



Sermon Transcript December 22, 2019

Advent 2019 Christmas Introductions Christmas Spirit - A Spirit of Wonder John 1:1-18

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on December 22, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
John 1:1-18

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.

Introduction

Much is made this time of year about a thing called “Christmas spirit.” What is that, anyway? What is meant by “Christmas spirit?” Dan Schaeffer was pondering his thought when he came across a newspaper article written by a reporter who had been searching for the meaning of this popular notion of “the Christmas spirit.” After concluding his quest, this reporter felt that this was the best answer he could offer: “It’s in your heart. It feels warm and glowy. You can’t buy it, and you can’t get it from anybody else.”¹ That doesn’t really clear things up for me. It still seems rather nebulous. But that is a popular view of “the Christmas spirit” - “it’s a warm and glowy feeling inside us this time of year.”

However, it leaves you asking, “how do you get it?” Does this spirit hit you when you unpack the decorations and start playing Christmas music? Does it require a Christmas tree? One strand of lights? Two? Is it more presents? This is the critical question. Are there a minimum number of Hallmark movies one is required to watch before you can get this “Christmas spirit?” And furthermore, is it nothing more than a feel-good sentiment that wells up inside of us simply because . . . as they say in a Hallmark movie to fix anything that ills you . . . “but it’s Christmas!” I wonder if we are more enamored with Christmas than we are in wonder with Christ.

In fact, Dan Schaeffer suggests that the true “Christmas spirit” is much more than a sentimental feeling that is conjured up with all the trappings of the holiday that we have come to love. Instead it is a profound joy—a sense of wonderment—because “the baby born in a Bethlehem manger *was God himself*. It was the miraculous birth of God the Son taking on humanity in order to substitute himself for us 33 years later on the cross . . . Jesus came to pay off the penalty for our sins we could never pay.”²

When is the last time you have been caught up in the wonder of all of this? Jesus, the second person of the Godhead has become the “second man” - the second Adam—so that we might become the children of God! That is how John begins his introduction of Jesus to us. He invites us to ponder the wonder of this mystery. In fact, J. I. Packer says of our passage this morning that John gives us “two mysteries for the price of one.”³

First there is the mystery of the plurality of persons within the unity of God. “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” In other words, Jesus was distinct from the Father and at the same time, he is fully divine. We could spend all day pondering the mystery of the nature of God, three persons and yet

one God. But that is not where John wants us to stay in this passage. He then introduces to us a second equally profound mystery in verse 14, “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” What a wonder to behold. The God of the universe became one of us.

Packer says it this way: “It is here, in the thing that happened at the first Christmas, that the profoundest and most unfathomable depths of the Christian revelation lie. ‘*The Word became flesh*’; God became man; the divine son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noise, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. And there is no illusion of deception in this; the babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets.”⁴ And that is what I want you to do this morning. I want you to think about this: “*the Word became flesh.*”

Advent 2019: Christmas Introductions

This Advent season we have been looking at the unique way each of the four Gospel writers introduce Jesus to us. Matthew begins his Gospel account with the genealogy of Jesus, tracing his lineage back through David and to Abraham. By doing this he is identifying Jesus as the fulfillment of all the promises of God. This is the One the Old Testament writers were anticipating: the One who crushes the head of Satan and who brings the blessing of God to the nations and who will rule this world with the peace and justice we all so desperately long for in our hearts. Matthew says, “that One has come!”

But then we saw in the Gospel of Mark that Mark introduces Jesus to us at the inception of his ministry. Mark says nothing about the birth of Jesus or his background or his life prior to his ministry. The Gospel of Mark is a Gospel of action and so Mark begins with the ministry of Jesus and the grand announcement that in Jesus the kingdom of God has come into the world and so there is hope in the wilderness. There is hope in the desert of life. Jesus is our hope.

Then last week we opened up the introduction of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke and here we were reassured that the things Luke wrote down for us were carefully researched and eyewitnesses were interviewed and therefore we can be certain that these things about Jesus are really true. Faith is not a blind leap. When you sat down in your seat this morning you did so because you were certain it would hold you. You had faith in the chair. If you were uncertain about that you would not have sat down. And so Luke says to us that our faith in Jesus rests in something that is true and certain. Jesus is truth.

How can one person—Jesus be the fulfillment of all the promises of God? How can one person—Jesus be the hope for all the world? How can one person—Jesus be the sure and certain object of our faith? There is a lot riding on one person here. How can one person be all that and more? John tells us how one person can be all of this to us. It is because this one person is God in the flesh. That is the wonder of it all!

Consider with me this morning the wonder of Jesus. Jesus was one with God from the beginning and he became one with us so that we could become the children of God. That is the source of true Christmas Spirit. It is the wonder of Jesus!

The Wonder of Jesus: One with God

John begins his Gospel with a staggering declaration regarding Jesus. He opens with this profound thought: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” John is unique in referring to Jesus as “*the Word.*” No one else in the New Testament describes Jesus this way. And there is no doubt that he is talking about Jesus in this verse. In case you are not convinced he is referring to Jesus in verse 1, all you need to do is go down to verse 14 where with great clarity he writes, “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” The Word is a person. The Word is Jesus.

It begs the question as to why does John refer to Jesus as *the Word*? If I had been writing this Gospel account, I probably would have gotten straight to the point and would have written it this way: “In the beginning was Jesus, and Jesus was with God, and Jesus was God.” But that is not how John began. So what is John communicating to us about Jesus by referring to Jesus as *the Word*? I would like to suggest two things that John is communicating about Jesus in his opening statement about Jesus.

First of all, God’s word was active and powerful in creation. In fact, John wants you to think back to Genesis 1:1 when you start reading this opening statement about Jesus. The phrase “*In the beginning*” is the title of the opening book of the Old Testament. That is what the word “genesis” literally means, “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*” How did he do that? He did that through the power of his creative “word.” “*And God said, ‘Let there be light and there was light.’*” But now we discover another dimension to the Word through which God brought forth all that has been made. Here we discover that the Word through which God created all things is none other than the person of Jesus. He too was from the beginning. Indeed, “*He was in the beginning with God.*” And so John says, in verse 3, “*All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.*” It is the same thing Paul says of Jesus in

Colossians 1:16, “*all things were created through him and for him.*” And so Jesus is the powerful creative Word through whom God made all things.

This tells us two very important things about Jesus. First of all, it tells us that “*In him was life.*” There is no life apart from the creative Word—Jesus. Did you ever hear someone say in an act of defiance against authority, “Well, It is my life!” It implies that I can do anything I want with my life. But here is the problem with that. As created beings, our lives—our breath—is derived from God through Jesus. You didn’t cause yourself to be. As much as you want to claim autonomy and independence, you have no life apart from Jesus. Whether you are aware of it or not—whether you humbly give thanks for it or not—you can’t breathe your next breath without the power of the Word—Jesus—“*for in him all things hold together.*”

And therefore, not only is Jesus life but he is also *the light of men*. Just as the first act of creation was the creation of light, so Jesus is that light and that life that comes into this dark world and has the power to bring new life—a new creation that overcomes the darkness. And so John tells us that this Jesus is the very one through whom God created all things and therefore is the one who is more than capable to make something new of your life and to renew all that is broken and fallen in this world. Jesus is the creative Word through whom God made all things and through whom God will make all things new—including you and me.

But there is a second reason why John refers to Jesus as *the Word*. It is through our words that we reveal our thoughts. You can’t know what I am thinking unless I tell you what I am thinking. God is a God who reveals himself. God is not aloof nor is he far off. He wants to be known by you. And so God first reveals what he is like through what he has made. Psalm 19 tells us that *the heavens declare the glory of God*. You should be able to look at what God has made and conclude that there is a God and that this God is powerful. Secondly, God has also spoken through the written Word. Through the Bible God has disclosed to us what is required of us and how we can know him. Peter tells us that *men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit*.

But the most profound way that God has revealed himself to us is through “*the Word*” (Jesus), for “*the Word was God.*” This passage concludes with a summary statement in verse 18, “*No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.*” That is the point of Hebrews 1:1-2. Here the writer to the Hebrews acknowledges the many ways God spoke through the prophets in the past, but then he says, “*but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.*” Leon Morris

says, “The Word points to the truth that it is of the very nature of God to reveal himself.”⁵ And how did God best reveal himself to us? He did so through Jesus who was with God and was God. That is why Jesus says in John 14:9, “*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*” Do you want to know what God is like? Look to Jesus!

This is the reason why John is writing his Gospel. He says in John 20:30-31 that he recorded the very things he recorded *so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name.*” In fact, Packer says “this is the stumbling block in Christianity.”⁶ If Jesus is nothing more than a remarkable godly figure in human history then all the other stuff like a Virgin Birth, or atonement on the cross or the resurrection of the dead seem too much to believe. But once you grant that he is the Son of God, it is not difficult to believe any of this. This is what makes sense of everything else in the New Testament. Why would it be hard to believe that Jesus brought a man by the name of Lazarus back from the dead when out of nothing God created all that is through Jesus. Relatively speaking, what he did for Lazarus is rather small. And so this is the most critical question you need to answer: Who is this Jesus? If he is the Son of God, if he is one with the Father, then that changes everything. This is the wonder of Christmas. It is the source of the real Christmas spirit. Jesus was from the beginning, he was with God, and he was God.

The Wonder of Jesus: One with Man

But then we come across something every bit as profound, if not even more so. The One who is one with God the Father, through whom everything has been made became one of us. “*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.*”

Can you at least pause and consider the wonder of Jesus who has become one with man? Bishop Fulton Sheen had a way with words and I have long loved his poetic description of what took place that first Christmas night when Jesus was born of a woman. “No worldly mind would have suspected that he who could make the sun warm the earth would one day have need of an ox and a donkey to warm him with their breath . . . He, who clothed the fields with grass, would himself be naked; that he from whose hands came planets and worlds, would one day have tiny arms what were not long enough to touch the huge heads of the cattle; that the feet which trod the everlasting hills would one day be too weak to walk; that the Eternal Word would be unable to speak; that Omnipotence would be wrapped in swaddling clothes; that Salvation would lay in a manger.”⁷ When you take time to ponder and wonder at this, it is indeed staggering.

It helps us understand what John is saying about Jesus when he says “*we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*” When you think of what the four Gospel writers have written about Jesus, where do you see the glory of God shine through his life? How did he show forth his glory?

There is no doubt that you can point to the miracles of Jesus to demonstrate the wonderful glory of Jesus. Who can do what he did? John only records seven of the many miracles Jesus performed. In fact, of the seven miracles John recorded, three of them are not even mentioned by the other Gospel writers. The one most surprising to me is the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead. I would have thought that would have been at the top of the “miracle list” for all the Gospel writers. But only John tells us about that miracle and clearly that points to the glory of God. Only God can raise the dead. John called the miracles of Jesus “signs” and the raising of Lazarus from the dead was a sign that pointed to the glory of Jesus—the fact that Jesus was *the resurrection and the life*. But is this where the glory of God was most evident in the life of Jesus?

Strangely, I think the glory of Jesus was most visible in the humble things. You would expect someone who was from the beginning and was with God and was God to be able to do anything that is of the miraculous. But the paradox of Christmas that causes the world to stand in wonder is the humility of Jesus first on display at his birth and then most profoundly at the cross. One might say that is not surprising at all that Jesus would rise from the dead, after all, this is the one through whom all things came into being. What is more staggering to me is that this Jesus is so “one with us” that he suffered and he died for us. He laid down his life for us and took our judgment for sin so that we could be forgiven. He is full of *grace and truth*. Paul describes the grace that is revealed to us in Jesus this way in 2 Corinthians 8:9, “*You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*”

There is something really reassuring about the humble birth of Jesus. Jeremey Linneman describes the story of the birth of Jesus with these words, “In the middle of nowhere, to parents who might be called nobodies, this child, who looked like any other baby, was born. Jesus didn’t come by way of fairytale birth into a golden palace. Jesus came by way of pain, of poverty, of confusion. Jesus comes into the real world, this place of both beauty and brokenness, not into some idealized world.”⁸ Do you know what is so reassuring about this? We don’t live in an idealized world. Jesus was born into the real world.

On social media we often try to paint a picture of some kind of idealized world that we think we live in, but it is often not real. That is the challenge of our world. We often feel the need to be better or to do more or to experience the spectacular or run to the next great thing. And we forget how Jesus stepped into the average, the poor, the mundane, the suffering and the broken—the real world—the world we all know and live in each and every day. The encouragement I find in that is what Linneman says: “If God shows up here—the stable—then he can show up anywhere.”⁹ In fact, it is in these kinds of places—our regular and broken lives that God likes to show up. This is the wonder of Christmas. It is the source of the real Christmas spirit. The *word became flesh* and we have seen his glory in the humble and the ordinary of life.

The Wonder of Jesus: Children of God

Sandwiched between these two great mysteries—the mystery that Jesus is one with God and the mystery that Jesus is one with us—is the reminder that some receive these things to be true and some do not. In fact, John says that Jesus *came to his own, but his own did not receive him*. Sadly, if that is the case for you, the most that the Christmas spirit will ever be for you is the warm sentiment that comes with the holiday. Now don’t get me wrong, there is good in family and there is good in the giving of gifts and so on. But sometimes the reality of life we just talked about—the brokenness that takes no holiday—can not be covered by a sentimental warm and glowy feeling. Some of you are going through the kind of difficulty that no amount of holiday warmth can soothe.

But then John says this, “*But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*” Do you realize how profound that verse is and the wonder it should cause to well up within you? Because Jesus was one with God from the beginning and because he became one with us we can become the children of God.

Do you know what the wonder is in all of this? To be called children of God means that Jesus is our brother. The writer to the Hebrews actually says that Jesus “*is not ashamed to call them brothers.*” John Piper was asked this question: “In what sense is Jesus my brother? And how does the brotherhood of Jesus add wonder and affection to our worship?” As Piper tries to answer this question he confesses his inadequacy to convey both the reverence for Jesus as the Son of God and the closeness and intimacy of Jesus as our brother. He concludes by saying, “the weight and the wonder of our worship of Jesus is always a mingling of trembling reverence at the unique divine greatness of the

One who is, and the unspeakable lowliness that unites him to us in a shared human nature and suffering and amazingly intimate friendship.”¹⁰

There was a church Father from the fourth century by the name of Athanasius. He called the doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus “the marvelous exchange.” He put it this way, “Christ became what we are so that we can become what he is.”¹¹ That doesn’t mean that we become God. But what it does mean is that as children of God, Jesus is our brother. He enters our life so that we can enter his. And the Son of God—the Eternal Word through whom all that has been made is made . . . becomes our brother.

You get a glimpse of this brotherly affection of Jesus in John 17. In this great prayer of Jesus before going to the cross Jesus prays for us. One of the things he prays for us is that we would be with him. He prays, “*Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me may be with me where I am . . . The love with which you have loved me, may be in them and I in them.*”

Our kids are all grown up and out of the house. We will get to see all of them over this Christmas season. That is our joy. But one of our joys is to watch them catch up with each other and enjoy each other. One by one, as they first come through that door, they are greeted with excitement and great joy. It is their brother! It is their sister! I love watching that. That is the joy with which Jesus longs to greet us when we come home. With great delight and with great joy our brother—Jesus—will present us before our Father as those without guilt because Jesus became one of us and suffered like us and died for us. That is the wonder of Christmas. Because Jesus was one with God from the beginning and because he became one with us we can become the children of God.

Conclusion

I hope you are marked with the true Christmas spirit. It is a deep abiding joy and sense of wonder over the fact that he who is one with God became one with us so that we could become the children of God.

Have you received him? Put Matthew, Mark, Luke and John together—these four Gospel witnesses—and hear what they have to say about this Jesus. He is the Son of God who was born to die. Through his death on the cross, he atoned for our sin. You can’t atone for your sin. You can’t make things right. You need a Savior. That is why the angels announced to the shepherds the night Jesus was born, “*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.*” Simply repent of your sin and in faith turn to Jesus who is able to forgive you of your sin.

The more you take time to think on these things, the more you will be able to sing during this season, even in the mundane, the brokenness, the sorrow of what may mark your life this season. I am not suggesting you cover up and suppress whatever it is that weighs you down this season. But I am suggesting that if Jesus stepped into this world by first stepping into the middle of nowhere, to parents who might be called nobodies—into the pain, the poverty, the confusion—you know—into the real world. Then he is accustomed to stepping into your world this Christmas season and he is accustomed to being found there in your pain. He is with you.

Finally, the true Christmas spirit is reflected through us when we imitate Jesus who became poor so that we can become rich. Packer says this, “The Christmas spirit is the spirit of those, who like their Master, live their whole lives on the principle of making themselves poor—spending and being spent—to enrich their fellow humans, giving time, trouble, care and concern, to do good to others—and not just their own friends—in whatever way there seems need.”¹² I wish the newspaper reporter had found this quote before writing his article.

That is a spirit that is born out of the wonder of Christmas. It is a spirit that receives Jesus by faith. It is a spirit that finds Jesus in pain. It is a spirit that imitates Jesus in the spending of ourselves for others.

Because Jesus was one with God from the beginning and because he became one with us we can become the children of God.

¹Dan Schaeffer *What Is the Christmas Spirit?* www.crossway.org October 31, 2011

²Ibid

³J. I. Packer *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 53

⁴Ibid., 53

⁵Leon Morris *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 66

⁶Packer, 53

⁷Bishop Fulton Sheen *Life of Christ* (New York: Doubleday, 1958) 27

⁸Jeremy Linneman “If God Can Show Up in Bethlehem . . .” www.thegospelcoalition.org December 19, 2019

⁹Ibid

¹⁰John Piper “Jesus is my Brother—But what does that mean?” www.desiringgod.org Sept 7, 2016

¹¹Glen Scrivener “Glory to God in the Lowest” www.thegospelcoalition.org Dec 11, 2019

¹²Packer, 64

