well at the tail end of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The disciples just completed their grocery trip to town and find themselves dumbfounded by the actions of their rabbi. Tucked away in a table conversation about food between the disciples and Jesus, a new topic is served up: our mission or work is to reap a harvest of people for God's kingdom (4:35-38).

It's a new day and the old order of planting the seed and in four months comes the harvest has ended. The newly converted (planted and harvested by Jesus) Samaritan woman instantly becomes a part of Jesus mission (a planter: *Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?* 4:29) and brings the whole city to meet him (for the harvest of faith: *Many Samaritans from the city believed in him because of the woman's testimony...and many more believed because of his word,* 4:39, 41).

The Samaritan woman was so overwhelmed by her experience with Jesus that she either forgot her jar in her excitement or was in such a rush to tell her village about him that she wanted to run and not lug the water jug! Have you noticed how these main stories in John build upon each other using an underlying theme of water? From the water of purification changed into the wine of celebration, to the water and Spirit of rebirth, to the water that quenches our thirst, the living water of eternal life (4:14-15), John keeps drawing upon water as a powerful metaphor for God's activity among us.

fell asleep. She awoke the next morning with peace in her heart and was healed.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is one message you take away from John 3?
2. What did you notice in this story about Nicodemus that you had not seen before?
3. How is God calling you to respond?
4. How do you understand the activity of the Holy Spirit in your life?

NOTES

Week 5: (John 4:1-30) Day

Our nation is in the midst of another bloody and ugly round of racial tension. A clue to racism is the use of “we” and “them” language. Another clue is when we are tired of hearing about race and simply get angry or want to ignore this conversation. Racism is not unique to our nation but it is one of “our” problems which needs resolution which results from listening, understanding and working for justice. While it is hard work to listen, to seek understanding and to be understood as well as to work for justice for all people, it is the journey of Jesus. This is the dream of a church that mirrors God’s vision where all people are included.

Jesus demonstrated the value of all people in his journey into Samaria to the well located on the edge of the village of Sychar. Jews traveling from the region of Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, with Samaria situated in the middle of these two Jewish areas, would commonly detour around Samaria to avoid traveling through it. Jesus, on the other hand “had to go through Samaria,” (4:4). It sounds purposeful or part of Jesus plan. Put more contextually,

(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 comes before me, v.15’”).

From his fullness,
We have all received,
Grace upon grace.

{The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 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, John 1:17-18; editors’ addition}.

(Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 29, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966, pp. 3-4).

A Few Thoughts on John 1:1-18:

In the beginning was the Word (John 1:1) reminds us of the Creation story of Genesis 1 as well as the Greek writers of antiquity who wrote about the Word (*Logos* in Greek from which we derive the word: logic) used by Stoic philosophers to explain creation in terms of divine reason. The creative communication of John’s opening hymn proclaims a bold witness to the Word who is Jesus the Christ to both Jews and Greeks. Of the four Gospels, John is the most intentional evangelist to introduce or make Jesus accessible to the whole Roman world.

John begins by mirroring the creation story found in Genesis 1:1-2:3 where God speaks a word and the action of creating is put in motion...*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being* (John 1:3). The ears of any Greek speaking audience must have perked up when they heard a fresh idea that this Word was God. John introduces the Word at the outset and concludes his Gospel by saying that all the libraries of the world could not contain all the books that could have been written if everything Jesus did and said were recorded in books (21:25).

Two additional major themes of John are introduced: the Word is the author of life, the life-giver and life sustainer. Secondly, the Word is the light that shines in the darkness for all people (vv. 4-5). The themes of life and light will be further developed in the Gospel of John.

John shifts thought from Jesus in verses 1-5 to John the Baptist in verses 6-9 when God sent him on his mission. Like Q who did the preparations, created a tool package and did the surveillance work for James Bond, John the Baptist was sent from HQ to prepare the mission for Jesus because God works through people like you and me.

John came as a bright, blinking arrow pointing to the light, much like a merge arrow that forewarns drivers that the lane ahead is closing so move over now! For what purpose was John sent? To shine the spotlight, to identify the true light who enlightens everyone who believes in him. This is the first time the word *believe* appears in the Gospel of John (it will be used 57 times in John, while only 8 times in Matthew and Luke, and 13 times in Mark; the word *believed* is used 24 times in John and 1 time in Matthew, Mark and Luke; and the word *believes* appears 11 times in John and 2 times in Mark). It is clear that a major purpose of writing this gospel is *so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name* (John 20:31).

The focus in verses 10-13 returns to Jesus. While John the Baptist just testified that the true light was coming into the world, verse 10 gives a preview of what is to follow in the next section and that is Jesus has entered and is in the world. Next, he reminds us that Jesus created the world and more specifically, human life. Yet, Jesus was not accepted by humans, especially among his own people of Israel. But God empowered all who receive and believe in Jesus to become God's children. The power to become (begotten) children of God flows from the Holy Spirit, not from blood (woman), nor will of the flesh (lust) or the will of man (his seed). We are begotten of God (check out 1 John 3:9 which talks about God's seed within us as believers – a metaphor, to explain God's role in our coming to faith). The fact that we believe in God and his son Jesus Christ as the leader of our life is a God thing.

We bring nothing to the party. God has prepared the picnic and set the table. God invites, woos, beckons and calls us. All we do is respond, show up and begin to live life influenced and directed as we listen to and follow Jesus.

water of baptism we sacramentally participate in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. All we bring to this watery gift is our response to believe and follow the Lord each day.

The third and final response of Jesus includes a rather snide comment by Jesus to Nicodemus (3:10). This time when Jesus follows with “amen, amen,” the tense switches from “I” to “we,” as if Jesus is speaking on behalf of the disciples. It is almost a response you might expect from Jesus after he is risen and ascended (3:11-21), a ten verse response.

In 2002, the Director for Evangelism of the Lutheran Church of Ethiopia, one of the fastest growing Lutheran churches in the world, came to the United States to visit the ELCA. As the former Director for Evangelism of the ELCA, I was blessed to meet him and travel to visit his church in Ethiopia.

Pastor Alemu Shetta shared with me his testimony: Alemu grew up in a small rural village in Ethiopia where his mom was the much respected spiritual leader who practiced natural divination. One day in school an evangelist came to his classroom and shared the story of Jesus. The evangelist read the story of Nicodemus to the class.

When the evangelist read John 3:16 that *God so loved the world that he gave his only son*, Alemu raised his hand and asked: “who is this God who loved him,” as his name Alemu means “world.” *For God so loved Alemu that he gave his only son*. Before the evangelist left that day, Alemu had come to faith in Jesus.

When Alemu walked into his house after school, his mom took one look at him and new something was different. His face was filled with light. When she discovered that her son had prayed to Almighty God, she was afraid and angry. As great a spiritual leader as she was in her village, even she did not dare to pray to Almighty God. Alemu ran away that night and lived with his uncle for the next year. To shorten the story, she became sick, invited her son and brother to return and share the Gospel with her. She was awakened by a dream that night which said that if she burned her books about divination and all her potions and put her faith in Jesus, she would be healed. Alemu's mom threw them in the fire, offered her life to Jesus and

gospels as the practitioners of the law), Nicodemus would have reason to be both curious and cautious in approaching Jesus. He may be curious because of the miracles Jesus was doing yet cautious because Jesus challenged the Jewish religious system by overturning the tables in the temple (John 2).

Hearing Nicodemus' quest to experience the presence of God that he saw in the signs that Jesus was doing (2:23), he said to Jesus "...no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God," (3:2). While Nicodemus crept to Jesus under the canopy of night because he was cautious, Jesus was distinctly discerning (2:24-25) of the hearts of others and detached himself.

What can be lost in the English translations of the Greek text are the subtle nuances or clues to the story. Note the three exchanges in conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, each time getting a longer and deeper response by Jesus. To each statement or question, Jesus responds with "amen, amen" which get translated as "yes, yes" or "truly, truly." The first response of Jesus is that no one can SEE God's kingdom without being born from anew (3:3).

While the first response is only one verse, Jesus second response is four verses. The second response moves from seeing the kingdom of God to entering the kingdom of God: *being born of water and the Spirit* (3:5). Certainly, Christian baptism is implied by the phrase water and the Spirit. While sifting through the layers of the formation of the Gospel of John, the Christian church that would hear this story in late first century would totally understand its message. The Pharisee Nicodemus, however, would not comprehend, having only seen a baptism for repentance, not a sacrament of new birth.

The idea of new birth is not restricted to John alone but also appears in 1 Peter 1:23 and Titus 3:5. The three activators of regeneration or new birth include the Word (which is both Jesus and the Scriptures), the Holy Spirit and the natural sign of water which is used for baptism. This is not magic but follows the command and promise of God which claims and calls us to follow and live in Jesus' name.

God does what we cannot do by claiming us as children of God through this sacrament. By the promises in Scripture and in the

While Luke's Gospel offers the familiar and intimate story of Mary, Joseph and the babe lying in the manger, John strikingly shines the light of Jesus, the son of God and God's presence in the world in verse 14. The incarnation is a theology that Jesus the Word became human, became flesh and lived among his followers, who now are bearing witness to him in this gospel. The enduring love and mercy of God was evident in Jesus as grace and truth. John the Evangelist and the community that surrounded him now bear witness to his grace and truth through this Gospel of John.

Discussion Questions:

1. What caught your attention in these first eighteen verses of John and why?
2. How does the story of God taking on flesh and becoming human in the person of Jesus impact your faith? What questions, if any, does this raise in your mind?
3. As you ponder this reading, what might God be calling you to do this week?
4. How does this reading influence your prayer for today?

NOTES

Week 2: (John 1:19-51) The Power of Testimony.

It was a crisp February morning when I briskly walked along campus at the University of Minnesota, Duluth heading toward the Commons Building. I recall the lump in my throat as I moved step-by-step closer to my destination. It was like swallowing a potato. My tongue was as dry as a desert highway.

As I grabbed the door handle to the Commons foyer, I nearly made an abrupt retreat back to my dorm room. “Nope,” I thought to myself, “I promised Stan I would try and do some evangelism work in the Commons area today.” This memory is forever etched in my mind as my maiden voyage in sharing faith on the stormy and rocky seas of my fear and insecurity.

Shock may be too weak a word to express my emotions as I stepped into the busy Commons that morning where a large, bright “National Condom Week” sign attracted students for the free give-away, like bears to honey! All around the display were helium filled condoms floating near the display table: red-white and blue patriotic condoms, psychedelic 70’s style condoms, striped and the not-to-be-forgotten “peace-sign” condoms.

The Commons was filled with laughter, levity, loud conversations and innuendos. My shoulders dropped and I breathed out a heavy sigh. Let’s just say that after a few weak attempts at initiating conversation with strangers further down the Commons in the Food Court, I chalked this experience up to one big failure.

I surprised myself that I allowed Stan to talk me into sharing my faith ever again. With a real mixed review on these early experiences I finally discovered how much more natural these conversations are with people you know. Sharing our hope and trust in God with other people is almost always more impactful if you know a person well enough to care about them. Whether it’s about teaching a class, playing on a team, being a neighbor, working with others or sharing your faith, it’s all about relationships.

While John 1:1 mirrors Genesis 1:1, some writers suggest that the opening hymn in 1:1-18 is followed by the seven days of a new creation revealed in Jesus (John 1:19-2:11). The clue that is used is

Week 4: (John 3) Night.

If you ask my wife Jody, she will tell you that I am one of the fastest people she knows when it comes to falling asleep. I love to sleep. Yet I also know the long nights of restlessness when I allow anxiety to torment me.

On one particular night when I was deep in the grasp of sleep, I was wrenched out of its clutches by the ring of my cellphone. The voice on the phone asked, “Pastor, can you come quick, Don is dying?” Dressed and driving, I kept my window open a crack to awaken my slumbering brain. As I stepped into Don’s condo that night, I was treated with the love and warmth of Don’s family as they surrounded Don who lay in his hospital bed which set on the edge of the living room. There were tears shed, prayers offered and loving stories told as Don slipped from this world into the next.

John chapters 3 and 4 tell two lengthy stories that are only recorded in John’s gospel. John 3 tells the story of Nicodemus, a religious leader who comes to Jesus under the cover of night. In John 4, Jesus met a woman of Samaria at a well at high noon.

John contrasts light and darkness, night and day throughout his gospel. While John finds little good in how he writes about darkness, there are times when I have had profound experiences in the night: insightful dreams, awakened naturally and savor the knowledge that I still have four more hours until the alarm goes off, listening to the hoot owl outside my window, or walking in the light of a new or full moon. While following Jesus and pursuing the light of his teachings is our desired goal, I am simply making the point that there is value in embracing and learning from the shadowy times of our lives as well.

Nicodemus sought our Jesus in the privacy of night because he had seen the signs or miracles Jesus had been performing (3:2). As a Pharisee (a group of religious leaders among the Jews whose name means to be separate. The Pharisees seem to emerge following the exile in Babylon with the formation of the synagogue as a house of prayer and study of the Law after the temple was destroyed in Jerusalem in 587 BCE. The Pharisees are mentioned often in the

which is a clue to the time when his hour arrives on the cross. In the Temple, Jesus likewise speaks of God's new idea when the old temple will be destroyed and replaced with a new one-time sacrifice: Jesus own death on the cross. "Destroy this temple (his body) and in three days I will raise it up" (2:19). Two stories and one new idea: Jesus, the Messiah and Savior of the world.

Discussion Questions:

1. Of the two words: imperfect or invaluable, which do you more commonly associate with as you think about yourself?
2. What new insight did you gain as you read the story of the water turned to wine?
3. As you read and reflect on these two stories, what touches your heart or what do you find most meaningful?
4. Prayerfully practice: "I am forgiven and valued by God!" As you begin and end your day this week, repeat that truth to yourself.

NOTES

the pattern in seen in John's use of the phrase "the next day" in verses 29, 35, 43. Finally, 2:1 says "on the third day," which could refer to days 5 through 7 of a new creation in Christ Jesus. The Apostle Paul speaks of Jesus as the author of a new creation in these words: *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* (2 Corinthian 5:17).

Day 1: John 1:19-28

Day 2: "The next day..." 1:29-34

Day 3: "The next day..." 1:35-42

Day 4: "The next day..." 1:43-51

Days 5-7: "On the third day" 2:1-11

"Who are you," is the question addressed twice to John the Baptist, (1:19, 22)? John answers that he is not who they think he is nor who they are looking for: not the Messiah, nor Elijah or the prophet. The long awaited hero or protagonist in the story appears in the next scene. John focuses the spotlight on Jesus when he exclaim: "Look there – that one is the Lamb of God" (1:29)! Jesus grew to be identified in the early church as the Passover lamb connected to the Moses story and the liberation of Israel from the bondage of slavery (Exodus 12:3-6) as expressed by Paul: *For our pascal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed*, 1 Corinthians 5:7c.

While John the Baptist is questioned twice about his identity, he also proclaims twice that Jesus both preceded and was of much greater importance than him (1:15, 30). John's role in relation to Jesus is further clarified as the one to prepare the path for Jesus (1:23; Isaiah 40:3) by baptizing him (note that while Jesus baptism is eluded to in John's gospel, the actual account of the Jesus' baptism is not recorded like in Matthew, Mark and Luke) as a revelation to the Jews (1:31). God called John the Baptist to fulfill this purpose (1:33). John strips away all mystery by announcing that Jesus is the Son of God (1:34). But then again, John's gospel never pretended to be a Stephen King novel! This gospels purpose is to reveal not hide the identity of the main character.

On the following day, Andrew and another of John the Baptist's unidentified disciples respond to John's testimony about Jesus, leave John, and begin to follow the Lord. Andrew, who is lesser known in

Ephesus (or whoever the congregation is that receives this gospel) than Simon Peter, because Andrew is introduced as Simon Peter's brother (see 1:40). Andrew finds his brother Peter, tells him they have met the Messiah and brings him to meet Jesus (1:41-2). Our witness is so much stronger when it naturally emerges in conversation with people who already know us.

While it may seem that the witness of John the Baptist to his disciple Andrew who turned around and testified to his brother Peter about Jesus may have only taken a few hours, Andrew and others had likely followed and trusted John the Baptist for quite some time. When God called John to baptize, God revealed that he would recognize the Messiah when he baptized him because the Holy Spirit would descend and remain on him (1:33). Don't you think that one of the big stories that John the Baptist would tell his disciples is God's promise that he would baptize the Messiah some day and these are the clues to identify that will identify him?

I can only say from my life that my biggest experience of God pales in comparison to this story of Jesus' baptism. Yet I still tell my stories about God. It seems only logical that when Jesus shows up and the Holy Spirit remains on him, some of John's disciples would naturally begin to follow Jesus. In his excitement to share what he saw, Andrew introduced his brother to Jesus so Peter would follow Jesus as well.

In the next story, Jesus finds Philip, who he may or may not know already, who goes and finds Nathaniel and tells him about Jesus (1:43-45). On the lips of Nathaniel is placed the confession of faith of the early church which came into existence after the death and resurrection of Jesus: this rabbi is Divine (the Son of God) and the prophetic Messiah and King (1:49; 6:14-15). While I am not saying it is prophetically impossible for a newbie like Nathaniel who just met Jesus to speak out about Jesus divine identity, it seems highly unlikely. The message about Jesus being Messiah and King is equally true whether Nathaniel said it at his first meeting or after he saw the crucified and risen Lord.

Solution: drove out the sacrificial animals, overturned the economic system and introduced the idea of his death and resurrection.

The story of the wedding feast with its six stone jars of water for ritual purification changed into the wine of celebration signals the arrival of Messiah...*the wine miracle confirms the disciples' confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah. The text couples the proclamation of Jesus' messiahship with the miracle without explicitly stating how they are related, so that readers must forge the link. Philip's confession directs attention to the Law and the Prophets. According to the Law, a ruler was to come from the tribe of Judah: "Bind his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes" (Gen 49:10-11). Several prophetic writings spoke of an outpouring of divine favor upon Israel, saying that "the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it," and sometimes connecting abundant wine with the restoration of Davidic rule (Amos 9:11, 13; cf. Joel 3:18; Isa 25:6). Jewish tradition associated this outpouring of wine with the advent of Messiah, (Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pp. 83-84, 2003).*

Six stone jars for purification, unlike the number seven, is an imperfect number. The perfect one transformed the water into the wine of celebration. Later, Jesus refers to himself as the vine (John 15) which produces the grapes that become the wine. Jesus poured out his lifeblood to purify his followers as the church gathers to drink of the cup of salvation and recall his action of absolute love. This water to wine story becomes a "perfect" clue to the seventh day of the new creation which is found in cup of forgiveness, the life-giving blood of Jesus.

In the second story, Jesus travels to Jerusalem and enters the Temple on the festival of Passover. While the other three gospels place this story during Jesus final week, which is historically more likely, it serves a unique purpose in John by being juxtaposed with wedding feast in Cana story.

Jesus symbolically drives out the livestock for sacrifice as prescribed by God and flips over the table of the financial entrepreneurs. He says, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace" (2:16c)! In the story of Cana in Galilee, Jesus said his hour had not come (2:4c)

I am, however, way more fixated and familiar with my imperfection. As a husband, father, pastor, preacher and writer, I expect greatness from myself. What I notice the most in hindsight are all the places I have come up short, failed or missed the mark. I know that many of you share that same experience.

So what could it mean for you and me to embrace our imperfection? Does it mean that we will lower our standards? I do not think so. What does embracing our own imperfection look like? Perhaps we could come to accept our best effort at any given time in any specific role as good enough and leave it at that. Honestly, that may be easier to write than to practice but I still think it is spot on. Maybe we can avoid a common saying, "I am my own worst enemy." Memorize and begin to say to yourself: "I am forgiven and valued by God!" So by God, maybe, just maybe, we can accept and value our own lives and personhood as well. This is a new idea and a new practice for me.

God's new idea was demonstrated in John 2. Two stories, while each unique, evolve from the same idea. Let me capture the two stories on a storyboard for the sake of comparison.

John 2:1-11 (on the 3rd day after Nathaniel came to believe)

Characters: mother of Jesus, Jesus and the disciples, servants, chief steward, bridegroom.

Setting: Wedding feast at Cana in Galilee.

Plot: to reveal the Messianic glory of Jesus, the pure, new wine.

Problem: the wine during this 7 day wedding day celebration has just run out.

Solution: Jesus changes 6 stoned jars filled with 20-30 gallons of water each into wine. Do the math!

John 2:13-22

Characters: Jesus, Jewish crowds, sellers, money-changers, disciples.

Setting: Temple in Jerusalem during the festival of Passover.

Plot: Forshadowing of Jesus' death and resurrection (he will replace the need for Temple sacrifice)

Problem: it honestly appears to be the ordinary temple sacrificial system.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think of times when you have been blessed by the testimony of another Christian. Please share your story with your group.
2. What has been your experience of telling others about God? What is the most positive story you can share? Have you seen anyone's life change for the good and for God?
3. What did you notice in the readings for this week that you find helpful for your life?
4. Who needs a hope-filled word from God in your network of relationships? Please pray for them: for an open heart and mind and for the love of Jesus to be openly, credibly and consistently showered upon them.

NOTES

Week 3: (John 2) New Ideas.

imperfect & invaluable powerfully reflect who you are in the eyes of God: NOT perfect and of the greatest value. "I am fearfully and wonderfully made," Psalm 139:14. I celebrate the tremendous value God places on all life, including my own life. I know that God treasures me and all of life in my inner soul. When I pause to contemplate that fact (and mind you that takes time and I do not do it very often), my heart overflows with joy and gratitude. How about you?