

The Word Made Flesh

Cycle # 3 – Session #1

The Word Made Flesh

Text: John 1: 1-5,10-14,16-17

Gathering

Opening Worship

Light a candle as a reminder of God's presence. You may want to light a single candle or again invite the group to bring the candle or at least the candle holders you have been using during this time of study.

Song: *I Was There to Hear Your Boring Cry -- #75 Chalice Hymnal*

Litany

Bless the Lord, my inmost self; O Lord, my God you are very great.

You are clothed in majestic splendor;

Light covers you like a garment.

You stretched out the sky like a tent,

Extending the roof high over the waters.

Have you not made the clouds your chariot,

Riding on the wings of the wind?

You set the earth upon its foundations,

You clothed the world with sea. Casting water over the hills.

The springs provide water for the animals, and satisfy the hungry beasts.

You make grass sprout for the cattle,

and plants to meet human needs.

Bringing bread out of the ground and wine to cheer our hearts.

How many things you have made, O lord

And you shaped everyone in wisdom.

The world is full of your creatures.

May God's glory go on forever!

Rejoice, O Lord, in what you have made!

Bless the Lord my inmost self, Praise the Lord! Hallelujah

*From Psalm 104, A New Translation for Prayer and Worship
translated by Gary Chamberlain., Published by Upper Room*

Welcome One Another. Share briefly with one another something you have learned during the weeks of this Bible study or during the weeks you have not been meeting. It may be something you hadn't known about the scripture, it may be a connection between pieces you hadn't noticed before, it may be something you've discovered about yourself or others in your group or about God. And it may be something else altogether.

Cycle #3 – Session #1

Scripture

John 1:1-17

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, * and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

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

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. ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (NRSV)

NIV

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2 He was with God in the beginning.

3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood^[a] it.

6 There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. 9 The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.^[b]

10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

12 Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent,^[c] nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only,^[d] who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

15 John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" 16 From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only,^{[e][f]} who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

John 1:1-17 The Message Bible The Life-Light

¹⁻² The Word was first, the Word present to God, God present to the Word. The Word was God, in readiness for God from day one. ³⁻⁵ Everything was created through him; nothing—not one thing!— came into being without him. What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out.

⁶⁻⁸ There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light. ⁹⁻¹³ The Life-Light was the real thing: Every person entering Life he brings into Light. He was in the world, the world was there through him, and yet the world didn't even notice. He came to his own people, but they didn't want him. But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves. These are the God-begotten, not blood-begotten, not flesh-begotten, not sex-begotten. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish. ¹⁵ John pointed him out and called, "This is the One! The One I told you was coming after me but in fact was ahead of me. He has always been ahead of me, has always had the first word." ¹⁶⁻¹⁸ We all live off his generous bounty, gift after gift after gift. We got the basics from Moses, and then this exuberant giving and receiving, this endless knowing and understanding— all this came through Jesus, the Messiah. No one has ever seen God, not so much as a glimpse. This one-of-a-kind God-Expression, who exists at the very heart of the Father, has made him plain as day.

John 1:1-18 (KJV)

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

² The same was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

⁴ In him was life; and the life was the light of men. ⁵ And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness *comprehended* it not. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. ⁸ He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. ⁹ That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.

¹¹ He came unto his own, and his own received him not. ¹² But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: ¹³ Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me. ¹⁶ And of his fullness have all we received, and grace for grace.

¹⁷ For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

Dwelling in Scripture

1st reading - Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard. Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2nd reading - Invite people to talk about what they have heard and where it might intersect with their lives.

Behind the text

Before we move to a closer look at the text and some things about this scripture, let me say a bit about the translation of this passage. I am suggesting you look at at least three versions, the **New Revised Standard Version**, Eugene Peterson's translation from the **Message Bible** and the **King James Version**. If that third suggestion surprises you, it won't be more of a surprise to you than it is to me. But in this instance it seems very appropriate. Both the **Message** and the **KJV** seem to catch the poetry better.

As with all translations reading more than one version may be helpful because there are often many ways to translate the same words. Some translations are of course better than others and one may catch a nuance of language the others miss. I must admit I have sometimes felt a little jealous of Alexander Campbell who carried his Greek Bible with him and did his own translation. But since most of us can't do that, the next best thing seems to be to read several versions. One of the other reasons for reading more than one translation, especially with very familiar texts, is it may keep us from sliding over the words we've read so many times that we've stopped listening to them and don't hear what God may be saying to us through the writers

In an earlier session I posed the question, "If you were going to be stuck on an island and were limited to one book, what would you take?" In addition to that book if you could then take one gospel as well, which one would it be? I'd probably take Luke/Acts, but with many regrets for the ones I'd be leaving behind. Each of the gospels is written from a slightly different perspective and each brings us particular gifts. To lose any of them would impoverish us both as individuals and as church. The first three gospels, sometimes called synoptic or parallel gospels share many similar stories and teachings and appear to have had some common sources. John is clearly different. The content is very different as is his theological perspective. Occasionally someone will try to reconcile the events in the first three gospels which doesn't work very well. But John just does not seem to fit with them anywhere. Each gospel needs to be looked at and appreciated for what it brings to us. That is particularly true of the Gospel of John.

Of all the gospels John is in many ways the most beloved and even for those of us who may prefer the first three, John is filled with many favorite sayings and reflections. Among the best known scriptures are the prologue... *In the Beginning*, Ch. 3:16, *God so loved the world...* Others come to mind, *I am the vine you are the branches...* phrases such as *"living water"* or *"bread of life"*. Without this gospel we would not have the story of the woman taken in adultery or the woman at the well in Samaria. One of my personal favorites is found in Chapter 10:15, as Jesus is talking about the sheep

knowing the shepherd's voice there is this phrase, "*I have other sheep of whom you know not.*" That not only intrigues me, it gives me hope that in the many rooms Jesus describes as a part of his father's house, there is room for those who through the centuries have sought God, but for whom the door to God through Jesus has been closed, either because of when they lived or sometimes because of the way they have been treated by those who call themselves Christians.

Over the centuries John has been the most controversial of the gospels in large part because it is so different. In the first three gospels, we see Jesus teaching, healing people in body and mind, traveling to Jerusalem only at the end of his life and throwing the money changers from the temple in the last week of his life. In John, he goes to Jerusalem three times, one for each of the years of his ministry. Much of his ministry seems to take place in places not far from Jerusalem. In the first three gospels Jesus rarely says anything about himself and this book is focused on who he is. This is a writing that seems to raise more questions than it answers.

When approaching most books of the bible, the usual questions are *Who wrote it? When? And Why?* The answer to the first question is easy. We don't know. Tradition says it was John the son of Zebedee. But for many reasons you can explore in a good commentary, it seems very unlikely. Oddly enough there are some hints about this man we'll call John for the sake of convenience. Here's some of what we can know.

- 1) It appears the writer's sources were connected to a different tradition than the writings of the first three gospels. Otherwise it is difficult to explain why even the few shared stories are very different.
- 2) It also seems clear he was a person who saw himself as connected to Jesus through the eyewitness testimony of "*the beloved disciple.*" It seems to make the most sense to me that he tells the story as he has heard and understood it. It may be he is one of those about whom Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.*"
- 3) Clearly he loved Jesus passionately. It is likely he knew who was meant by the term, "*the beloved disciple*" and because others would have known who that person was, he didn't need to give the name.
- 4) His transmission of the Gospel is an act of faith so that those who follow may believe. He seeks not only to tell the story, but to reveal who God is in the telling.
- 5) While on the surface the gospel appears to be evangelistic, by looking deeper it may not be as much concerned with making new converts as it is in confirming the faith of his own community and correcting the faith of those whose faith he regarded as erroneous which leads to a conclusion that it was most likely written by a Jewish Christian for and in the Jewish community. Traditionally Ephesus has been suggested as the place, but that is only conjecture.

The *when* of the writing is somewhat less uncertain. There seems to be agreement that it wasn't written earlier than 70 C.E. and not later than 100 C.E. Since it was mentioned in writings from Egypt by 100 C.E. it had to be earlier. At the other end it appears to have been written after the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. It may have been written shortly after those events as was the gospel of Matthew. However, there is at least one major factor which makes it seem likely it wasn't written until sometime in the

80's or even 90's. Many people have been troubled by its intense rhetoric about the Jews, but that seeming harshness is likely connected to the time of the writing. Obviously there was conflict between the Jews and the early Christians to the point that in 90 C.E. a "*benediction*" was published. This was to be used for the exclusion of Christians from Judaism. Christians who were facing expulsion, persecution, and possible martyrdom, needed to hear a word of assurance and encouragement of the kind appearing in John. At the same time the harshness toward Judaism and the focus on the Christian community that seems to shape this gospel, is understandable.

Before we move on to look at the prologue to John, which is the focus of this study, one or two other things may help us get a perspective on this gospel and this particular portion of it. There was a time when my studies led me to think the differences between the cultures and philosophies during that first century were clear cut. Jews were one way, Hellenists another. The various sects and smaller groups were strictly that. The more I have read and the more that is being discovered about the early church, the less clearly defined the boundaries seem to be. There are a variety of ideas which appear to have influenced the writer, some Jewish, some Greek, perhaps Gnostic thinking and the community at Qumran and yet these influences are very fluid and held within the writer's particular context designed to reveal God who exists beyond the bounds of time and history and yet also enters into history.

Fred Craddock in his small commentary, *The Gospels*, says of John, "*This is a book in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim.*" Having gotten this far into our exploration of the scripture, this is a good place to stop and read it.

Observation

Whenever I read this passage, there are several things which always strike me.

- 1) This is one of the more poetic passages in the Bible. It seems likely some part of it may have been a hymn of the early church. While I've never heard it sung, it is a passage included in each lectionary on Christmas Sunday, the season when we often turn to the most poetic of the scriptures to help us put into words the experience of Jesus coming into the world.
- 2) Secondly, the poem is interrupted twice by prose in which John the Baptist is brought into the story.
- 3) The opening line, "In the beginning..." takes us back to Genesis 1.
- 4) This is a passage that does not lend itself to analytical thinking. It is somewhat like listening or playing music. When you're practicing and trying to get the music into your head, it's okay to take it apart. But once that is done, then you are prepared to let the music be just that. The best moments of all are when the singer and the music become one. This passage is one which invites you to allow it to sing for you.

Consider

When and where have you heard this scripture read? What memories do you have of it? What challenges or puzzles you?

Observation

Before we go further with the prologue, I'd like to do a little stage setting. One of the images I picked up somewhere, but no longer have any idea where I first heard it, was an invitation to see the Gospel as a drama being performed on a stage. In his short commentary on John, Fred Craddock refers to it as a dramatic gospel. This makes some sense to me. Imagine that this is a drama being done in an amphitheatre. At the center is the circular stage, so that wherever you are sitting, you can see that central stage. As you follow the drama, you will notice there is a central character, God, who is not seen, but very present. At the visual level we see Jesus who is the "revealer" of God. Along with Jesus on that stage are other characters. We meet the disciples, we meet the woman at the well, we meet Nicodemus, and dozens of others. At the edge of the stage are those who saw the play as it first began to unfold. Then behind them are those who were not there as it first took place, but who are still close to those early events. Now we begin to see the circle of people who are there by faith but are not eyewitnesses. Yet, they are able to see and understand because the play is happening every time they pick up the Gospel and begin to read. The risers go on year after year and generation after generation. For the moment we're close to the top, but there will be others behind us. But whether we are on the first row or the top row, we are invited to hear and see Jesus and the rest of the cast who inhabit the pages of this gospel.

Consider

Imagine you are in the theater and the narrator comes out to deliver the prologue. What will he say? What guidance may he have for you as you prepare to meet God in this time and place?

Observation

There is no doubt, at least in my mind, this is one of the most challenging texts we will come across and at least has the possibility of being one of the most rewarding. Because of the language and our cultural setting, it is hard for us to get inside, but if we can gain some understanding of the language and the context, we may discover some of the blessings found in these nineteen verses.

The first challenge we face is in the opening lines and the word, "*Word*." It seems pretty clear that Word and ordinary words are not exactly the same, but we live in a culture in which "word" has no life outside of the context of being written or spoken, and read or heard. In this context, the Word seems to have a separate being. Once it is uttered, it goes into the world to do its work. If you remember back to Genesis, you will remember that God spoke and the creation took place. The Word encompasses both word and deed, and seems greater than either. Gail R. O'Day who wrote the commentary on John for the *New Interpreter's Bible* suggests that Word encompasses both the eternal sphere, the cosmic Word of God, and the temporal or earth sphere in which the Word is made visible. Fred Craddock in his commentary *The Gospels*, describes Word as existing outside the bounds of time and history, but that it doesn't stay outside. It enters into history.

Consider

If these are new ideas to you, you may simply want to spend some time in thought, before you move on. Understanding Word is key not only to the prologue, but to understanding the whole of this Gospel. If concrete images help you grasp the concept, you may want to reflect on some of the stories which follow and how Jesus makes the Word visible. You may also want to think about some of the people you know who seem to you to point you toward an understanding of who God is and who Jesus is. In doing that, they are being Word. One of the things which makes this scripture so difficult is that it doesn't begin as the other three gospels did by pointing you to the stories that illustrate these concepts of Word: the birth, baptism, beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Observation

It is possible to take an overall view of the four divisions of the prologue.

- 1) 1:1-5 The eternal Word is the Light and Life, the creation.
- 2) 1:6-8 John the Baptist enters as a witness to the light.
- 3) 1:9-13 The Light or Word enters the World.
- 4) 1:14-18 The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us.

For John Jesus is the embodiment of the Word made flesh, an understanding which is central to our understanding God. Jesus is the "revealer." Jesus' mission originates in God and makes real the possibility of an intimate relationship with God. If you look carefully at the first three lines you may notice a summary of the story as it will unfold, ¹*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. .*

Consider

What do the terms Light and Life mean to you? Are you conscious of those who bring light? Madeleine L'Engel, in several of her books, suggests that light bringers are important. These are the people who point us toward God, toward wonder or beauty or make the world better or more understandable, who love with very great love even in the face of hate.

Observation

The placing of a simple comma can change the meaning of a sentence. From the beginning, verses 3-4 have been at the center of the argument. If you place the comma after life as in "*What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people*" as in the NRSV, there is one meaning. On the other hand the meaning changes somewhat in the NIV where the translators used the other punctuation, "*In him was life, and that life was the light of man.*" This is one of those places where no one can say which is right and so it is left to us to choose, which speaks more clearly to our faith and understanding both of who God is and who Jesus is. That is, of course, another challenge of this prologue, it will mean something slightly different to each of us.

Consider

How important is a comma in terms of your own faith? Which reading seems to be the most helpful to you? If you were to rewrite this passage in ordinary every day prose, how might you write it. One writer suggests that in Jesus the extraordinary enters into the ordinary everyday world in which humans live. He points us beyond that to God and also embraces and blesses the ordinary. That may also be John's role in the story. Prose encounters poetry and points us to the one who comes.

Observation

The heart of John's message lies in the last verses of this passage. It is also the passage, 1:14-18 which I believe sends us to the heart of transformation, beginning with "*The Word was made flesh and dwells among us.*" Eugene Peterson puts it in a slightly different and for me a more vivid way. ¹⁴*The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.* Some years ago a pastor in Northern California suggested the translation, *The Word became flesh and pitched its tent among us.* It ends with the word, ¹⁸*No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only,*^{[e][f]} *who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*

This is where I think we enter the picture. First, in a very real sense I have come to see this passage as not only being about Jesus, but about us. Jesus dwells in us and we continue to be witnesses to the love of God in our world. We live in neighborhoods and go about ordinary every day life. At the same time as Christians we are called to point to the presence of God in our lives and in our world. As Jesus was the revealer of God, we are also to be revealers of God. People came to know God as they came to know Jesus. People will either come to know God through us or not depending on how we live our lives.

A lot of the Gospel of John focuses on the love of God as made visible in Jesus. In encounter after encounter Jesus points to a love that goes beyond anything most people have imagined. As Christians, as Church, we are called to continue being that presence and living that love.

Consider

What does this have to say to you? What might it say to your church? How do you express God's love? How are you growing in your ability to love? How inviting and welcoming is your congregation?

Activity (Optional)

Choose one area of your own life. Are there ways you can live God's love more openly, more generously with other people around you? If you do this as a group activity, you may want to tell one another at least one thing you will do during the coming week. As a group you may also want to consider developing an activity by which you as a church can express love for some in your community.

Practicing the Presence

The New Creation – John 1:1-17

Begin using this material and preparing for this new cycle of prayer and reflection the week before the time of meeting with your small group. The pattern of preparation is as was suggested for the two previous cycles.

If you do not have an opportunity to use the material a week ahead, you may want to divide your time between the scripture for session one and the scriptures for Session 2:

As you begin this new section you may also find it helpful to reflect on how you remain mindful of God and of others for whom you plan to pray. One of the things I have learned about myself is that no matter how good my intentions are to be aware of God's presence through out the day, as well as to remember certain people in prayer, I get distracted. So I have learned to have reminders around me. Sometimes these are sticky notes on my computer, a card, an icon, a rock, the pull on the zipper of my planner, a bookmark are among some of my reminders. When I see or touch these objects, I often give a simple prayer of thanksgiving for persons or things which God seems to have placed in my life. This allows me to remember them as they cross my mind rather than thinking I have to go through a long list every morning or evening. I also carry a couple of my favorite prayer in my notebook, where I see them occasionally. This is one from ***Celtic Prayers – A book of Celtic Devotion, Daily Prayers and Blessings***, collected by Robert Van de Weyer, published by Abingdon Press

God

I am the wind that breathes upon the sea,
I am the wave on the ocean,
I am the murmur of leaves rustling,
I am the rays of the sun,
I am the beam of the moon and stars,
I am the power of trees growing,
I am the bud breaking into blossom,
I am the movement of the salmon swimming,
I am the speed of the stag running,
I am the strength of the ox pulling the plow,
I am the size of the mighty oak tree,
And, I am the thoughts of all people
Who praise my beauty and grace. (p. 19)

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

Closing Worship

Words to carry with you -

In the beginning
Before the mountains had been shaped
before the hills before the beginning of the earth:
In the beginning rejoicing like a master workman:
In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
when God established the heavens
when God drew a circle on the face of the deep
when God marked out the foundations of the earth
the Word was with God
and the Word was God.

God said: Let there be
and there was
and it was good.
God spoke
and that voice thundered
powerful
full of majesty breaking cedars
shaking the wilderness:
Where were you
when I laid the foundations of the earth
when the morning stars sang together
tell me where were you?

God spoke:
Before I formed you in the womb

I knew you
I loved you with an everlasting love
I appointed you prophet
go and proclaim:
thus says the Lord!

God spoke
God commanded
God called us by our name.
God spoke
when all was in gentle silence
the Word leaped from heaven
into the midst of the land
a lamp
a light
good news
healing the brokenhearted
breathing new life into dry bones
the Word became flesh
O dry bones
and dwelt among us
dry bones
hear the Word of the Lord!

Miriam Therese Winter
A Birthday In God With Us,
Resources for Prayer and Praise,
Abinadon Press, 1979

Prayer

As you have done in each session, notice the person on your right and on your left. Hold them in prayer during this week. If there are special joys or concerns share them with one another.

Response (Unison)

**In the very beginning you called forth light,
Our days and nights are lit by sun, moon, and stars,
You give us light by which to find our way.
When the road ahead seems dark, may we look to you.
When we see the way, may we show it to others also.
When there is so much darkness and despair in a world
where war, injustice, cruelty, neglect, apathy seem to
threaten the light of goodness, may we remember
you have promised the dark cannot destroy the light
and we are to be among your light bearers.
Amen.**

Blessing

**God who knows us by name and loves with unfathomable love
is with us in this place and all the places we go. With that knowledge
we go from this time and place with grateful hearts and hope for the
future.**

Song: *Lo, I Am With You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal*