

“Back Story”
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Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18
January 3, 2010

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! AMEN.
The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

As an Elementary Ed major with an emphasis in Speech and Drama I was often cutting out construction paper projects for class while my roommate, Greg, a Secondary English major was studying much deeper subjects from Shakespeare to Philosophy (something he reminded me of whenever I complained about my work load). As I made game pieces he would talk about classic literature plots and characters or give me examples of Aristotelian philosophy: “if you see a red fox in a field but you think it is a dog is it a fox or a dog?”

Reading John chapter one feels a bit like an exercise from Philosophy 101. Some suggest John wrote it with an eye to the philosophers of the day – to appeal to their minds in hope that the complex but simple beauty of God’s incarnation to save humanity might win their hearts for the Christ. His writing is brilliant and one could ponder long and hard over what it means that Jesus is God and is with God – dwells in, exists in, is made of the same stuff as God. Perhaps it is all the years I spent with the “Concrete Operational” thinking of young children but there are times when I read it that I can’t help but think the words I would so often say to Greg as he presented a philosophical question, “I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about.” To consider it more clearly I’d like to look today at what actors and authors call “The Back Story” – the information behind it all that helps to explain a character or plot or, in this case, the deep writings of St. John concerning the Incarnation.

“The Story” of course is the story of Jesus’ birth that we heard so beautifully from Luke’s Gospel on Christmas Day. John 1 is also the story of Jesus’ birth but while Luke’s retelling is full of characters and scenes that are easy to conjure in our minds John chapter 1 is set against a blank drop and comes across like the most puzzling of puzzles – a bit like the one I gave my wife Mary long ago where all the pieces were the same and the picture was a bowl of cherries. This opening to John’s Gospel dissects God’s greatest gift come to us in human form, to show us how it works.

I read last week that the Japanese have engineered a frog with transparent skin so Biology students throughout the world will no longer have to kill frogs to dissect them and see the organs at work inside. It is important for students of biology to see anatomy in order to grasp the intricacy of the body and to underscore the miracle of life. So it is with our dissection of this text. Not just to understand it for ourselves but to be able to share the truth of Jesus with others. You see, “The Back Story” gives us deeper insight into the love of God shown to us in Jesus as we consider Who He is and what He came to accomplish.

Without Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels, stables, Magi, King Herod or any animals John gives us a philosopher’s view of The Back Story as it unfolded beginning “in the beginning” when there was “the Word, the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

Right there, you and I are humbled by a piece of information we cannot process because what John is saying is this: before everything ever existed, Jesus was, before He was Jesus. To further illumine this identification of the eternal person of Jesus you must also know He was “the Word,” not a spoken word like our words, but God’s creative energy and intent by which reality became and becomes real. According to Genesis chapter 1, which John consciously evokes here, God spoke the Word and creation was born and the Word He spoke was the pre-Incarnate Jesus, or as I said, “Jesus before He was Jesus.” It is no accident that John refers to Genesis 1. All the Gospel writers and authors of the Epistles made reference to the truths of the Old Testament scriptures and Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecies.

“The Word became Flesh.” I don’t know what that statement does to you. I am absolutely astonished, blown away, humbled, that the One whom God sent among us as a burping, bouncy baby boy, was God, Himself, squashed and squished into pounds and ounces of Hebrew human flesh and blood. God who was/is Jesus before there was Jesus got here the same way we did, choosing to humble Himself to seek and save the creation God created “in the beginning” when Jesus was the Word that was with God and was God. It wraps around on itself in a wondrous mystery of the Divine Nature of Jesus that, as Luther said, “with which all Christians ought to be acquainted, and which they are able to understand. Nothing is too great for faith.”

Human beings, even we who are known by God and claim Him as Savior and Lord by the miracle of faith, have a hard time grasping what it meant for God to become human. It was the only way God could come “to His own” and have “His own” reject Him. Not that this is John’s indictment against the Jews—it is an indictment that finds ALL humankind guilty before God, for failing to recognize God as our Creator. We are “in the dark,” until the Spirit of God brings the light to us - strikes a match in us, if you will, by matching Jesus’ humanity to ours and by showing us the signs that say He came to give us the power to become children of God, children born, not of flesh and blood, but by the Word and will of God.

To say Jesus was human, but only human, is to say nothing at all. To say Jesus was God, but only God, leaves us in the dark. But to say with John, that this creative person/personality became “enfleshed” to live among us as “Immanuel,” “God-with-us,” is to lay hold of the gracious mystery by which God takes us daughters and sons of earth and makes us sons and daughters of God.

In Jesus we see the glory of God. You know what happened to people before Jesus who “saw the glory of God,”? They died. They died because human sin cannot co-exist with divine glory. Even the greats of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, never saw God face to face. God hid Himself, behind clouds of incense and the blood of sacrifices and the words of His prophets and the demands of His Law, until that singular moment when God pulled back the curtains of Heaven and sent His glory to earth, wrapped in swaddling clothes, as the Light not even the deepest darkness of sin and guilt could overcome.

Christians who only celebrate the birth of Jesus are missing a big part of the celebration; not just His birth, but our rebirth; a birth by faith through water and the Word where grace is piled upon grace and we are cleansed, clothed in a righteousness we did not earn and do not deserve

and transported into the presence and fullness of God. In every story told of Jesus, we see that glory of God. And that glory does not kill us; it revives us – brings us to new life. When darkness threatens us, and God seems hidden once again, we turn to the places where God has put Himself - in His Living word, Jesus, and in the Scripture words about the Word. When God seems far away, He draws us close to His heart when as one of His children we gather with our sisters and brothers in community at our Lord's Table. Worship has always been designed for God to speak to God's people in the Word, for us to respond – speaking the Word, singing songs of praise, coming before God with our prayers and with our tithes and offerings. It is always a place of mystery where all kinds of people – philosophers and construction paper cutters, farmers, engineers, singles, parents, the aged and the very young come into the presence of God to be fed, to feast, to be silent and to speak – and to go out into the world to share.

God has always chosen to use witnesses like John (albeit the greatest among them all) who not only tell the story, but The Back Story, the story “full of grace and truth,” that embraces those who hear and receive it by faith into the presence of the living God - the God whom one day we will see face to face.

Who has God placed in your path who needs to hear of the mystery of the Word-made-flesh? Who needs to hear of Jesus – God's greatest gift? The ultimate truth of The Back Story from John is that He who was in the presence of God/was God became present among us to give us the gift of heaven. Share that great gift – revel in that mystery!

Amen.

Now may almighty God, whose Incarnate Word Jesus, has filled all the earth with the light of grace, empower us to reflect that light in all we say, in all we do and in all we are.