

Covenant Response: The Gospel Incarnate

series: *What Is the Gospel?*

John 1:1-18

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If you have your Bible or your i Phone or your i Pad or your Scripture Memory turn to John Chapter 1. Since September our sermon series has asked the question, *What is the Gospel?* And we have gone through—from the beginning we have looked at the various covenants, seeing the Gospel from a vantage point of the covenant story that God has made with his people. Then we looked at the Covenant Maker, looking at how the storyteller of the Gospel, God himself, has revealed himself as Father, Son, and Spirit. And today as we begin this advent season—another year, another holiday gone with Thanksgiving, another holiday on the horizon—the time when it's actually appropriate to listen to Christmas music. We enter Advent looking at the Gospel from the covenant response.

And today—it's not so much...well, it is, it involves our response today, for sure. But today we're going to look at the overflowing nature of the covenant that was made with God and how he responded to the reality that we are in sin and brokenness and separation, in that he provides a way through his Son, Jesus. And so today, when we think of faith and we think of embracing Jesus Christ, who proclaims good news—but he also is good news. And so today as we enter advent season, as we await Christmas and have longing in our hearts, we look at Jesus's incarnation. So follow along as I read John 1:1-18.

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 were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

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

⁹The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹²But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And 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.'") ¹⁶For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷For 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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. [Thanks be to God.] Let's pray. Father, would you add blessing to the hearing of your word. Would you help me, the teacher, to bring light upon your word, that we would understand it. But Lord, I confess my need for you, because I can't do that, but that is the work of your Spirit in our lives. We do pray that you would, by your Spirit, give us understanding; by your Spirit you would move in our hearts; that you would cultivate faith, hope, and love in your Gospel through your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen

"Always winter, never Christmas." If you've ever read or perhaps you've watched the movie, "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe," then you remember those sad words spoken by the faun, Mr. Tumnus. He said that when he was interacting with Lucy, her first trip to Narnia. He explained to her why it was winter and how it had been so for a long time. And then, as an afterthought to that reality, putting weight and meaning into that reality, he says, "Always winter, never Christmas." And that framed the condition of Narnia under the White Witch's curse. But if you've read the book or watched the movie you know that a frozen Narnia was but a moment of its entire history. It was not the story of Narnia's beginning, nor was it the story of Narnia's ending.

You see, sometimes we can only frame our stories, from the frame of reference, by the existence of our plight, from our struggle, our misery, of our sin. And because of that we can sometimes reduce the Gospel to Jesus's death on the cross, so that our plight has relief, so that our struggle has peace. We find freedom from our misery, and we see and experience forgiveness from our sins. And all of those things are true. And even if we do focus and reduce the Gospel to the cross, hopefully we tack on his resurrection.

But you see you cannot reduce the Gospel to only Jesus's death on the cross. It is that. Absolutely. It is that. But it's so much more. The Gospel that saves is indeed the good news of Jesus accomplishing salvation through his cross, through the work of his redemption, through His reconciliation between God and mankind, and then through his work of restoring all things. This is done through his life his death and his resurrection. And so this Gospel that we're looking at, this Christian Gospel, must also include his incarnation. And the good news—which is what 'gospel' means, the good news—the good news that God has taken on flesh is big news. Now there's a lot in this passage that we can focus on. But for this morning we're just going to focus on three parts, three aspects of the passage dealing with the incarnation by looking at the **Word, Light, and Flesh**.

First, the **Word**. Look at verses 1-3. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He [meaning the Word] was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him [meaning the Word] and without him [meaning the Word] was not anything made that was made." In our English translations the 'Word' that we see—the 'Word' is translated from a Greek word. Now I don't normally like to talk about Greek words up here, but it's an important word; it's *logos*. At its most basic use *logos* is the expression of the mind with communication and its intent. It literally is 'words,' 'speech,' 'utterances.' But it also can be used as a reference to a whole message given or a whole speech presented. So the word *logos* is all over the Greek New Testament. But here John is using it with very specific intention,

specific use in mind. And we see from verse 1 that he states, “In the beginning,” and by doing so he draws our attention to Genesis Chapter 1 and Creation. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” And we see how God spoke things into existence by the word of his power. And so the *logos* was God's Word.

Likewise, John is utilizing something that was also well known in Greek society: Greek philosophy. The *logos* was a way of trying to speak about the organizing, rational, principle of the cosmos. And as John uses the word *logos* here he is weaving together Jewish and Greek perspectives to describe reality. He is claiming something here. He's claiming that the cosmic *logos* is not abstract and not separate from creation, but is personal and is involved in God's creative purposes. And even more than that, John is claiming that the cosmic *logos* is one with God and preexisted with God.

Second, looking at the **Light**. Now the light is spoken in various verses: verses 4-5 and then 9-13. We're not going to spend a whole lot of time on this. But looking at verse 4—I'm sorry, verse 9—the true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world. And then in verses 4-8 there is this interaction with this man John, and we'll talk about John in a minute.

But the true light. Light. What is light? Light is that which is in contrast to darkness. It's the opposite. Where there is darkness, there is no light; but where there is light, it penetrates the darkness. Of course this is in a physical sense, but it can also be used in a metaphorical kind of a way to express the transcendent. And so here John is again ascribing something about the *logos* from a different angle, the true light. And he also kind of works in the themes of creation, as well. Verse 10: “He was in the world, and the world was made through Him.” And in this communication of the light emanating from this preexistent *logos*, this preexistent word, this true light, we see a communication happening, and we see intention. And we see going from that which is eternal to something which is temporal and something that is finite, to be receiving that.

We'll see how these weave together again here when we look at the third aspect, **Flesh**, verses 14-18. Look at verse 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.” I move quickly past the light, because this in verse 14 is where he weaves together the cosmic *logos*, the Word, and the true light. And by doing so he gives shape to a person, a man, namely Jesus Christ. The Word has become flesh, and we have seen his glory—another image of radiance, of brightness, of light, of splendor.

The word for ‘flesh’ is used in different ways throughout Scripture. Sometimes it is merely referring to the fleshly tissue covering bones and body. Sometimes it is referring to just the physical body, the whole totality of the body, kind of when we say ‘flesh and bones.’ In more abstract ways flesh can express the physical limitations in our abilities, in our weaknesses. It also can be used in the New Testament to describe an instrument or a means of how we act or express something. Sometimes it's just broadly kind of jargon for our sinful nature. Sometimes it is specific to discussing our sexual urges, which doesn't necessarily imply sin, but certainly in [some] contexts that it talks about it, it does often discuss our sexual sins. So all those things are different ways that the New Testament writers use the word flesh.

But here John, in keeping with his theme of these images—word, light, flesh—he’s saying something very specific. Here John is using ‘flesh’ to describe the animating function of being a real live person. Do not underestimate this Christmas, do not underestimate today as you listen to God’s word from John Chapter 1, do not underestimate the gravity of what John is claiming here. Do not let all the warm fuzzies that you have for Christmas songs and spice latte or all the feels you have for garlands and gift giving. . . Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year, but don’t let that nostalgic sensibility that we have around Christmas cloud our view, our view of the scandal of the Christian Gospel. John is claiming nothing less than this: That the Son of God, the Eternal and pre-existent second person of the Trinity, has now entered space, time, and limitation as a person in Jesus Christ, who was born of a woman, with flesh and blood.

Now I enjoy “Silent Night” as much as the next person, but the gravity and the scandal here. . . We can’t, we don’t know for sure, but we can safely assume that it was not a ‘silent night.’ And so why is this so scandalous? Why is it scandalous that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us? In the Jewish context it’s pressing in on the sensibilities of how can the one God, eternal and infinite, experience the finite and also be three persons. It’s nonsensical. In the pagan context and the Greco-Roman context, how can the transcendent divine be associated with the temporal, fleshly, earthly human?

And even in our own church history people have misunderstood Jesus’s incarnation. And we usually fall on one side or the other of a dualism. On one side you have a dualism that says the divine and the spiritual is good; the flesh is not as good or the flesh is bad. (Human. . . I’m sorry, there was another point to that.) And when you think of it that way, then salvation becomes an escape from the body. The other side of the dualism could be that humanity is innately good and divine, but the divine, the deity, is actually not that big of a deal or nonexistent. And then the implicit salvation in that story is one of self-improvement, the quest for fulfilled lives. And at times in the life of the church people sought to focus on Jesus’s deity and downplay his humanity. The effect of this can still try to affirm God’s revelation that God is true and God is transcendent and God is making himself known, ~~but it does not give allowance for God’s gracious initiative toward humanity. Rather, in this view Jesus’s humanity is elevated as only an example to follow, because the potential for humans to be. . .~~ (and I’m reading the wrong paragraph. Please forgive me, because I would have missed, completely missed what I was saying.) If we are denying or downplaying Jesus’s humanity, it does not give allowance for God to dwell with his people. The separation between God and his people remains, which then suggests that humans must be like God in order to be with God. We have to transcend that chasm. We have to go from our lowly state to be with God in his high estate. This becomes crushing, because we cannot become what we are not.

And other times people sought to focus on Jesus’s humanity, and they downplayed or they denied Jesus’s deity. The effect of this view can still try to affirm his physical body, but it does not give allowance for God’s gracious initiative toward humanity. Rather, Jesus’s humanity is elevated as only an example to follow, because the potential for humans to be godlike exists within ourselves. This reduces God’s salvation to only an example and equally becomes crushing, because we cannot attain when we continue to fall, when we continue to fail and fall short. But the scandal of the Gospel is that God being eternal, interspaced in time—he who is infinite becomes finite. The *logos* becomes flesh. He dwells among his people and makes it

possible for us to experience reconciliation with God and union with God. Thus through the course of history Christians have wrestled with the mystery of John Chapter 1.

Now there have been various errors, and I just gave you a spectrum of the extremes, and there's all kinds of nuances in between. And I could give you names for these errors, and we could go down the line of church history, and that would be wonderful in another context. But the beauty of John Chapter 1—in this space as we discussed it this morning—is that the Holy Spirit gives understanding to the truth of Scripture. In our attempts to express the reality of Jesus being fully God and fully human, we do well to ascribe boundaries, much like bumpers at a bowling alley. So when you throw the ball down the lane and the bumpers are up, you know that the ball's not going to fall in one gutter or the other. The union of the divine nature with the human nature in Jesus Christ was without division, without separation, without change, without confusion, and is a union of nature. It's not a moral or spiritual sentiment. If one of the natures of Christ was absent, or if the union of the two natures had been replaced by the meaning of the two, then such a person cannot be the mediator between God and humankind. Because he's neither. He cannot truly bring about union with God, reconciliation with God, and communion with God, since by the mixing of the two natures he himself is different from both, and all together a third kind.

Now this is very complex language and abstract thought that theologians a thousand times more intelligent than me try to grapple with. And it's generally the Christians that have stepped out and said, 'I'm going to describe the Trinity'—that they kind of fall on their face. And so boundaries help us to explain what the trinity is not. And this is all together important. And this gets into the implications; this is why the Incarnation matters. This is why when the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us it has significance for your life this morning and has significance for your life for eternity. Jesus's incarnation is a part of God's plan of salvation. It consistently flows from God's character. We see his steadfast faithfulness. We see his eternal love, his promises made through his covenants. Jesus's incarnation is just as much a part of his saving work for redemption as his sinless life, as his atoning death, his resurrection, and his ascension. It's not trying to tease these saving works apart and pitting them against each other or trying to prioritize them. It's actually seeing the totality of Jesus's life death and resurrection and seeing how that accomplishes salvation. It is like taking light and shooting it through a prism and seeing the colors of the rainbow, the various frequencies of light. We see all these different aspects, and the incarnation is part of our salvation. Jesus's incarnation is the physical manifestation and loving expression of God to all of creation, especially humans who are made in the image of God.

And this is incredibly powerful, as Paul writes to the Colossians, because Jesus is the image of the invisible God. We see here in John how he has made him known, because no one—verse 18—no one has ever seen God. But this Word, this light, this incarnate Son of God named Jesus, has made God known. Jesus's incarnation matters for our lives today. In the Christian Gospel God dwells with his people. He comes and he sets up house with us. He doesn't set up a colony. He doesn't set up the big house on the hill. He doesn't set up a serfdom. He comes and he—the language comes from the Old Testament—he 'tabernacles' with us. He 'tents' with us. He sets up a tent beside us and lives among us.

This has all the importance for when we are experiencing the full range of what it means to be

human—from all of our joys and all of our sorrows. A Creator and Redeemer that does this makes all the difference when we're experiencing pain, when we're experiencing sickness, when we're experiencing need and weakness, when we experience the limitations of what it means to be human, when we experience that internal angst because we know in our mind's eye what [living] without limitation could be like, but it's so far from our experience. Jesus incarnated also makes all the difference because he takes on flesh, because that allows the opportunity for him to take on death. All the joys, all the sorrows of our inner selves and across our relationships. Think about Jesus's incarnation when you are experiencing isolation. Think about Jesus's incarnation when you are experiencing loneliness or conflict or when you are experiencing strife or toil. When you're afraid, when you're anxious, stand in awe that our God draws near to us.

Jesus's incarnation models intentional relationships with other people. Christians living in a manner of the Gospel can mirror an incarnational presence. Now of course we can't save people. Our incarnation isn't the same as Jesus. We don't change from being eternal to the temporal. We don't change from the infinite to the finite. We are just who we are. But yet we can mirror that incarnation. It's how we live our lives that bears witness to the Word made flesh, in the light that enlightens the world. Incarnational presence is movement toward one another. It's entering in and putting skin in the game. And that involves risk. That involves the potential to be rejected. That involves the potential to be hurt. But it also provides the potential to be the hands and feet and the way in which God can show his grace and peace to another human.

We get to bear witness, just as John bears witness about the light. We bear witness of Jesus's incarnation, and then we become witnesses to that incarnation. We are filled by his light, transformed by the word of his power, and amazed by the path that he takes in humility and love. We respond with belief, faith in him, as we witness Jesus and his life and his death and resurrection—who he is and what he has done on our behalf. And as we appropriate this identity as followers of Jesus, we also take on that role of sharing with others what we have experienced in him. We grow in faith, we grow in hope, we grow in love, because we are resting in God's promise. We are leaning on his steadfast love. And we get to participate in his Word, his message, because he is the message.

Now that's what's also important here. When you're wrestling with John's dealing with Jesus, this man, this mystery of him being also the Son of God, the second person the Trinity, it's important that he's also bringing to bear this man, John, because that in some ways. . . He's telling the story, but he's also putting John in in contrast to Jesus. Because Jesus is not. . .he is a man, but he is not like any man. You see, John was a man sent from God. John was a witness to the light. He clearly claims that he was not the light. And John is making a key differentiation between John as a regular man, speaking the words of God, and Jesus, a man who is the Word of God. Again, the mystery of how Jesus, who was born after John, ranks before John, because he was before John. It's the same mystery that Jesus being the son of David can be also the Lord over David.

So this advent season, rejoice! Prepare your hearts, long for the coming of Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, the Gospel made flesh and dwells among us. Maybe this will be for your first time this year. Maybe you've sung Christmas carols or had all the wonderful trappings of American

materialism as we give gifts. And those things have fond memories of celebrating Christmas season. But maybe for you it's the first time that you are awakened to the reality of who Jesus is. May his Word wake you, and may his light shine upon you that you may see him. If you are a Christian, and you have been for many, many years, or a young Christian for that matter, this is always an opportunity in the advent season to be captivated by the story of Jesus. That before time God made it possible to be with him, and he makes that possible through his Son, Jesus.

And for whatever reason, in his mystery, in his wisdom, he became a baby. All the crying, all the pooping, all the eating. Is that your picture of Jesus? You picture Jesus growing and maturing, falling down and scuffing his knee, crying because he wants his mother. Christmas challenges our sensibilities of who God is and who he is as a human. And it's a beautiful invitation. It enlivens our brains; it helps us with our imaginations. Not that we would speculate and go off course, but that we would we would revel in who he is. And take it as opportunities to return thanks to him, being in awe with one another of him.

The Gospel of Jesus's incarnation is not because our flesh is ultimate and he is affirming our experience of being human. In some ways he is—by even becoming a baby, by becoming a person, by becoming someone who can die. He is taking on the full realm of what it means to be human—for him to take on a mind, for him to take on a will, for him to take on a heart and the emotions of humans. He's actually giving dignity and a reminder of the dignity that we had in God's creation as image bearers. But he took on flesh to redeem flesh and make a new humanity. So this Christmas season as you think about the Gospel, Jesus is not born for our self-fulfillment. He is born for us to be fulfilled in him.

So "Always winter, never Christmas." Sad words if they're left alone. But the reality is of the story of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, we have a picture when the ice begins to melt and Father Christmas comes at last. And here Father Christmas says these words: "'I've come at last,' said he. She [meaning the White Witch] has kept me out for a long time, but I have got in at last. Aslan is on the move. The witch's magic has weakened.'" In the incarnation we have the first tastes of the curse breaking. In Jesus's life he's pushing back the curse, and as far as the curse is found, he's pushing it back. He's redeeming us, saving us. As all things were lost in Adam, all things are restored in Christ.

John of Damascus said this: For the whole Christ assume the whole me, that he might grant salvation to the whole me. For what is unassumable is incurable. That gives me great comfort, because I have sinned and I've been sinned against. My mind is faulty, my body is weak. And Jesus took on flesh. He entered into weakness. He entered into humiliation, is what some theologians say. He is who was exalted entered in to humiliation. That is the path of his exaltation. He does not come down announcing his rightful place. He comes down not even announcing his own coming. He has other people announcing his coming. And there is a longing and an expectation. And when we hear the cry from the Herald that Jesus is born—to us a Son is given, to us a child is born—we rejoice. Christmas is rejoicing, because winter is melting.

Just in close, the incarnation is the focal point of history, where the beginning of the story begun in God's creative purposes hinges on the continuing story of God's redemptive purposes, fulfilled in Jesus. And so where he has come the first time on this side of his death and resurrection, we await his second coming. So even now as Christians we utilize the incarnation

as a way to grow in our longing for his return. May we wait with expectation; may we wait with hope, longing for his return.

Let's pray. Father, we do give you thanks, that you in your wisdom and in your eternality and your preexistence, that the Son who. . . I can't even fathom you, holy God—that you, the Son, became man. [Audio is truncated here]