



John

In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, God is presented as speaking the creation into existence. God speaks the word and it happens: heaven and earth, ocean and stream, trees and grass, birds and fish, animals and humans. Everything, seen and unseen, called into being by God's spoken word.

In deliberate parallel to the opening words of Genesis, John presents God as speaking salvation into existence. This time God's Word takes on human form and enters history in the person of Jesus. Jesus speaks the word and it happens: forgiveness and judgment, healing and illumination, mercy and grace, joy and love, freedom and resurrection. Everything broken and fallen, sinful and diseased, called into salvation by God's spoken word.

For, somewhere along the line things went wrong (Genesis tells that story, too) and are in desperate need of fixing. The fixing is all accomplished by speaking—God speaking salvation into being in the person of Jesus. Jesus, in this account, not only speaks the word of God; he *is* the Word of God.

Keeping company with these words, we begin to realize that our words are more important than we ever supposed. Saying "I believe," for instance, marks the difference between life and death. Our words accrue dignity and gravity in conversations with Jesus. For Jesus doesn't impose salvation as a solution; he *narrates* salvation into being through leisurely conversation, intimate personal relationships, compassionate responses, passionate prayer, and—putting it all together—a sacrificial death. We don't casually walk away from words like that.



Nicodemus and the Woman at the Well

A CONTEMPLATIVE READING ON JOHN 3-4

THE STRIKING THING about the juxtaposition of the stories of Nicodemus and of the woman at the well is that God's Spirit is at the heart of the action. In both stories we see the creating presence of God, the breath breathed into our lives just as it was breathed into Adam, the breath that makes us alive in ways that biology can't account for.

This God-breathed life is accessible across the whole spectrum of the human condition. We're welcomed into life, period. There are no preconditions. There are no exceptions.

And the introductory metaphors in each story are accessible. Everyone knows the words without using a dictionary. They come out of ordinary life. With Nicodemus, it's birth. With the Samaritan woman, it's water.

Then there are these features:

The first story is about a man; the second, about a woman. There's no preferred gender in the Christian life.

The first story takes place in the city, the center of sophistication and learning and fashion; the second, on the outskirts of a small town in the country. Geography has no bearing on who gets into the kingdom. It neither bars someone from entering nor guarantees someone entry.

Nicodemus is a respectable member of the strictly orthodox Pharisees; the Samaritan is a disreputable member of the despised heretical Samaritans. Racial background, religious identity, and moral track records are neither here nor there in matters of spirituality.

The man is named; the woman, unnamed. Reputation and standing in the community don't seem to count for anything.

There is also this: Nicodemus opens the conversation with Jesus with a religious statement—"Rabbi, we all know you're a teacher straight from God" (John 3:2). Jesus opens the conversation with the woman by asking for a drink of water, a sentence that doesn't sound the least bit religious. It doesn't seem to make any difference in the Christian life who gets things started—Jesus or us—or what the subject matter is—heavenly or earthly.

And in both stories a reputation is put at risk: Nicodemus risks his reputation by being seen with Jesus; Jesus risks his reputation by being seen with a Samaritan woman. There's a sense of ignoring conventions here on both sides, a crossing of the lines of caution, a willingness on both sides to risk misunderstanding.

And then there is this: In both conversations *Spirit* is the pivotal word. *Spirit* links the differences and contrasts in the two stories and makes them aspects of one story. In both conversations *Spirit* refers primarily to God and only derivatively to the man and the woman. In the first conversation the Spirit gives birth. The Spirit is an agent, a source, a cause of the birth that makes a person able to "see" and to "enter" (both



verbs are used in the conversation). In the second conversation, God is Spirit; the consequence is that if we're to worship him, we must worship him in spirit and in truth.

Finally, there is this: Jesus is the primary figure in both stories. Although Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman provide the occasion, Jesus provides the content. In everything that has to do with living, which is the large context in which everything we do and say takes place, Jesus is working at the center. Jesus is far more active than any one of us; it is he who provides the energy.

Contemplative Questions

The Holy Spirit is the power of God to create life, both in the physical and spiritual realms. In what ways do you see him brooding like a nested bird over the unformed circumstances in your life? What do you see emerging as a result? How do you see him brooding over the unformed parts of your character? In what ways do you see the character of Christ emerging as a result?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Prayer

Dear Lord,

Thank you for the presence of your Holy Spirit.

*Thank you that he broods like a nested bird over her eggs,
warming them, protecting them, bringing them into the fullness of life.*

*Thank you for all the ways he does that,
not just in the creation but in the new creation.*

*Thank you for how he did it with Nicodemus,
for how he did it with the woman at the well,
and for how he did it—and continues to do it—with me.*

Especially I pray . . .

Further Reading

Genesis 1:1-2—God's Spirit brooding over the watery abyss of the new earth to bring life.

Luke 1:26-35—God's Spirit brooding over the watery abyss of Mary's womb to bring life.

THE LIFE-LIGHT

1 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
abundance,
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.

THUNDER IN THE DESERT

¹⁹⁻²⁰ When Jews from Jerusalem sent a group
of priests and officials to ask John who he
was, he was completely honest. He didn't
evade the question. He told the plain truth:
"I am not the Messiah."

²¹ They pressed him, "Who, then? Elijah?"
"I am not."
"The Prophet?"
"No."

²² Exasperated, they said, "Who, then? We
need an answer for those who sent us. Tell
us something—anything!—about yourself."

An Unhurried Gospel (1:1-5)

Matthew, Mark, and Luke write like kayakers on a swiftly flowing river with occasional patches of white water. There's never any doubt that they're going where the course of the river takes them. But John is more like a canoe on a quiet lake, drifting unhurriedly, paddling leisurely to take in the sights along the shoreline, noticing rock formations, observing a blue heron fishing in the rushes, pausing and drifting to sketch cloud patterns reflected in the glassy water. So as we get ready to travel the smoothly flowing rhythms of John's prose, prepare yourself for some breathtaking scenery.

Jesus Comes to Us (1:14-18)

“No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18), but we do see his glory, the bright splendor that marks God’s presence. We saw it at Sinai, in the Tabernacle. We saw it in Jerusalem, at the Temple. But most of all, we saw it in Jesus.

So when John tells us that Jesus, the flesh-and-blood Jesus that everyone can see, “moved into the neighborhood” (verse 14), he clearly means for us to understand that Jesus is the new Tabernacle and Temple of the Hebrew people. But what’s so striking is that Jesus isn’t like an architectural structure waiting for us to come to him. Instead, he comes to us.

²³ “I’m thunder in the desert: ‘Make the road straight for God!’ I’m doing what the prophet Isaiah preached.”

²⁴⁻²⁵ Those sent to question him were from the Pharisee party. Now they had a question of their own: “If you’re neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet, why do you baptize?”

²⁶⁻²⁷ John answered, “I only baptize using water. A person you don’t recognize has taken his stand in your midst. He comes after me, but he is not in second place to me. I’m not even worthy to hold his coat for him.”

²⁸ These conversations took place in Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing at the time.

THE GOD-REVEALER

²⁹⁻³¹ The very next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and yelled out, “Here he is, God’s Passover Lamb! He forgives the sins of the world! This is the man I’ve been talking about, ‘the One who comes after me but is really ahead of me.’ I knew nothing about who he was—only this: that my task has been to get Israel ready to recognize him as the God-Revealer. That is why I came here baptizing with water, giving you a good bath and scrubbing sins from your life so you can get a fresh start with God.”

³²⁻³⁴ John clinched his witness with this: “I watched the Spirit, like a dove flying down out of the sky, making himself at home in him. I repeat, I know nothing about him except this: The One who authorized me to baptize with water told me, ‘The One on whom you see the Spirit come down and stay, this One will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ That’s exactly what I saw happen, and I’m telling you, there’s no question about it: *This* is the Son of God.”

COME, SEE FOR YOURSELF

³⁵⁻³⁶ The next day John was back at his post with two disciples, who were watching. He looked up, saw Jesus walking nearby, and said, “Here he is, God’s Passover Lamb.”

³⁷⁻³⁸ The two disciples heard him and went after Jesus. Jesus looked over his shoulder and said to them, “What are you after?”

They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?”

³⁹ He replied, “Come along and see for yourself.”

They came, saw where he was living, and ended up staying with him for the day. It was late afternoon when this happened.

⁴⁰⁻⁴² Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard John’s witness and followed Jesus. The first thing he did after finding where Jesus lived was find his own brother, Simon, telling him, “We’ve found the Messiah” (that is, “Christ”). He immediately led him to Jesus.

Jesus took one look up and said, “You’re John’s son, Simon? From now on your name is Cephas” (or Peter, which means “Rock”).

⁴³⁻⁴⁴ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. When he got there, he ran across Philip and said, “Come, follow me.” (Philip’s hometown was Bethsaida, the same as Andrew and Peter.)

⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶ Philip went and found Nathanael and told him, “We’ve found the One Moses wrote of in the Law, the One preached by the prophets. It’s *Jesus*, Joseph’s son, the one from Nazareth!” Nathanael said, “Nazareth? You’ve got to be kidding.”

But Philip said, “Come, see for yourself.”

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw him coming he said, “There’s a real Israelite, not a false bone in his body.”

⁴⁸ Nathanael said, “Where did you get that idea? You don’t know me.”



JOHN 1

UNAVOIDABLE, UNDENIABLE, INCARNATIONAL

*“The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.”*

The verses that come to mind when someone mentions *The Message* are varied. “Unforced rhythms of grace” (Matthew 11:29) captures the imagination of some; others are inspired to “take your everyday, ordinary life . . . and place it before God as an offering” (Romans 12:1). Some take comfort in hearing, “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope” (Matthew 5:3); some shout, “Amen!” when they read, “Help, GOD—I’ve hit rock bottom!” (Psalm 130:1). These words and phrases are doing what the words and phrases of any Bible throughout history have done: opening a channel between spirits and Spirit. The net effect is resonance.

Certainly one verse in *The Message* that has proven especially resonant comes at the outset of the Gospel of John: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14).

John’s declaration here is resonant because it is so unflinchingly incarnational. What is the main storyline of the Bible? Incarnation—Jesus. The biggest heresies that have troubled the church have eliminated the body of Jesus—his flesh and blood. They make it into an idea, and the minute you make it into an idea, then you can argue about it.

This is gnosticism, and God has no time for it. He has time for gnostics. But gnosticism itself is not a priority for Jesus. It is, in fact, the exact opposite of incarnation. Where gnosticism strips ideas of their involvement in flesh, their relationship with people, the incarnation of Jesus both dignifies the earth and all who occupy it and confronts it and us with the authority of God.

It’s easy these days to affirm the incarnation while effectively dismissing it. We learn of Jesus by way of words distilled through centuries of doctrine and dogma. We accept Jesus as a great idea. But then the picture painted by John expands—“The Word became flesh and blood”—and suddenly the stakes are raised. “The Word . . . moved into the neighborhood”—and suddenly God is in our faces, unavoidable, undeniable, the way every neighbor is unavoidable, undeniable.

Fortunately, this flesh-and-blood God—occasionally frustrating, sure, and often mysterious—is good. “We all live off his generous bounty,” John tells us, “gift after gift after gift” (verse 16). This is the neighbor we dream about: here with us, in flesh and blood.

Jesus answered, “One day, long before Philip called you here, I saw you under the fig tree.”

⁴⁹ Nathanael exclaimed, “Rabbi! You are the Son of God, the King of Israel!”

⁵⁰⁻⁵¹ Jesus said, “You’ve become a believer simply because I say I saw you one day sitting under the fig tree? You haven’t seen anything yet! Before this is over you’re going to see heaven open and God’s angels descending to the Son of Man and ascending again.”

PAUSE: Why were Jesus’ first followers such quick converts? What do you see in Jesus in John 1 that makes him compelling to follow? How important is the testimony of John the Baptizer about Jesus to those who follow him? What is your testimony about Jesus?

FROM WATER TO WINE

2¹⁻³ Three days later there was a wedding in the village of Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there. Jesus and his disciples were guests also. When they started running low on wine at the wedding banquet, Jesus’ mother told him, “They’re just about out of wine.”

⁴ Jesus said, “Is that any of our business, Mother—yours or mine? This isn’t my time. Don’t push me.”

⁵ She went ahead anyway, telling the servants, “Whatever he tells you, do it.”

⁶⁻⁷ Six stoneware water pots were there, used by the Jews for ritual washings. Each

held twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus ordered the servants, “Fill the pots with water.” And they filled them to the brim.

⁸ “Now fill your pitchers and take them to the host,” Jesus said, and they did.

⁹⁻¹⁰ When the host tasted the water that had become wine (he didn’t know what had just happened but the servants, of course, knew), he called out to the bridegroom, “Everybody I know begins with their finest wines and after the guests have had their fill brings in the cheap stuff. But you’ve saved the best till now!”

¹¹ This act in Cana of Galilee was the first sign Jesus gave, the first glimpse of his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

¹² After this he went down to Capernaum along with his mother, brothers, and disciples, and stayed several days.

TEAR DOWN THIS TEMPLE . . .

¹³⁻¹⁴ When the Passover Feast, celebrated each spring by the Jews, was about to take place, Jesus traveled up to Jerusalem. He found the Temple teeming with people selling cattle and sheep and doves. The loan sharks were also there in full strength.

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Jesus put together a whip out of strips of leather and chased them out of the Temple, stampeding the sheep and cattle, upending the tables of the loan sharks, spilling coins left and right. He told the dove merchants, “Get your things out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a shopping mall!” That’s when his disciples remembered the Scripture, “Zeal for your house consumes me.”

The Finest of Wines (2:1-12)

It has long been customary for readers of John’s Gospel to count seven signs, miraculous acts by which we may come to see and believe the revelation of God in Jesus. *Believe* is the critical verb here. The signs are particularly chosen for their power to evoke belief.

The seven signs show Jesus continuing the work of God in Genesis during the seven days of Creation. It would be difficult to tell these stories without conveying some sense of wonder that we’re being let in on something extraordinary, a realization that these signs are evidence that God is still at work in his creation and isn’t just its Maintenance Engineer.

And he’s still at work in his creation today. Still performing signs that point to him. Still revealing not only his glory but also his goodness—and, most particularly, his goodness toward us. He’s still changing the water of our lives into wine (the first of the seven signs) . . . and not just any wine, but the finest of wines.