

These first 18 verses of the gospel according to John are about God becoming a man, but John does not tell the story of the birth of Christ. John tells us about the God becoming a man in a significantly different way than the other gospel writers do. Rather than describing the events of Jesus' birth, John focuses more on the divine nature of Christ and the meaning of his coming into the world. We are focusing on these verses as part of our Advent/Christmas celebration.

Last week we looked at verses 1-5 and we saw that they are mostly about the Son of God before the incarnation, referred to here as the Word. These verses tell us about the divine nature of Jesus before he came to the world by means of his conception and birth. These verses tell us that the Word is eternal – that he has always been with God and that he was and is God. They tell us that all things were made through him and that he has life in himself and that he gave life to men and that that life was the light of men. Verses 1-4 describe the situation before the fall. Verse 5 describes the situation after the fall and give the first hint of why the Word became flesh. Verse 5 says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

This describes a situation in which there is opposition between light and darkness. The darkness is trying to overcome the light, but it is not able to do so. The light continues to shine. The light stands for God and particularly here the eternal Son of God who became flesh. And the darkness stands for the kingdom of darkness and all that is associated with it – sin and death and evil. This sets up John's portrayal of Jesus as the light of the world who has come to overcome the darkness of sin and death and Satan and bring his people from the realm of darkness into the realm of light and life.

The next paragraph begins John's description of Jesus' mission. And verses 6-8 are about the mission of John the Baptist. “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.”

So Jesus comes to the world as the light who is going to overcome the darkness and John the Baptist is sent by God to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. This idea of witness is interesting because it says something about how God makes himself known in the world. He uses witnesses. Part of the background here is the OT requirement that two or three witnesses were necessary in law courts to establish the truth when there was a dispute. Witnesses testify of the truth of something on the basis of what they have seen and known.

In the gospel according to John there are many witnesses to the truth of who Jesus is. In John 5, Jesus says that he has borne witness to himself, but he goes on to say that his own witness is not good enough because multiple witnesses are necessary. And so he mentions the witness of John the Baptist. He mentions the witness of the works that he had performed. He mentions that the Father had borne witness to him when he spoke out of heaven and he mentions that the Scriptures bear witness about him. (John 5:30-40)

All these witnesses are about establishing the truth about who Jesus is and his significance. John the Baptist is the first one mentioned. "He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him."

Now this is very interesting. Jesus came as the light of the world. He is identified as the light. And yet he needed witnesses to testify about who he really was. That means that the light was not visible to everyone. It was not immediately obvious that Jesus was the light of the world. He looked like a normal human being. He did not have a halo. He was not luminous. He needed witnesses to testify to who he was. He needed witnesses to confirm his own teaching about who he was. His miracles were some of those witnesses, but they clearly were not enough all by themselves because many people saw them and did not believe. They accused him of doing miracles by the power of the devil.

So Jesus came into the world as the light of the world, but he was not immediately recognizable as the light of the world. Verses 10-11 tell us that many people did not know him or receive him as the light. "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him." The term "world" in John is almost always the human race in opposition to God and it includes his fellow Jews who did not receive him. The people of the world, for the most part, did not recognize and acknowledge their creator when he came among them as the God-man.

So you have a great contrast here between who Jesus is and how he presents himself to the world. He is eternal. He is the creator. He is the Word. He has life in himself. He is the light of life. He is the light of the world. And yet it is possible for people to see him and not recognize his glory. His glory is not immediately apparent. He is not self-authenticating. He just looks like another man. And so he needs witnesses to testify about who he really is.

John the Baptist is the first witness mentioned. Some of the later verses describe his witness. In John 1:26-27, John says, "[A]mong you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." 1:29-30, "The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'"

It is interesting that God should come into his world in this way. He could have come looking like God. He could have come looking like the light of the world. He could have come in such a way that there would be no possibility of not recognizing him for who he was. But he didn't. He came looking no different from any other man. He needed witnesses to confirm who he was. He came in such a way that it was possible not to recognize him. And many did not. The world did not know him. His own did not receive him.

Now part of the reason for this is that the glory of God is not always or necessarily obvious or visible. Sometimes it is, like when God came down on mount Sinai. The glory of Jesus will also be visible when Jesus

returns at the end of the age. Revelation 1:7 says of Jesus “Behold he is coming with the clouds, and every eye shall see him....” There are situations in which the glory of God is unmistakable and undeniable. But that is not always the case. Most of the time the glory of God is deniable in that it is possible for human beings not to see it and recognize it for what it is. The glory of God is displayed in the creation, but many people do not recognize it at least at a conscious level. Also with Jesus when he was on earth. He was the light of the world, but many people did not see him as the light of the world. His glory was displayed as truth, compassion, love and sacrifice. Jesus truly was the light of the world, but it was possible for people not to see the light partly at least because it was not obvious and visible.

But underlying that was the spiritual reality. Our text says that the world did not know him and his own people did not receive him. And John explains that more fully later in his gospel. In 3:19 he says, “the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.” John also teaches that there is a blindness that is the result of God’s judgment against sinners and that Jesus is at the heart of that. In 9:39 John quotes Jesus as saying, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”

So the people of the world do not recognize Jesus as the light of the world because they do not want to – they love the darkness rather than the light – and the world does not recognize Jesus as the light of the world because spiritual blindness is God’s judgment against sin.

But Jesus is the light of the world and he came to the world to rescue people from the darkness and to overcome the darkness. In John 12:46, Jesus says, “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.” So Jesus came into the world as the light to rescue people from darkness – from the realm of darkness – from the realm of sin and death and blindness and bondage to sin. He came to open the eyes of the blind and to give the light of life to those who would believe on him. Believing on Jesus is about walking in the light – walking in the truth and living the abundant life of fellowship with God and living to please God.

Now in the light of the nature of spiritual darkness and spiritual blindness, it is significant that John was sent as a witness “to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.” John’s function as a witness was to persuade people to believe that Jesus is the light of the world. And all the other references to witnesses in John’s gospel have the same purpose. The purpose of witness is to persuade people of the truth. Jesus’ own teaching by which he witnessed about himself, the witness of the Father, the witness of Jesus’ works and the witness of the Scriptures – these are all about persuading people of the truth about Jesus so that they will believe on him and have the light of life.

This is not the whole picture as we will see in a moment, but it is an important part of the picture. Jesus is the light of the world come to rescue people from the darkness of sin and slavery to Satan, but people love darkness rather than light and people are blind to the light. But Jesus came into a world of darkness to

persuade people to believe on him and receive him as the light of their lives and the light of the world. Jesus witnessed about himself by his teaching and by his miracles. But there were other witnesses as well. And John the Baptist was one of them. He was a witness along with the other witnesses to persuade people that Jesus was and is the light who came to rescue them and the world from the darkness of sin and evil.

And that role has now been given to the church. John the Baptist is still a witness because his testimony has been preserved in the Scriptures. The Scripture is still a witness – as the whole Bible witnesses to the light who is Jesus. But this is also a role that has been given to the church. In John 15:27 Jesus says to his disciples, “And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.” And in 20:21 Jesus says to them, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And we have Jesus’ words to his disciples and through them to the church, “[Y]ou will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And finally Jesus’ words to his disciples in Matthew 5:14, “You are the light of the world.”

Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus came to the world to overcome the darkness. He did that by bringing the truth about God and himself and about sin and about salvation in him. He did that by breaking the power of sin by fulfilling the law in our place and by suffering its penalty in our place. He overcame the darkness by freeing us from the power of sin and death. It is all glorious. Jesus is the light of the world and those who follow him do not “walk in darkness, but ... have the light of life.” (John 8:12). But the truth of that is not immediately apparent to those who are still walking in darkness and so God has sent witnesses into the world to testify to the truth, to be the light of the world, to persuade and convince those in darkness that Jesus is the light of the world – that he is the way, the truth, and the life.

And so as we celebrate Jesus’ coming to the world as the light to overcome the darkness, we are reminded in these opening verses of John’s gospel of the important role of witnesses. John the Baptist was sent from God “as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.” John the Baptist had a specific calling to bear witness by introducing Jesus to the world. We, the church, have a special calling in our time in history to “witness about the light, that all might believe through [us].” God has so ordained things that seeing the light happens through witnesses bearing witness to the light. And so as we celebrate the coming of the light into the world, we are reminded of our calling to witness to the light and so be the light of the world in our generation.

Now in verses 12-13 John describes two things. He describes how people who are walking in darkness become followers of Jesus as the light of the world and he describes one of the key blessings that follow from that. Verses 12-13, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the 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.”

So first he describes how people who are walking in darkness come to the light. They receive him and they believe in his name. They receive him – the Word who became flesh – the light of the world. They receive him.

We can receive people. We do it all the time. We can receive a person as a friend. We can receive a person as boyfriend or girlfriend or a husband or a wife. We can receive a person as someone who has authority over us. We can receive a person as a doctor or as a business partner. Receiving a person has to do with entering into a relationship with that person. And the nature of that relationship depends on who we are and who the other person is.

So John here says that his own people for the most part did not receive him, but there were some people who did receive him. The people who received him received him for who he claimed to be. If we look through the rest of the gospel we see various people receiving him. The first disciples received him as a Rabbi – a Teacher and they followed him. They received him as their teacher. Who the disciples received Jesus as continued to deepen as they learned more about who Jesus really was. They received him as one who was greater than John the Baptist. They received him as the one who had the words of eternal life and as the Holy One of God. They received him as one who was worthy of being followed. They received him as their shepherd. They received him as their Teacher and Lord. And eventually they received him as their Lord and their God. They received him as Jesus the Christ, the Son of God and the one who gave them life through believing.

Indeed they came to receive him as the Word who was with God and who was God. They came to receive him as the creator of the world and the one in whom was the light of life. They came to receive him as the light of the world. And as their good shepherd who gave his life for them.

Our text mentions receiving him and believing in his name in the same breath. To believe in his name is to believe in him. To believe in someone is to trust them. To believe in Jesus is to trust him – to trust that he is telling the truth – to trust that he is who he says that he is – to trust that he will do what he promises to do. It is to trust his promise to give eternal life to his followers. It is to trust that we will never die through believing in him. It is to trust that he is indeed the light of the world and that to follow him is to have the light of life. It is to trust that he is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world and that through believing in him we will never perish.

John here mentions one special gift that those who receive Jesus and believe in him receive. “To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God....” This is about being adopted into God’s family. It is about having the rights and privileges of membership in the family of God. It is about God being our Father and Jesus being our brother. It is interesting that John in this gospel does not say a lot more about this. Mostly Jesus speaks of God as his Father. But after his resurrection Jesus does say to Mary, “[G]o to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and Your Father, to my God and your God.’” (John 20:17). But in John’s 1st epistle we have these glorious words in 3:1, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.”

This is the greatest possible blessing – to be children of God – to have God as our Father – to belong to the family of God. This is the opposite of walking in darkness. To walk in darkness is to walk in the realm of sin and

death. To walk in the light is to be embraced by God as his children. It is to have God as our Father. Children of God live in the love of their heavenly Father. Children of God are cared for by their Father. They live in the Father's love.

It is significant that John here speaks of this as a right – not an inherent right, but a right that is given by Jesus to the children of God.

There is something formal about family relationships. They are legal relationships. When a child is adopted into a family, he officially or legally becomes a member of the family. He or she officially belongs. And all children have the right to be loved by their parents – to be cared for by their parents. Parents have the responsibility to love and nurture their children. It is a terrible violation of a child's rights if a parent fails to love and care for a child. It is interesting that the most significant relationships in our lives – marriage and family are legal relationships because they involve rights and obligations.

Here John is saying that Jesus gave those who received him, the right to become the children of God. That means that the Father places himself under obligation to love and care for his children. If God adopts us as his children, he confers rights upon us and places himself under obligation. That is the ultimate guarantee of wellbeing. It is an awesome thing that the God who is above all – who has no one above him to require anything of him – places himself under formal obligation by giving believers in Jesus, the right to become the children of God.

Now this entry into the family of God happens by birth – not natural birth but the new birth. He stresses that children of God are born into God's family by a birth that comes directly from God. Verse 13 says that those Jesus gave the right to become the children of God, "were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." So this birth is distinguished from natural birth. This text stresses that the birth by which people become children of God is a direct act of God. The children of God are born of God.

Now this passage is very significant in the way it mentions receiving Christ and believing on him and the new birth in the same breath. On the one hand it teaches that the way to become a child of God is through receiving Jesus and believing on him. On the other hand it teaches that the way that people become children of God is through a direct act of God called being born of God. We are active in receiving and believing. We are passive in being born. Both of these assertions are gloriously true.

We have seen how God uses witnesses to persuade people of the truth of Jesus. The message of Jesus as the light of the world is presented to us by all kinds of witnesses in order to persuade us to accept it and receive Jesus. At the end of his gospel John tells us that he has written it "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." But when that happens – when people do receive Jesus and believe on him, the ultimate reason is that they have been born of God. And so

when we are followers of Jesus, we happily confess that we have become children of God by being born, “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

This is why the Word became flesh – or at least it is one of the reasons. This passage is about “The true light, which gives light to everyone, ... coming into the world.” Those who receive him as the true light and believe on his name receive the right “to become the children of God.” There is no greater right. There is no greater privilege. Jesus came into the world that we might become the children of God through faith in his name.