

Gospel Beginnings: John

SCOTT HOEZEE

When a story has already been told many times, you wonder if there could ever be a new way to tell it. Is there anything new to be said about the story of the Great Depression, for instance? Haven't we heard it all before? Well, the evangelist John might have wondered this about the story of Jesus' birth. He knew that Luke and Matthew had already filled in most of the details of what we celebrate at Christmas, and so by the time John wrote his Gospel, was there a fresh way to tell that story? John decided there was. He would do it by giving the story a cosmic backdrop. Today on Groundwork, let's let John reveal to us the deepest layers of the story of Jesus' advent into our world.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and as we are preparing our hearts and minds to celebrate Christmas this year in this series of programs over the Advent season, the season anticipating Jesus' arrival, we have been exploring the opening chapter or so of each of the four Gospels, and we are up to the fourth one now today, John.

DAVE BAST

And I think I would like to read these verses if I could and we will start to talk about them, but this magnificent prologue – it is often described as the prologue to the Gospel of John – just a staggering piece of news that John gives us.

¹¹In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In Him was life, and that life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. And then this famous verse: ¹⁴The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So it is interesting to notice the different styles of the four writers whom the Holy Spirit used to give us the Gospel and the New Testament. Matthew took us back to Jesus' family and opened with that family tree – the long, 17-verse genealogy or family tree of Jesus. Mark just sort of begins right in the middle of things with Jesus getting baptized. He does not give us any background at all. Luke takes us right down to ground level – takes us right down to Mary, and Elizabeth and Zechariah, and Joseph, and the stable. Luke brings us right down to the earth. John? He decides to pull the camera way back, and I mean way back – clear back to the very beginning: In the beginning are the first three words of John 1; also the first three words of the whole Bible.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. There's a clear echo of Genesis 1 here in John's opening. You know, John is interested in theology. Luke is the great storyteller; he is the historical researcher who has gone and talked to people and he has Elizabeth's story and Zacharias' story and Mary's story. John, the theologian, backs off and consciously picking up on the creation of the whole universe, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and

the earth,” he starts out, “In the beginning was the Word;” and thereby opening up a whole picture, not only into the story of the origin of the universe, but into the very nature of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; this story I am about to tell you, John is saying, is really big. How big? It includes everything. Dave, when I read John 1 now I am always reminded of this movie we watched – a short, little movie in high school science class; it was called: *Powers of Ten*, and it was meant to show you things about math and distance and raising things by a factor of ten. The movie starts out showing a couple in Grant Park in Chicago. They are having a picnic on a little picnic blanket, and then the camera pulls back, and every ten seconds you get ten times farther away from the couple. So first you just see the picnic blanket, then you see all of Grant Park, then you can see all of Lake Michigan, and then all of the United States, and then the whole earth; and it keeps going until you get past Saturn and Jupiter and to the outer reaches of the Galaxies; but then at the very end, it zooms back in much, much faster than we zoomed out; and so you zoom past the galaxies, you zoom past the stars, you zoom past Jupiter and Saturn and Mars, the moon, and then you see the earth, and boom, you are right back at the picnic blanket. That is sort of what John does. He takes us way back to the beginning, and then sends his camera hurtling through time and space until we arrive at this one: Jesus, the Word made flesh; Mary’s son.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and what he says is simply mind-boggling. We have gotten used to it – we have grown accustomed to it. He says that this person, Jesus of Nazareth – history calls Him that – John would say we knew Him that way. We walked about with Him, we lived with Him, we spent three years in His company – He did not begin at birth. He did not begin to be when He was born. All of us, as far as we know, begin to be when we come into the world. Jesus already was. He already was a person. He was not a human being, but He was a person from all eternity. He was in the beginning with God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He was not always called Jesus and He did not always have hands and feet and eyes and teeth. He picked that up when He became incarnate inside of Mary, but the person that is our savior – Jesus Christ – that person always existed. He is part of God; and what John reveals to us here – and it may have been the first time in the whole Bible that this was revealed to anybody – is that this person, the Son of God, we would call Him, in the doctrine of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we would say: The second person of God. He was the Word of God – the logos in the Greek. In other words, John is saying: You know in Genesis when you read: God said, “Let there be light.” God the Father got it going, but the one who said, “Let there be light,” that is the one we now know as Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Yes. So we get two truths for the price of one – two mindboggling truths for the price of one. First of all, God is a Trinity. God is not a simple being. He is a community of persons and always has been. There never was a time when the Father was without the Son, when He created the Son; and we learn that Jesus has always existed – the person who became the man, Jesus of Nazareth. He is eternal and He is eternal God. I think of a line that the great Dorothy Sayers, the great writer of the Twentieth Century, said: You can call that idea nonsense. You can call it craziness, but if you call it dull then words have no meaning.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Indeed.

DAVE BAST

This is pretty powerful stuff. This is pretty exciting.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what John starts to put us in touch with here in these opening chapter, it would take the early Church four hundred fifty years almost to figure it out. All of the earliest Church councils and so forth wrestled with

God as three, but still one, and Jesus as two natures, but still one person. There is so much here, it took almost five hundred years for the Church to even begin to wrap its mind around the mysteries that are at work here.

DAVE BAST

Yes; but one very important point, Scott, that I think I want to say, and then we will move on. The Church did not invent these ideas. Sometimes you will hear this sort of critique saying: Well, yes; in the Fourth Century these old bishops and whatnot got together and cooked up this idea. No. They took it from the scriptures themselves – from the Gospel; and it especially comes from this chapter. So, let's dig into that a little bit more in just a bit.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we are looking at John Chapter 1, the great prologue and the magnificent statement of Jesus the divine logos – the divine word of God who has always existed. John says that all things were made through Him, which incidentally is why He is interested in redeeming all things, Scott. It is not just saving souls, but He cares about the creation because He made it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; sometimes we do fall, all of us I think in the Church, sometimes we fall into thinking Jesus just saves me – my soul; but the Bible makes clear that God is interested in saving tadpoles and mountain lions and daffodils and humpback whales. Jesus saves all of it and John 1 gives us one of the reasons why: He made humpback whales and daffodils and tadpoles and mountain lions. It is His stuff. He is the one who in the beginning made everything, and now in the incarnate form, born of Mary, He came back to save all of it, too.

DAVE BAST

And the other thing John says here about Jesus is that He is the light of the world. He brought light into the world, as in His coming somehow God's illumination began to shine, and this wonderful statement: The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. And that is Jesus, too. But then there is a little bit of confusion about names here because there are too many John's in this first chapter; and so, he says something about the other John, John the Baptist.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We know from the book of Acts for instance that there was some confusion in the First Century, including even late in the First Century when we believe the evangelist John wrote this Gospel. There were some people who still thought John the Baptist had been the Messiah. The Apostles eventually in Acts run into a church one time of people who are worshipping the Messiah, but the name of the church was the Church of the Messiah – John the Baptist – and they had to say: Time out; gotta correct that here a little bit. It is Jesus not John.

DAVE BAST

Actually, I once visited a church in southern Mexico that was more dedicated to John the Baptist than it was to Jesus. They were practicing witchcraft there, too. So, yes, there are some weird things...

SCOTT HOEZEE

They were a little confused.

DAVE BAST

Right, a little confusion. So, John the evangelist says: There was a man sent from God whose name was John, but he came to bear witness to the light.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The preacher, Fred Craddock, once said: John 1 is like a song – it is like a symphony, but John calls a little timeout for just a couple of verses here to say: Time out, time out. Just so you know... Stop the music; let me make clear... Not John the Baptist – that is not the one I am singing about... Okay, restart the music and we will go on; and when he does restart the music, we get these verses, which are remarkable because John has built up the one we now know as Jesus. He has not named Him as Jesus, that does not come until later, but he is building Him up huge; He is the eternal Son of God; He is the Word that spoke the entire creation into being; He is the light of the world. If you have light and life in you at all, it comes from Him; and then in verse 10 you get this: He was in the world and although the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. What a tragic note that sounds. The one who made everything showed up and nobody knew it was Him.

DAVE BAST

Can you believe it? It is as though the whole story of the human race is a great drama. Think of it as a play, and all of a sudden the author who wrote the play walks out on stage and sort of joins the action, and all the actors and actresses look at him and say: Who are you? Get out of here. We don't want you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

C. S. Lewis, whom we often mention here on Groundwork because he just had so many rich things to say, he once made that very analogy. In fact, just imagine being in New York years ago on Broadway and the great play *Death of a Salesman*, written by Arthur Miller, is going on, and the show has finished. It has been a gloriously moving play. Everybody in the audience was in tears at one time – an incredible thing. And so, everybody is applauding at the end – standing ovation for all the actors in *Death of a Salesman*, and then Arthur Miller comes out, and just imagine the applause stopping, people looking at him and saying: Who is that? Maybe a few people booed him and said: Get off the stage. We just want to see the actors. The actors would not have had anything to say if it weren't for Arthur Miller; and so it would be ridiculous for people to boo him off the stage as though he had no place; but John says that is what happened to Jesus.

DAVE BAST

There is a terrible poignance about this, and of course, John is really not talking about something theoretical. He is describing what actually happened. You think of the tumultuous scene on Palm Sunday when Jesus comes into the city and the crowd is yelling and cheering and acknowledging Him as the Messiah, as the coming one: Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; and then just a few days later when He does not turn out to be what they expected – when He is not what they wanted – they turn against Him. I think it is important for us not just to say: Oh, those terrible people! Oh, look at what they did. He came to His own and His own rejected Him; but to think about ourselves. He comes to me too, and do I turn against Him and do I turn Him out? Part of me does.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it has been happening all through history. I read a story once about a monk in a monastery – or maybe he was the abbot or the head of the monastery. He tried to train his fellow monks to say that every time a stranger approached the monastery, the question you should first ask is: Oh, Jesus; is it You again? You know, we are always looking for Jesus, but most people don't, and so we miss seeing Him. You know, Dave, at Christmas and Advent we spend a lot of time thinking about the drama of the story and the mystery of God becoming a human being, and that is all great stuff. Sometimes we forget what that incarnation cost Jesus. It had to hurt to know you created the whole world and every person in it, and then be treated the way Jesus was. He had feelings too as a human being, and I think God has feelings, even as God; and that kind of rejection has to hurt; but thankfully, that was not the only thing John says because before he finishes that little section he says: But not everybody; and for those who saw Him – for those who figured it out, God gave them the right to be called children of God, and that is good news right here.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think one of our most popular assumptions is that everybody is a child of God. Isn't that true, Scott? This seems to imply that it takes something extra – something special – to become a child of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, to come into the kingdom of God and to be able to call God your Father does require the grace that Jesus brings; the grace to open your eyes. You could not do it on your own, that is one thing, especially in the Reformed tradition we have said: We could not have opened our own eyes, but the Spirit opens our eyes, and then you see Jesus for who He is; exactly who John is talking about here in this opening chapter, this mysterious figure from all eternity.

DAVE BAST

Well, we still have the greatest verse of all in a sense, verse 14, to look at, and we will do that in a moment.
Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and today we are looking at John. We are going to spend a little time... Dave, you read this verse earlier in the program, but it bears repeating.

DAVE BAST

Yes, let's listen to it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You can never hear this one too often; that 14th verse:

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory; the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

DAVE BAST

One of the great classic Christmas services was developed for the first time in 1918, just after the close of the first world war, in Cambridge at King's College, and it is called the Festival of Nine Lessons in Carols, and it always builds up to the reading of John 1 and the climactic 14th verse, and that reading is prefaced with the phrase: St. John unfolds to us the mystery of the incarnation; and that word *incarnation* is fancy Latin for *enfleshment*, the *enfleshment* of the Word.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what a startling thing it was. People in the Greek speaking world at the time would have been totally shocked by this. They had an idea that this *logos*, the divine word, was divine only. The Greeks had a certain dislike of all things physical in the body. That is why when Socrates was put to death he was actually kind of glad about it. He could get out of that body and let his soul fly free; so the idea that a god, much less the God of the universe, would willingly take on flesh – that blew their minds. They could not figure that out; but even if you do not have that Greek resistance, the idea that God could become human is something. It is supposed to blow your mind. It is absolutely startling. That word that John has been talking about in such cosmic terms, He, as Eugene Peterson paraphrased it, He became flesh and He moved into our neighborhood. He moved into the neighborhood. I like that.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I do, too. As you point out, Scott, this is really a retrograde movement as far as Greek philosophy would have been concerned, and for Jews it would have been almost impossible to accept as well apart from God's

grace that opened... As you said earlier, our eyes need to be opened. Only the power of God helps us to accept this, because the movement should not be down to earth and into flesh; it should be escaping all that. It should be, as you say, flying away and being loosed from the trammels of this body that so confines us; and here God says: No, no, I am going absolutely in the other direction, and I am going to limit myself and I am going to become one of you. I think of this bumper sticker I have seen that said: God is too small to be contained in just one religion. And our faith is: Hey, He was contained in just one body. You want to talk small.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Philip Yancey had a column in *Christianity Today* years ago where he reflected on the fact that long before Jesus was born as a baby – which is amazing enough – that the Son of God was laid in a feed bunk in a barn – that is amazing – but Philip Yancey said before that happened, He was a zygote inside of Mary. The Word became microscopic. I mean, think of that! The God who fills heaven and earth managed to get contained inside Mary's little, tiny body, and within that body for a long time it was a clump of cells so small even to this day you need a really powerful microscope to see it – and that was God. Amazing!

DAVE BAST

Yes, one of my favorite poems is the sonnet cycle by John Donne, and one of them is called *Nativity* with this line: Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb now leaves His well-beloved imprisonment. There He hath made Himself to His intent weak enough, small enough, into our world to come. God had to make Himself small to be one of us, but He did it; and He dwelt among us, John says. Another great word. Literally pitched His tent among us; and it calls to mind whole echoes of the Exodus story, doesn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes, when John says He made His dwelling among us, in the Greek literally it says He pitched His tent. He went camping. The word became meat and went on a camping trip, but not just a camping trip. For the Israelites or anybody who knew the background, that tent would be the tabernacle, and then later the temple – the place where God dwelled with Israel – the place where God dwelled on the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant. But it turns out, as the writer to the Hebrews will later play with a lot, that was just the coming attraction. This is the real deal of God becoming one of us; God moving into the neighborhood; God pitching His tabernacle among us in a literal tabernacle of flesh; and when He did, John said, we saw His glory; but what was the glory? He was full of grace and truth – grace and truth – interesting combination.

DAVE BAST

Very interesting. We are seeing here all kinds of themes that John will unpack during the course of his Gospel and his witness to the Lord Jesus. The Temple – the true Temple – is Jesus' body. "Destroy this temple," Jesus will say in the next chapter, "and in three days I will raise it up again," and of course, that was mindboggling – it blew the minds of the Jews to whom He spoke; but He is now the dwelling place of God with people. He is the nexus through whom we must come to God. He is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here is the good news of the Gospel for every single one of us in the Church also today and all through history; that He was full of grace and truth; and He needed both. If Jesus had been only the truth, all He could have done was point out our sins; but He also had the grace, so although He saw all the sins... He never missed one. I mean, He is perfect God. Jesus always knew what was wrong, but He did not run around Palestine shouting and screaming and condemning people. Sinners were attracted to Him. Why? Because He did not just have truth, he had grace.

DAVE BAST

He had grace, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And He would forgive you, and we all need that. It is good to know that He knows the truth about me, but I am really glad to know He is full of grace or the truth would be the end of me, but instead, I know I am forgiven.

DAVE BAST

Another story John will tell that shows this as beautifully as anything: When a woman is brought to Him guilty of adultery, He dismisses her accusers, and He says, “I do not condemn you, but go and sin no more.” There is the grace and the truth combined; and that is what He offers to anyone who will acknowledge Him, who will come, who will see the light; and who will become a child of God as a result.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is the Gospel in John 1; that the great God of all creation came down here to forgive us and offer us new life.

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation; and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing. You can even suggest topics or passages for future Groundwork programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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