

The Message: Described and Sent

John 1:1-14

Turn to John 1. John 1 talks about “the Word,” which I will continue to call “the Message.” John 1 describes the Message, who the Message really is, that’s in the first paragraph of John 1. And the second main paragraph tells us about his arrival on earth. That’s how much we’ll do today. We’ll talk about the rest of John’s opening next Sunday.

This is Advent, the coming of our Lord. The ancient church calendar ran on a three year cycle, and the cycle more less follows Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in that order. This is the second year, the Mark year.

At Christmas and at Easter, I try to follow this cycle, but the year we do Mark gets me in trouble on both Christmas and Easter, because Mark has no birth story of Jesus. In Mark Jesus appears out of nowhere to be baptized by John the Baptist. And Mark has only a very brief resurrection account as well.

So on the Mark year I use John at Easter time, and whatever else I can find at Christmas time, at Advent, which is now. We assume John knows about the birth stories of Jesus, but he has a different story of where Jesus came from. That’s why this Sunday and next we will read from John’s opening.

It is not a birth story, but we get that two years out of three, and that’s enough. John’s opening gives us a bigger picture of where Jesus came from. That’s what we’ll do.

John’s opening, Jn 1:1-18, tells us right from the start what John has come to know about Jesus Christ. In a real way, we get the conclusion of John’s Gospel at the start. Starting in Jn 1:19, he tells us what he says at the start of 1 John. Starting in John 1:19, after the opening, he tells us what he heard, and saw with his eyes, and what his hands touched. That goes to the end of John.

But John has been thinking about all that, for years and years, and the Holy Spirit has been guiding him, and in his opening he tells us what he learned from what he heard from Jesus, what he saw with his eyes from Jesus, and what his hands touched. But instead of telling us at the end, he tells us at the start, what he learned from listening to Jesus, and watching him.

The Message in the Beginning (1:1-2)

In the beginning was the Message, and the Message was with God, and the Message was God. He was with God in the beginning. John goes back to Genesis 1:1, In the beginning, God made the heavens and the earth.

At that point in time, back there when God made the heavens and the earth, the Message was already there. He was with God, and he was himself God, and he was with God, in the beginning. He was back there, with God, at the start.

We read once that the Message was God, and twice that he was with God, and twice that he was there at the beginning. The Message has been there all along, and the Message and God have some kind of close relationship. They are together.

The Creating Message: And God said, and it was so. (1:3)

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. Think about the first verses of Genesis. John begins with the same words, “In the beginning ...” so we know he’s thinking about the start of Genesis, and he’s telling to remember those lines.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

In our first creation story, Genesis 1, God makes things by speaking. In the second story, in Genesis 2, it’s different, God seems to make things with his hands. But in the first story, God creates with his words. All the way through, “Let there be light,” and it was so. “Let the ground produce plants,” and it was so. “Let the seas swarm with living things,” and it was so.

So John starts, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” In John’s Spirit-inspired imagination, John separates God from his words, and he imagines with the Spirit’s guidance the Speech of God having a life of its own. (Our words do sometimes take on a life of their own, don’t they.)

John makes “the Words of God” in Genesis 1, ‘the Speech of God,’ a separate person. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Through him, through the Word, the Speech, the Message, all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*

In the next line, John writes about life and light. That’s what the words of God produced, in Genesis 1, light and life. We’ll not spend more time on this now, but in simple terms, that’s what the opening to this Gospel does with Genesis 1.

The Message is Life and Light (1:4-5)

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not mastered it.

In him was life. Let's stop there. In Genesis 1, God created all life. Here we learn that the Word, of God, the Message, has that in himself. Jesus said this of himself. In John 5, Jesus said, *For just as the Father raises the dead, and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it* (5:21).

In John 11, Jesus said to Martha, *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die"* (11:25-26). In John 14, Jesus said, *I am the way and the truth and the life* (14:6). I am life.

People, life and death is a big deal. Unless the Lord returns, we will all die. Telling ourselves "yes but not yet" does us no good. Our response is not "yes but later," our response is Jesus. He overturns death to whomever he wants. The one who believes in him will live, even if they die, and in some way, we will not die at all.

Life pours out of Jesus. It is such good news. He himself submitted to a most unpleasant death, but it is still true. Life pours out of Jesus, and he is our answer to death.

And this life, that pours out of Jesus, was the light of all mankind. That life that pours out of Jesus is such good news, that life energy that gives Jesus the ability to overturn death is light to the world! The light shines in the darkness. The darkness cannot understand that light, can't grasp it, and the darkness cannot put it out that light, which is the life that pours out of Jesus.

1 John, which we look at last week, called Jesus the Word of Life, the Message of Life. And proclaiming what the eyewitnesses heard and saw and touched amounted to proclaiming the Eternal Life that was with the Father, and became visible to us. Jesus is the Message of Life.

In one word, when we look at Jesus, we see Life. That's the Word from God, the Message: look at Jesus, and see Life, find Life.

The Man God Sent, and the Light that's Coming (1:6-9)

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

In vv4-9, the word "light" occurs seven times. The darkness comes above all from death, and Jesus is the light for the whole world, because he brings life. That's what makes him the true light. And the true Light was coming into the world. That's new in this opening. We've heard twice that he was with God. And now we hear that he's coming into the world.

And that, folks, is how this gets to be a Christmas sermon. John is giving us a fuller understanding of Mary's baby in the manger.

He was with the Father, life comes out of him just as it comes out of the Father, particularly the life that overturns death. That's what makes him light, and he was coming into the world.

The Message was not Recognized or Welcomed (1:10-11)

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to his own people, but his own people did not receive him.

There's real sadness here, and real disappointment. Sorrow and lament. The world did not get who he was, didn't see it. And his own people, the Jews, whom he was sent to rescue, did not want him, they would not welcome him. The true light, who offers eternal life to every person, was misunderstood and rejected.

This summarizes the whole life of Jesus. The creature met the Creator and misunderstood who he was. The nation that should have been home to him instead rejected him.

Most of us have felt misunderstood at some point, and rejected. Sometimes very painfully, takes us a long time to get over it. That is the overwhelming story of our Lord's life. It was so bad, they killed him, the author of life.

But Some Welcome Him and Believe 1:12-13

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

This is how Jesus, the Message of Life, brings life to us. We receive him and believe in him, and we are re-born. As we receive and believe, we have a second birth. And that second birth is into an eternal life, an eternal life with death can't put out.

I got life from my dad and mom, and when I die, the life I got from them will end. But the life I got from my second birth never ends, it is eternal life. And I will die, but the grave cannot hold me. That eternal life is tougher than the grave, and the grave cannot hold me, it cannot hold us who receive and trust God's Message, and are re-born from God.

Believe in Jesus Christ

John's opening does not tell us who the Message actually is until v17. We'll cover that part next week. But what does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ? What does it mean to have faith?

There is a little story about faith in John 20. The first time Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, Thomas was not there. They told him that they'd seen Jesus alive, but Thomas said, "Until I see him for myself, and touch his wounds, I will never believe."

A week later Jesus appeared again to his disciples, and Thomas was there. Jesus said, “Take a good look, Thomas. Touch my scars. Don’t be unbelieving but believing.” Thomas immediately said, “My Lord and my God.” Jesus said, “Because you saw, you believed? Blessed are those who believe without seeing.”

What did Thomas say that showed his faith? Did he say, “Now I can see that you really did rise”? No. He said, “My Lord and my God.” And Jesus said, “Now you finally have faith.” Faith is not mental agreement, or feeling certain.

Faith is a relationship. “My Lord and my God.” In different words, “Jesus, I submit to you and I worship you.” Then, once he said that, Jesus says, “now you finally have faith.” Faith is a relationship of submission and worship.

Our society has done something with faith that is not in the Bible. Our society thinks that if you have clear evidence, then you *know* something, so you don’t need *faith*. Faith, in our society, is when you accept something as true without clear evidence. In the Bible, that’s not faith.

In Jesus’ conversation with Thomas, that understanding of faith makes no sense. Thomas now has clear evidence that Jesus rose from the dead, Jesus is standing there, Thomas can see and touch the scars. By our society’s understanding of faith, he doesn’t need it. He knows.

But knowing is not faith. Jesus does not say Thomas has believed until he said, “My Lord and my God.” Then Jesus said, “Because you saw, you believed? Blessed are those who believe without seeing.” People without clear evidence can still say to Jesus, “My Lord and my God.” We do that. We do it formally at our covenant, and often at other times too.

Agreeing that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead, and that he is the Savior, counts for nothing. Agreeing counts for nothing. When we say to Jesus, “My Lord and my God,” or words to that effect, when we submit and worship, then we have the faith that saves.

James in his letter says, “Ask for wisdom from God. But don’t ask if you don’t have faith, if you are double-minded, or unstable.” This is what James means by faith. “Don’t ask for God to give you wisdom in life if you’re not saying ‘My Lord and my God,’ don’t say ask if you are not submitting and worshipping.”

In the Bible as a whole, faith is not feeling certainty that something will happen. Faith is a relationship of submission and trust. For the most part, in the Bible the opposite of faith is not doubt about God, it is rebellion against God. *To all who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*

That is, to all who said “my Lord and my God, I submit to you and I worship you,” which means all those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

The Message became flesh (1:14a)

The Message became flesh and dwelled among us. The Word became flesh. He means that the Message became *human*, but by using *flesh* instead of *human*, John highlights human *weakness*, the things that aren't so good about being human.

This includes the weakness of our bodies, unpleasantness and pain and sickness and death; and also the weakness of our minds and souls. We can be fooled, badly fooled, and we are prone to sin, we want things we know are not good.

So also Jesus. He was made in every way just as we are, and he was tempted in every way just as we are. He was surrounded by weakness, just like every human high priest. Hebrews says all of this. That's what John means when he says, "God's Message to us became flesh."

The troublemakers behind John's Letters could not accept this. They could not accept that the Message became flesh. They like the Eternal Word, the Creating Word, they liked life and light and truth. But not the flesh (2 Jn 7; 1 Jn 4:2). The flesh offended them.

So John begins there in his 1st Letter, what we heard, saw with our eyes, watched, touched with our hands, that's what we announce to you, nothing less and nothing more.

Wrapping Up

What we've read in these 14 verses is remarkable. We start with the Creating Word of God, the Speech of God, being a Separate Person. This Eternal Person is with God from the Beginning, and through this Speech Person, every created thing is made. This Eternal Speech Person brings life and light to people, offers life and light to every person. Wow!

And then, this Eternal Speech of God Person, this Eternal Message, becomes flesh, becomes one of us, lives with us and like us. And if we receive him, believe him and call him Lord, we are born again, into God's family. Most of the world does not understand him, and does not want him. That's the world we live in. We are those who receive him, and build our lives around him.

This is Christmas, the third Sunday of Advent. The Word became flesh. We remember and celebrate that the Eternal Message became flesh. The Eternal Speech of God, who is a Separate Person with God, became human, including all the human weaknesses. God wants to rescue us, to call us, to bring us in, gather us in, so he sent the Message, and the Message became flesh.

For us who have believed, this is pure encouragement. Folks, we are so fortunate, that by some great miracle, we *did* eventually recognize this Person, and we *did* receive and welcome him, and we *did* believe in him, we also said, "My Lord and my God." From this we got life and light.

Yes, we have troubles, such troubles that we don't even *care* about this stuff. That's what God expects us to think and feel. That happened to Jesus too.

That's what it means to be flesh, which we are. That's why God tells us these things, again and again, so we don't get lost in the little stuff around us, which is all we can see.

Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author of our faith, who also endured the flesh, and endured such a great bombardment of troubles and attack against himself, and who is now enthroned, and will come back here to get us. Fix your eyes on Jesus. God wants to guide us with the One we cannot see. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Life and light come from him. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, such a Message you sent us. What a thing you have done for the world, because you loved the world. What a thing you have done for us, to get us and bring us in. Thank you for Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, who is your Eternal Message. How great are your ways! How great is your love! And what a story this is. Thank you that your Eternal Message became flesh, and lived with us and just like us. And before it was over, he lay down his life for us.

O God, bring us into this story. We get discouraged, and overwhelmed by the circumstances of our daily life, especially in these strange days of being so isolated from each other. We know we are in this story in John 1, those who believe and are re-born, but it can seem too far away from us to be any good to us. That's not what you have in mind, so bring us in to this story. We want you to help us fix our eyes on this Jesus, the Eternal Message. And God, one more thing: we are so glad to be your children! Amen.

BENEDICTION: May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us, and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.