

Who is Jesus?

Messages from the Gospel of John

Message 3

His Nature
John 1:1-5, 14

Introduction

What a strange beginning! It makes sense to us that the story of Jesus might begin with the angel's announcement of His birth, as does the gospel of Luke; or a recounting of His ancestors, as Matthew; or with John the Baptist's preparation for His ministry, as the gospel of Mark – but who would begin the story of Jesus by discussing “the Word”? Not only is this a surprising opening, but it is cryptic as well. Whatever could it mean that “the Word” was in the beginning? And if this is a codeword for Jesus, what is its significance? Finally, why would we want to think about this now, at Lehigh, in the 21st century?

If you will know Jesus, you must know who He is. This summer I met someone I knew casually and carried on a whole conversation with him about his work and common acquaintances. Later I realized he was not who I thought he was. This is very embarrassing! I wonder what sort of idiot he thinks I am. Many people know next to nothing about who Jesus is, so they have little chance of encountering Him. If your image of Jesus is formed by popular culture, you are unlikely to recognize the true Christ when He appears. John's gospel reveals in many ways who Jesus really is. This book gives us a full and rich understanding of Jesus. By studying John's gospel we will learn how to recognize the real Jesus. Even more, we will actually meet Him in this scripture. This week we will discuss three aspects of Jesus' nature – Jesus is the Word, Jesus is God, and Jesus is man.

The Logos

The first thing to keep in mind is that the word translated “word” in virtually all English Bibles is a very special Greek word: logos. It does not mean simply an ordinary noun or verb. There is another Greek word for such a part of speech: rhema. John could have used this word here – in fact he uses it elsewhere in his gospel. The fact that he uses logos instead of rhema clues us in to the fact that something special is meant here.

If you look up logos in a lexicon, which is a New Testament Greek dictionary, you will find that it has a whole range of meanings. As we said, one of these is “word”, a cluster of letters with a particular meaning. Another is “reason”. Greek philosophers picked up this meaning and used it to build a whole philosophy. Such men as Heraclitus, the Stoics, and Philo used it this way. The Stoics said,

What keeps the stars in their courses? What makes the tides ebb and flow? What makes day and night come in unalterable order? What brings the seasons round at their appointed times? All things are controlled by the logos of God. The logos is the power that puts sense into the world, the power which makes the world an order instead of a chaos, the power which set the world going and keeps it going in its perfect order.¹

I suppose you can see some similarity between the Greek logos and the Biblical God – and some people think that John is saying that Jesus is the logos the Greeks imagined. But I find no evidence for this in our text.

¹ Barclay p. 35.

A third meaning, and the most basic meaning of logos, is “speech” or communication. The reformer John Calvin translated it this way, and this seems the most obvious and sensible meaning of the word. It is not that logos is a combination of letters, but speech, communication, the articulation of words. Thus John is saying that in the beginning there was “the Speech”.

The Speech

Well, you may be saying, little good that does us. Certainly there was speech before Jesus arrived, and if the beginning is a reference to creation, how could there be speech before there was anyone to speak or hear? This seems just as opaque as the first statement. But no, for God is saying that the most fundamental power in the world is speech.

Now this would seem to contradict all experience. After all, how many of you found your lives transformed by your calculus or chemistry lecture this morning? Sometimes a politician may inspire us a little, but generally we are bored by speeches. And I don’t know about you, but many people think that sermons are the greatest bore. Even the apostle Paul had someone fall asleep during one of his sermons – so fast asleep that he fell out the window! And remember the childhood rhyme, “Sticks and stone can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.”? And do you remember why you might have recited that rhyme, or why your mother might have taught it to you? Wasn’t it because someone had in fact hurt you very badly with his words? “Wow, that’s the biggest zit I ever saw!” or “No, I’m going to the dance with Ted.” Now that we stop to think, words can really affect us. Speech can bruise us badly and leave permanent scars – worse, in fact than sticks and stones.

But we Americans have little patience with words. We are people of action. We admire the men who crossed the frontier, tamed the wilderness, and build a nation. Our heroes are cowboys, soldiers, and captains of industry. We don’t generally make movies about writers, teachers, and philosophers. And the church has adopted this perspective without much reflection. The Christian leaders we admire most tend to be people who are busy, active, building programs and institutions. Theologians are often a bit suspect.

The Biblical view is much different, however. Speech in the scripture is an active power. The book of Proverbs has much to say about the power of speech. In chapter 12, verse 18 we read, “There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, But the tongue of the wise *promotes* health.” Proverbs 15:1 says, “A soft answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger.”, and in verse 4 we read, “A wholesome tongue *is* a tree of life, But perverseness in it breaks the spirit.” You see, speech is a creative force, which changes everything in its path. Think of the power of some famous speakers. One commentator reported...

When John Knox preached in the days of the reformation in Scotland it was said that the voice of that one man put more courage into the hearts of his hearers than ten thousand trumpets braying in their ears. His words did things to people. In the days of the French Revolution Rouget de Lisle wrote the *Marseillaise* and that song sent men marching to revolution. The words did things. In the days of the Second World War, when Britain was bereft alike of allies and of weapons, the words of the Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, as he broadcast to the nation, did things to people.²

Jesus is the Speech

OK, so the Biblical view of speech is of a dynamic, earth-shaping force. Still, why does John use the word “Speech” to introduce Jesus? There are several reasons. First, although John is definitely not

² Barclay pp. 27-28.

trying to say that Jesus is the logos of the Greek philosophers, by using their term for the supreme mind of the universe he certainly would have gotten their attention. Second, the first century Jews used the term “Word of God” as a replacement for God’s name. So this would have connected with John’s Jewish audience. And third, John is establishing the verbal nature of God’s revelation.

This is a point worth expanding briefly, for it is very applicable to us. Among all the world’s religions, only those which sprang from first century Judaism are based on words. Other religions have their stories and holy books, but these are not essential to the religion the way the Bible is to Christianity, the Torah is to Judaism, and the Koran is to Islam. The second of the Ten Commandments is the prohibition on the use of man-made images in worship. The Israelites were totally forbidden to use any statues or pictures of God in their worship. Their worship consisted of words: reading the scriptures, praying, and hearing the prophets. This is because God cannot be represented in man-made images, and any attempt to do so would be so far short of His true nature, it would be blasphemous. But God does reveal Himself in words. Although we are far beneath God’s glory, somehow He speaks to us in ways we can understand, and we know His presence through His speech. Therefore, since God reveals Himself in words, not pictures, our worship must be verbal, not pictorial.

There are many implications of this principle, but I will say that this does not exclude such things as Christian art. However, although art is good and valuable, we must never think that it reveals God better than words. The Medieval church created magnificent stained glass windows to help an illiterate population learn the stories of the Bible, and in our day the film, *The Passion*, may help us understand Jesus’ suffering better. I admire stained glass windows and appreciate films about Jesus, but they do not have the same impact as speech. Stained glass does not reveal Jesus as well as scripture and sermons. *The Passion* is not as effective in saving us as the speech of God, and Jesus is the speech of God in the flesh.

The application of this point is that we all need the speech of God. Jesus does not come to us in pictures or films – He comes in words. That means that if we are to encounter Jesus at all, we will encounter Him verbally. So sermons and Bible studies and personal Bible reading are all important ways of encountering Jesus. Occasionally I hear someone say that he spent Sunday morning in the woods and encountered God there. Well, he did not. I do not dispute that he may have had a wonderful morning, and he may have gained a new appreciation for God’s creation, and in that sense he may have encountered God. But seeing a picture of your beloved is hardly an encounter. It is a reminder, not an encounter. Creation is not God. It is God’s work, and it reflects God, but God is not in creation. Such a person may have had a true and vivid experience, but it is not a meeting with God. God meets you through His word. So if you wish to meet God, read the Bible, or join a Bible study, or listen to a sermon. That is how you encounter Jesus.

This is the reason teaching is part of every RUF meeting, and it explains why we have such a wide array of Bible study groups. The first application of this passage to your life is to receive God’s word regularly. Come to RUF every week. Join one of our Bible studies. Read your Bible every day. If you have not done so already, take one of the free daily devotional guides in the back of the room. Above all, join worship at a church in the area. You will meet Jesus frequently if you take advantage of these opportunities to read, study, and discuss His word.

The Logos is Both God and Man

The first thing John tells us about the Word, or the Speech, is that He is God. He says this blatantly at the end of verse one, but He also ascribes to the Word characteristics of God. The Word was in the beginning. Before there was anything, there was the Word. Did you notice that this chapter opens with an amazing resemblance to the opening of Genesis? Both books begin with the phrase “in the beginning”. Both

assume that God pre-existed everything. Both declare that God made everything. Both accounts include the creation of light and life. Both record the conflict between light and darkness – and the triumph of the light. The parallels are so startling, John must be saying that the entrance of the Word into the world is a creation event. It is almost as if John is saying that the coming of the Word constituted the creation of a new world – or foreshadowed a new creation.

Our point is that all these characteristics of God as creator of light, life and the whole world are ascribed to the Word. If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck. We know that God existed before all creation, made the world, and filled it with life and light. If the Word existed before all creation, made the world, and filled it with life and light – he must be God.

Fine so far. The Jews used the term “Word of God” as a synonym for God, and the Greeks thought of the *logos* as the creative force in the universe. Both of John’s audiences would have been tracking with him. But then he went and ruined it all. In verse 14 he says that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”. If the Word is God, this would have been powerfully offensive to Jew and Greek alike. The Jews were shocked at the idea that God would lower Himself to the level of humanity. And this *is* a shocking thought. Scripture reveals God as infinite, perfect, pure, and dazzling in glory. Whenever people caught a glimpse of God they were terrified. Hear how God’s people responded when God appeared before them at Mount Sinai after they had left Egypt.

Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.” Exodus 20:18-19

It was inconceivable that such a fearsome God could appear as a harmless man. When Isaiah saw God He was overwhelmed by the contrast between his sinfulness and God’s holiness.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!” And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts.” Isaiah 6:1-5

The Jews knew that God was holy, sinless, utterly unspoiled by man’s sins. The thought that God would become man was scandalous. Of course it was no less scandalous to the Greeks. The dominant belief among the Greeks was that the material world was corrupt. Greek philosophers sought to escape the corruption of the flesh through reason or spiritual insight. They were appalled by the thought that God should pollute Himself by becoming man. They were trying to escape the flesh and become pure spirits. It was ridiculous to think that a pure spirit would take on flesh.

But this is exactly what happened. God did indeed lower Himself to our level. He polluted Himself with flesh and became man. This is the mystery of the incarnation which we celebrate every Christmas. The infinite, eternal, omnipotent God entered time and this world as a helpless baby. And the world He entered was a world full of hatred, greed, pride, and violence. Jesus left the pleasure of perfect harmony with His Father and lived in our world with all the miseries that men face in life. Eventually Jesus received the full

measure of this world's hatred. Evil men tortured Him and killed Him in the most horrible way. In the end God became even less than man. Psalm 22 which describes Jesus' death declares,

But I am a worm, and no man;

A reproach of men, and despised by the people. (v. 6)

When Jesus hung on the cross He was striped of all dignity, as He bore the sins of the human race.

If all agree that it was a great humiliation for God to become man, why did He do it? What moved God to live in the corruption of humanity? What moved Him to endure unspeakable suffering at the hands of wicked men? Why would He die here? Surely for no other reason than His great love for us. We opened these lessons in John by reading 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

God loved you so much, He gave His only beloved Son to die so that you may not perish. The final application to tonight's scripture is to worship God for His amazing love for us. If you refuse to worship such a wonderful God, you deserve to perish. Save yourself. Come to Jesus. Worship the God who became man to save you.

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