

TRUE GOD; TRUE MAN

John 1:1-18

Fourth Wednesday in Lent

March 27, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson is from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 1, verses 1 through 18. It's kind of a Christmas story. Matthew and Luke tell the Christmas story, mostly from a historical perspective. But here, John tells it from more of a theological perspective. He teaches the nature of Jesus Christ, that he is true God and true man, and he reveals the purpose for which the Son of God became man. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 1, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

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

² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through 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 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who 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 became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Who is Jesus? Opinions abound. He is at least one of, if not the most significant and popular persons in history. And, yet, people can't seem to agree about who exactly he was.

It would be like having a Babe Ruth fan club where none of the members agree on who Babe Ruth was or what he did. One person says he hit 714 career homeruns (which is correct), another says he was a pretty good pitcher (which is also correct), another person says he stole 531 bases (which is definitely not correct), another that he averaged 31.5 points per game for the Chicago Bulls, another that he was just a great coach, and still another that he is just a myth, but one that inspires young hockey players to reach their full potential. This would be the sort of fan club where people just assume Babe Ruth to be whoever they want him to be. I suppose the only way

this can happen is if several of the members start with the presupposition that Babe Ruth was really great, and then build their perception of him around whatever their idea of greatness is. They would say, "It doesn't really matter who Babe Ruth was; all that matters is what he means to me." This would be a rather silly fan club, because history doesn't support all the differing opinions.

But Jesus kind of gets treated this way, and it's equally silly. Some people say he is God. Some people say he is a man. Some people say he was *just* a man. Some people say he was a prophet or a great teacher. Others say he is just a myth, but one that inspires them. The opinions can't all be true. History has to count for something. The accounts of the eyewitnesses have to count for something. And Jesus' own statements about himself have to count for something. The various different opinions can't all be true. We can't make Jesus out to be whatever we want him to be.

I suppose what has happened is that over the last two thousand years, Jesus has gained enough admiration that, whatever belief system you live by, you have to find a place for a positive opinion of him. This hasn't always been the case. At the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, and for a few hundred years following, there was plenty of hostility toward him. The closer you are to something historically, the less wiggle room there is to squeeze it into your system. But, after a few thousand years, it becomes a bit easier.

What we're concerned about, however, is not what we can make Jesus out to be, but who he actually is. The gospel reading from John 1 is one of the primary passages in Scripture that teaches who Jesus is. I should note, however, that this passage does not stand alone as the proof of who Jesus is. It's not just about what the apostle John says about Jesus. This passage is merely the introduction to the book. It introduces the doctrine of who Jesus is, and then the rest of the book is filled with the historical proofs to verify it. Those proofs consist of Jesus' miraculous signs, as well as his own statements concerning himself. These are the proofs of what John says in the introduction: in short, that Jesus is true God and true man.

Most false teachings concerning Jesus have slid into the ditch on one side or the other. A few of the earlier heresies affirmed that Jesus is true God, but denied that he was fully human. But it seems like the majority of heresies, especially the ones that continue today, recognize that Jesus is a human being, but they take something away from his divinity. Most of them don't completely deny Jesus' divinity, but they make him out to be a lesser kind of God than God the Father. They might say that Jesus lived such a great life that God adopted Jesus as his Son. Others might think of Jesus as being the first and greatest being that God the Father created. This sounds a bit better, but it still leaves Jesus as some kind of lesser God. I suppose the primary question regarding the divinity of Jesus is this: "When did Jesus become God?"

John answers this question by opening his Gospel with the very familiar words, "In the beginning" (1:1). So do these words remind you of any other books that start the same way? How about, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1)? When John says, "In the beginning," he is drawing our attention back to creation, to Genesis.

Now imagine we are reading the Gospel of John for the very first time. When we hear the words, "In the beginning," we might expect John to tell us a genesis story, an origin story. And if we know beforehand that John is writing about Jesus, we might expect him to tell us about the beginning of the Son of God. We might expect him to say something like, "In the beginning God created his Son." But John doesn't do that. Matthew and Luke, in their Christmas stories, go into great detail about how the Son of God became man. Now we expect John to tell us the story of

how he became God, but he doesn't. He can't. Instead, he writes, "In the beginning was the Word"—and *Word*, with a capital "W," refers to *Jesus*; we see that in verse 14—John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). John can't tell us how Jesus *became* God, or how the Son of God was *created*, because he did not *become* God, and he was not *created*. When John talks about how the Son of God became *man*, he can tell us. He says, "The Word *became* flesh" (1:14). But he doesn't say anything about the Word *becoming* God. He simply says, "And the Word *was* God."

So notice the difference between the words *became* and *was*. And I know; this is a bit technical, but this is important. Notice the difference between the words *became* and *was*. *Became* has a definite historical starting point. Sometime around 5 to 2 BC, "The Word *became* flesh." But the word *was* is timeless. There is no starting point. The eternal Word did not *become* God. "The Word—with a capital "W"—*was* God." He just *was*. The Word was not created. The Son of God has always been. He is the eternal Word.

Now if we expected John to tell us how Jesus was created, we are in for another surprise. Not only was he not created, he is, himself, the Creator! "He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." (1:2-3). Jesus cannot be a created being, because nothing has ever been created without him. He is the Word by which the Father created all things.

In the creed we confess that we "believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." We talked about that last week. But the Father was not working alone in creation. "In the beginning, God"—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as the Trinity, "God created the heavens and the earth." God the Father is the primary person responsible for creation, but he was not alone; he did the creating through the Son. The Son is the eternal Word through whom heaven and earth were created.

John calls him "the Word." And he says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

John also calls Jesus "the true light" (1:9). This distinguishes Jesus from the created light—that of the sun, moon, and stars. Jesus is the *true* light. This is something greater than the physical light that we observe. This is a spiritual light.

Verse five says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Spiritual darkness is worse than physical darkness. Physical darkness is just the absence of light. But spiritual darkness is more than just the absence of God. It is hostility against God. Spiritual darkness is pure evil. Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "**The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.**" (3:19-20). The darkness in us hides from God. The darkness of sin hates God, fears God, and does not understand God. The darkness of sin hates and fears the light when God says, "Your works are evil."

And the darkness of sin does not *understand* the light when God says, "Your sins are forgiven." In our more honest moments we recognize that we are children of darkness. And if we are sinful and dark, then it just doesn't make any sense that the light would want to have anything to do with us. We don't understand the concept of forgiveness. And since we do not understand it, we remain in fear, because light destroys darkness, and we don't want to be destroyed. We cannot grasp with our natural minds the idea that the light can drive away darkness without destroying the children of darkness.

So the darkness has not understood the light, but, glory to God, the darkness also cannot *overcome* the light. This is the thing about the battle between darkness and light: darkness never wins. Wherever darkness and light meet, light always wins. There are places where darkness reigns as a powerful and destructive force, but when a light comes into that dark place, the darkness vanishes. Darkness has no defense against light. Wherever darkness and light meet, darkness gives way and ceases to exist as if it were never really there.

Children of darkness still love the darkness, because it conceals their wickedness. So when the light comes, they hate it, they run from it, and they oppose it. This is what happened when the light came into the world. “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” (1:9-11). This is the eternal Word by whom heaven and earth were created. And this is the true light who became flesh to be rejected by his own.

The eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us (1:14), but we rejected him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. How tragic it sounds. The light came to drive away the darkness, but the children of darkness did not recognize the light. They did not comprehend the light, so they tried to overcome him. And they thought they had, but their violence against the light turned out to be his victory over darkness.

Now I wonder, *what would it be like to create something and then enter it?* When I was a boy I loved Legos. Actually, I kind of still do. But as a boy, I had a whole Lego town complete with an airport, a diner, a fire station, a police station, a gas station, a race track, a train track, houses, cars, and, of course, lots of little Lego people, all doing exactly what I wanted them to do.

And I know I’ve used this illustration before, but it’s still the best one I can come up with.

Now imagine if I could live in this town I created. I suppose I imagined this a few times as a boy. What if I could make it come alive? And what if I could go down and become one of them? This is the closest thing I can imagine to the incarnation of Jesus.

In my imagination, my Lego people would love me. They would say, “I really like my house, and the race cars are so fast! Thank you for creating this for us.”

And then I would say, “You’re welcome. I’m so glad you recognize how great I am.” But what if that’s not what happens? What if they reject me? What if they don’t understand who I am? And what if they try to overcome me? What if they try to kill me? And what if I let them? What if this had been my plan all along?

Like I said, I loved Legos, and I kind of still do, but not *that* much. I suppose a better word is *like*. I like Legos because of the enjoyment they give me. But that is not the reason God loves his creation. When the Scripture says, “God so loved the world” (John 3:16), that is not a statement about the value of the world. It doesn’t mean he just liked us a whole bunch. It’s a statement about the character of God. God loves the world because God is love (1 John 4:8). This is the only reason God would come to his own, knowing that his own would not receive him.

I can’t imagine suffering for the sake of my Legos. The very moment they should turn against me, I would be out of there, and they would be in the next garage sale. I can’t imagine suffering for the sake of my Legos. But that is exactly what Jesus did for his creation. He suffered. And that was his plan all along. That was his reason for becoming man. The Son of God became man for the very purpose of dying.

TRUE GOD; TRUE MAN (John 1:1-18)

And this is why it matters that Jesus is true God and true man. Doctrine is not trivial. The things God reveals about himself matter. He doesn't reveal this stuff to us just because it's interesting. I suppose there are probably an infinite number of things about God that are interesting. But he has revealed certain things about himself because they matter for our eternal salvation. It matters that Jesus is true God and true man because, in order for all his works—especially his death on the cross—but in order for all his works to be credited to us, he must do them as true God and true man. In order for his sacrifice to be valuable enough to cover all of our sins, he must be more than a mere man. A mere man is not valuable enough to cover more than one man's sins. To cover all the sins of the world, he must be true God. And in order to withstand the temptation of the devil, he must be stronger than the first man, who failed. He must even be stronger than the devil. In order to accomplish all that he did, he must be true God. But—and here's the other side of it—in order to represent all of humanity, he must also be true man. In short, he must have the strength and value of God but the blood of a man.

Now this doesn't mean that he is part God and part man. He is fully both. He is fully God, and he is fully man. Everything he does, he does it as both God and man. He always has been God, and he always will be. But at a certain point in history, somewhere between 5 and 2 BC, the Son of God became man and was called Jesus. He was born as true God and true man. He lived as true God and true man. He suffered and died as true God and true man. He rose from the dead as true God and true man. He entered into heaven as true God and true man. And he lives forever as true God and true man.

He has taken on our nature in order to restore the image of God to us. He took on our sin to suffer with it and die with it in order to remove it from us. He rose from the dead as a man in order to open the resurrection to all mankind. And he ascended into heaven, and continues to live in heaven, as a man, to open heaven to all mankind. From the time of his conception, through the rest of eternity, everything he does, he does it as true God and true man, and he does it for our sake. Jesus Christ, true God, and also true man, is our Lord. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.