

## Don't Get Grandparents Started John 1:1-18

The best conversation starter I know is the simple statement: "Tell me about your grandchildren." Make that request and you had best be prepared to listen. Often I have had to listen to someone go on and on about his or her grandchildren and have had to become downright rude just to break in and tell how smart and good-looking my grandchildren are. It isn't too wise to get grandparents started. Grandparents tend to exaggerate. And they actually believe what they say. I know because I am a proud, perhaps vain, and sometimes obnoxious grandparent.

It occurred to me the other day when I was studying today's text that this prologue to John's Gospel sounds as if it was written by a grandparent. It makes dramatic and sweeping claims about the Christ. The Gospel of John does not contain a birth narrative; Jesus is simply introduced. We can be fairly certain that this gospel was composed around the end of the first century of the Christian Era, so we can say that a second or third generation Christian is doing the writing. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to say that the person telling the story at least has the perspective of a grandparent.

Indeed, the claims are breath-taking. While we pay most attention to the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke, the four –word statement near the end of John's introduction captures the essence of Christmas: "The Word became flesh." The God of mystery and eternity has become one of us. What an amazing thought! But that's only one comment. Let's look at several of the things this writer says about the one whose coming we celebrate at Christmas.

I am always touched first by the concept of light. John says, "The true light which gives light to everyone was even then coming into the world." Light, for me, is a deeply meaningful concept. I believe that all persons are gifted with the "image of God." We share a divine presence and feel a deep hunger for spiritual fulfillment. We yearn for oneness with God, with other people, and with

ourselves. The touch of God in our lives leaves us discontented until we live in relationship with him.

We are made for the light, but we live in a world of darkness. That's why Isaiah could write, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who lived in a land as dark as death a light has dawned" (9:2). The darkness of the night is a symbol of the darkness of ignorance, pain, and broken relationships. The need for light has been expressed in many poignant ways. Gamaliel Bradford wrote about an "obsession" in his life which he described as a "keen, enormous, never-sated thirst for God." Francis Thompson depicted God's pursuit as a "hound of heaven" that would never give him rest. Philosopher Bertrand Russell said that he possessed a "center which is always in great pain, searching for something beyond what the world contains." Augustine said it well for all of us in his famous prayer, "Thou hast made us for thyself and we are restless until we rest in thee." (John Knox, *Limits of Unbelief*, p. 84.)

About what and about whom were these thinkers speaking? They were describing a struggle with the darkness of the human heart and the aching need for light. John says that the light has come, the true light that enlightens every life. This light shines in the darkness, and the darkness is powerless against it. In this statement I hear the wonderful assurance that one day light will overcome darkness in every form, that life will triumph over death, and that goodness will defeat evil. The light has come! That is a life-changing affirmation.

The second grand claim made here about the Christ is that he enables persons to believe that they are the children of God. The line goes like this: "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." My understanding is that Jesus shows us that we are children of God and guides us to believe and accept that reality.

My approach to evangelism is to help persons believe that God has already accepted them. Jesus came to demonstrate that truth. In that sense Jesus is the Savior of the world. He leads us to discover and to accept.

A minister felt called to undertake a prison ministry. In his work he met a man who was serving a thirty-year sentence. The man had admitted his guilt, but he was depressed and suicidal. The minister visited him weekly and the two of them studied the New Testament and spoke of the unlimited love of God. In time the man in prison came to believe and made a profession of faith. Often he would greet the visiting minister by saying, "I'm so glad to see you. You saved my life." One day the minister said, "You know that's not true. I didn't save you. God saved you." The man in prison replied, "I know that, but you were the one who showed me God's love and salvation."

This little exchange gives us an insight into the nature of the person and work of Jesus. It is God who saves us, but it is Jesus who visits us in our captivity, in our darkness and despair, and assures us of God's love and salvation.

Many persons find it extremely difficult to accept their acceptance, to believe that they are the children of God. They expect that they must do something, probably something totally beyond their ability, in order to gain God's approval. Jesus points us to a new understanding of our place in God's family. He ate with "outcasts and sinners," but he never called them "outcasts and sinners." He told the woman "taken in adultery" that he did not condemn her. He asked the paralytic at Bethesda if he "wanted" to be healed. He told the man on the pallet in Capernaum that his sins had already been forgiven. He related the stories of the shepherd seeking the one lost sheep, the woman searching for the lost coin, and the wealthy landowner waiting for his lost son, and he said that God is like those people. He came to help us accept our place in God's family.

A third claim that makes such a profound impact on my life and thought (Obviously, I could choose many more; grandparents are lavish in their statements.) is the one at the end of the prologue. John says that the Christ, "who is nearest to the Father's heart, has made him known."

Harold Kushner tells a Hassidic story about a rabbi who came home from the synagogue one day and found his nine-year-old daughter crying bitterly. He asked her what was wrong, and she told him, between her sobs, that she and her friends had been playing hide-and-seek. When it was her turn to hide, she did so well that the others had given up on finding her and went off to play another game. She had waited a long time for them to find her, and finally she had come out of hiding to find herself alone.

As the rabbi comforted her, he mused to himself, “I wonder if this is how God feels. God is mysterious. His presence is not obvious to the person who is careless. Even our efforts to find God are half-hearted. Often we don’t really want to find God, because we are afraid of what he might say or how we might feel in God’s presence. Sometimes we simply stop looking.” (*Who Needs God?*, p. 181.)

More often perhaps, our problem is that we do not know where to search or how to go about detecting the presence of God. There are times when our need or our hunger drive us to seek God. How do we know how to find him?

The Word became flesh! Jesus has made God known! My personal faith is based on the idea that God is what we see in Jesus. In Jesus we see compassion, involvement, acceptance, and reassurance. We see Jesus as teacher, healer, companion, and fellow struggler. For me God is all those things.

To be sure, the God of creation and eternity will not be fully knowable. There is a mystery and transcendence that I will not penetrate. But all I need to know about God I learn through Jesus the Christ. The Christ has made God known.

Light for life, acceptance by God, what God is like—these are but some of the things the Christ has brought. In true “grandparently” fashion the writer extols the virtues of the one coming into the world. So we listen, not with impatience, but with hope. The claims here might seem too good to be true, but when we experience them, they become life-changing. The Word, the eternal reality, has

become one of us! And has made us one with him! Praise be to God! (Here I am talking like a grandparent.)

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