

## **“What Does God Look Like?”**

**Series: John**

**John 1:1-14; Genesis 1:1-5**

For Christmas one year, William P. Young, former office manager and night clerk, wrote a novel for his six children. This gift was meant to aid his children’s understanding of the Christian faith. Well, two of Young’s friends, both former pastors, read the novel and thought it should be published. But dozens of religious and secular publishers turned them down. So they decided to print it themselves. Armed with a \$300 marketing budget, they plunged into the turbulent, failure ridden world of book publishing.

For a year, no one paid much attention. But gradually word of mouth and Christian radio reviews gained traction and by June 8, 2008, The Shack had sold one million copies and appeared on The New York Times best seller list. As of January of this year, it had sold five million copies and had been number one on the Times best seller list for thirty-five straight weeks.

This success has engendered its share of praise and criticism. Presbyterian biblical scholar, Eugene Peterson, author of The Message Bible said it could be as influential as the Christian classic, The Pilgrim’s Progress. Likewise, Wynona Judd said, “This story has blown the door wide open to my soul.”

Yet, others, particularly conservative evangelicals found much to dislike in the book. Chuck Colson in a review entitled, “Stay Out of the Shack,” criticized “the author’s low view of scripture” and “silly lines” spoken by the God character. On his radio show, R. Albert Mohler, Jr., characterized the book as “deeply troubling” and including “undiluted heresy.”

Well, with its increasing popularity, I felt the need to read it, so while gone this summer I took the plunge. What I discovered was that the book is a novel. It is not a theological treatise and makes no claim to be such. It projects some unusual images, such as portraying God as an African American woman who likes to cook. What that means is that God looks like Regina, our church chef. Jesus, on the other hand, is a laid back, brotherly Middle Eastern carpenter while the Holy Spirit manifests itself as a hard to capture Asian woman.

One could argue that some of the anthropomorphic portrayals of the Trinity do not exactly match up with traditional Christian teaching. And yet, the book carries an extraordinarily powerful message about God’s love and forgiveness. It speaks to where so many of us find ourselves in our Christian walk.

Now, as I read The Shack, I immediately thought about John 1:1-14, our scripture. Often called The Prologue through verse eighteen, its poetic prose carries the purpose of a novel or poetry in that it attempts to give image and texture to spiritual elements we struggle to describe or explain. Throughout written history, poetry has often been the medium humans employed to convey and understand the incomprehensible. And this is exactly what the gospel writer does in The Prologue. This morning, as we begin our study of the Gospel

According to John, we will start where John begins, with words that not only summarize the gospel, but describe the indescribable.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

The Gospel According to John is different from Matthew, Mark and Luke. Called the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke are very similar, using the same sources, and one another, for their writing. But John is different. It carries a different chronology than the other three. It disagrees on time, place and events. And more importantly, its purpose is different. Where the other three mostly describe the events of Jesus' life, John interprets them. John isn't content to tell about Jesus. He focuses more on the theological than the historical and biographical. He wants to show us who Jesus is, convince us of Jesus' divine nature.

Much of this is because of timing and events. John is conceived thirty to forty years after Mark, the first gospel writer. John reflects the heightened tensions between church and synagogue at the end of the first century. Plus, as Christianity grew and matured, the Church began to formulate a theology to reflect its beliefs. Although Christianity began as a new faith for Jews, the evangelism of the Apostle Paul quickly made non Jews the greater part of the Church. By John's writing, former Jews were a small section of the Christian community of faith. So, John's gospel speaks to heresies such as gnosticism and docetism that began to form when the Christian gospel met the Hellenistic world.

Like The Shack, John used images with which his readers would have been familiar. Just as all of us understand the concept of an African American woman who likes to cook, the concept of the Word was part of both Jewish theology and Greek philosophy. To the Jew, God's Word was active, alive. In the creation story, the repeated phrase is “And God said...,” signifying the Word's creative, dynamic power. Likewise, the Old Testament prophets preceded their announcements with “Thus saith the Lord...” The Word put events in motion. It carried the qualities of reason and wisdom. In Greek thought, the Word connoted the very mind of God, giving order and design to the universe.

Just as The Shack took familiar human images to portray the Trinity, by employing the Word, a concept known to both the Jewish and non Jewish world, the gospel writer John through the middle of his prologue was discussing ideas with which all his readers agreed.

Comedian George Wallace responded in a USA Today article to the question of what was his favorite death joke saying: “The preacher at my father's funeral said, ‘Mr. Wallace was a community leader, a great man, who loved his wife and children.’”

He said: “Hearing this, my mama leaned over to me and said, ‘Go see if that's your daddy in that coffin.’”

By using the concept of the Word that spoke to the hearts, minds, and inquisitive natures of his readers, John prompted them to get up and look into his book and see the person of whom he was speaking.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

What is the gospel writer John trying to tell us in the Prologue? Whereas Mark begins his gospel with Jesus’ baptism, and Matthew and Luke with his birth, John takes a step back. Reiterating the first words of Genesis, “in the beginning,” John forcefully proclaims that the Word was there at the very beginning of creation. When everything began the Word was present, and not only present, but a player in, an instigation of, the creative process. For the Word was not only with God at creation, the Word was God. Otherwise, the Word is to be viewed in the context of eternity.

But not only was the Word a full participant in creation, but the Word brings the light of God, the knowledge, the wisdom, the truth of God into the world. And it is this light of the Word that counteracts, that fights the darkness, the sin and evil present in human existence. And the darkness cannot overcome the light of the Word.

Now, to this point in the Prologue, whether you are a Jewish theologian or a Greek philosopher, you can agree with what John has written. Using concepts familiar in other religious and intellectual ideas, John has moved his readers into common territory to which they can all give assent. But then in verse fourteen, John makes a radical turn that would shock his non-Christian readers. Continuing the familiar idea of the Word as the light, the truth, the wisdom, the creative force of God, he then declares that this Word is Jesus.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” The Word, carrying the very mind and being of God, became a human being. The Greek word translated “lived,” or the older translators used “dwelt,” literally means “to pitch tent.” In the Old Testament, it is the word employed to describe how God “dwelt” in the Jews’ tabernacle when they were wandering in the wilderness on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Jesus is God’s Word, sent to earth to teach us and show us who God is. Human, yet divine, Jesus reveals the very nature of God, the very mind and being of God. To his Jewish and non Jewish readers, John is saying here is the Word of which you have been talking and studying all those centuries, the very mind, will, wisdom and creative energy of God. This Word became flesh. This Word is Jesus.

There is a story about a little girl who on the way home from church turned to her mother and said, “Mommy, the preacher’s sermon this morning confused me.”

The mother said, “Why is that?”

“Well,” replied the little girl, “he said that God is bigger than we are. Is that true?”

“Yes, that’s true,” the mother replied.

“He also said that God lives within us. Is that true, too?”

“Yes,” responded the mother.

“Well,” said the little girl, “if God is bigger than us and he lives in us, wouldn’t he show through?”

The mystery of the Word becoming flesh confuses us. But what we know for certain is that in Jesus God shows through.

So, what does all this mean for you and me? John’s purpose and goal almost 2000 years ago remains the same today. He wants us to believe, accept, that Jesus is the Word, the very essence and being of God, as the Nicene Creed we repeat on communion Sundays says, “very God of very God.”

Why does that matter?

Because if we believe that Jesus is truly God, God’s Word come to earth to reveal the nature and essence of God, then we cannot view and respond to Jesus as another great teacher, or brilliant philosopher, or extraordinary theologian. If Jesus is God, his words and actions cannot only be acknowledged as good ideas, or suggestions, but as God’s revelation, God’s Word, God’s direction for you and me. Otherwise, when we see Jesus, we see God.

In verse fourteen, when John writes, “and we have seen his glory...” it means we have beheld the character and wisdom of God in Jesus. The deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God. The Word, Jesus, was with God from the beginning. Jesus is the method by which God reveals Himself to the world. This means that if we claim to be Christian, then we will follow, exemplify, listen and believe on Jesus, because Jesus is God.

The final journal entry read: “I am a disciple of Christ. I will not let up, look back or slow down. My past is redeemed, my future secure. I am done with low living, small planning, smooth knees, mundane talking and small goals. My fate is set; my goal is sure! My road is narrow and rough. I am a disciple of Christ. I must go until he comes, speaking of all I know of him and work until he stops me.”

The words were those of an unknown Zimbabwean pastor who was martyred for his faith.

If we believe what John is telling us, that Jesus is the Word, and the Word is God then we will be done with “low living, small planning, mundane talking and small goals.” Our fate will be set, our goal, to follow Jesus, will be sure.

“What Does God Look Like?”

John’s answer is Jesus. The Church proclaims that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. If you say, “I cannot wrap my mind around this,” you are in

good company. The Church has been struggling for 2000 years to explain this mystery.

And that is one reason we continuously return to John's Prologue. The Christian symbol for John is an eagle. Some pulpits are even made in the shape of an eagle. This moniker was selected because of the "soaring" prose of this passage.

In these verses, through the poetry of image and symbol, John expresses a truth we still struggle to explain. The Word, present with God at creation, became human, and dwelt among us, revealing the very nature and love of God. In Jesus, we see God, and discover how we are to think, act, and believe toward God and one another.

Jesus is God. In Him, we find our model, our pattern, our direction, and our hope.

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