

Let There Be Light

Veiled in Flesh: Christmas with John, Pt. 1

Merry Christmas, everyone. I'm so glad you've come to church to enrich your faith during this holy holiday. Historically, the church has called it Advent - the four weeks leading up to Christmas – we are a week behind because I got a little off track with the previous series. We spent the last few months looking at the Gospel of John, chapters 12 and 13.

Well, for the rest of the year, we will be taking a look at the *first* chapter of John. Because John begins with Jesus coming into the world. We've titled the series "*Veiled in Flesh*" which is not only the – hardly ever sung – lyric from the second verse of *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, it's an incredibly rich theological concept of *incarnation*. It's basically John's way of talking about the meaning of Christmas – that God became flesh and entered into the world. But before He was *flesh*, He was something *else*. And we will see that today.

So let's jump in and read our text, and we'll start the series off with **John 1:1–11...**

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was

the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

6 "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light."

9 "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."

Alright, even though there's many things to be said about this very, very famous passage, we have a pretty strong clue to the focus. Seven times the word "light" shows up here – I highlighted them for the screen. Seven times we have the word "light", and though there'll be other themes in here, I think we need to ask ourselves, what is this telling us about light?

Obviously, you all know that "light in the darkness" is really one of the ways that throughout history, Christmas has been celebrated. It's one of the major symbols right up to the present day. Lights on trees, lights on houses, the Zilker Park Trail of ...? Lights. In just two weeks, we will gather back here on Christmas Eve for our annual candlelight service. We end the year by lighting candles to symbolize what happened in the world at Christmas.

So what is that all about? Let's just take a look at how simply these first eleven verses of the gospel of John, tell us that we *need* light - human beings need a light. That there *is* a light. And then *how* we can connect to it, how we can receive it. We *need* light, there *is* a light and *how* we can receive it.

Now, first of all, The Need for Light especially seen in v.4-5, "*In him was life, and that life was the **light of all mankind**. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*" Now, see here in verse 4, obviously, there's light and there's lights and here's lights and you see the lights. But there is something that down in v. 9 is called the "true light" that everyone needs and in v. 4 is "the light of mankind" – humankind, universal - which means there's a kind of light that we *all* need.

But we're also told in these verses that our *relationship* with that true light is – I guess you could say - it's very fraught. Because obviously, as we're going to get in a minute down to verse 9 and 10, it talks about when they true light came into the world, it was rejected. But here in verse 5 it says, that in a sense, the true light came into the dark world, and "the darkness has not *overcome* it."

Now, actually, this is one of those challenging words that creates translation choices. Sometimes it says the darkness has not *comprehended* it. The old KJV says the darkness "comprehendeth it not". So, "comprehend" or "overcome". Now perhaps you think that's pretty different. Well, yes and no. It's a single Greek word, but it's a word with, you might say, planned ambiguity in it.

It's really like our English word "master". Now, think about what it means to "master" something. Sometimes to master something means to extinguish it - to fight with it and get rid of it. So, to "master your fears", means you're trying to get rid of them, okay? You *master* your fears. You're really trying to control them and minimize them.

But if you master a *subject*, you're trying to understand it. To say "I mastered that subject" means I got it, I understood it. So which is it? Well, this word means both of those things. And it probably is *deliberately* ambiguous, which means John is trying to say that there's a true light that human beings need, but not only are we *hostile* to it, we're *clueless* about it. And so what it's actually saying is The world is a **dark place**, and we do not know how to **enlighten** ourselves.

Now, let's go a little further with this idea of light. When the Bible talks about light and darkness, what is the symbolism? Well, it's really not that hard, it's what you think it means. This is not just Biblical literacy, this is good old literacy literacy. First of all, to be dark sometimes means *evil and suffering*. Darkness means evil and suffering. We talk about the "dark times" in our lives, or we're in a "dark place" in our lives.

And evil and suffering can have many, many, many forms. You know, when Jesus was born, if you go to the book of Matthew, it tells us that Herod found out that there was a someone born who was supposed to be the prophesied future King. And so Herod decided to kill all the children in the village of Bethlehem to make sure there was no future rival to his throne.

Mary and Joseph got away but had to flee to Egypt- and no, Jesus didn't have a visa. Didn't have a Mastercard either. And so you have refugees and you've got violence and you've got injustice and you've got infanticide and grief and sorrow and broken families, and you know...just like now. While I was writing this sermon, Deanna sent me an article about the mother and daughter killed by the gunmen this week in Circle C – just a mile from the coffee shop where I was actually writing this sermon. The *Statesman* article ended with a quote from their neighbor, "Stuff like that doesn't happen in our neighborhood." Except of course it does. The world's a dark place, and the world *continues* to have all those things.

So when we talk about darkness, it can mean the world is filled with evil and suffering...*but* darkness can also mean *ignorance*. You know, if I'm in a dark room, I don't know what's in the room and I'm stumbling, and I'm falling, because I'm "in the dark" – literally I can't see or comprehend what's going on around me. And we use it metaphorically - somebody asks you at work what's going on with the changes at headquarters and you might say, "I have no idea, I'm in the dark."

And so again, what it means to say, "the world is a dark place", is to say the world is filled with evil and suffering *and* we don't have the ability or the knowledge to know how to solve it.

Now this is the very first you might say, *clue*, to what the Bible says the meaning of Christmas, the meaning of Jesus coming in the world, is. What is it? This world is a dark place and if there is going to be any light it has to come from *outside* the human race. In Matthew's version, he quotes the prophet Isaiah in a very famous passage - partly because it got into Handel's Messiah - but **Isaiah 9:2** says, "*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*" And that's Matthew's way of talking about Jesus coming into the world, means that we're in darkness and light has come into the world from outside the human race.

Now, I want you to know that what we have said so far...which is that a key message of Christmas is the world's a dark place, filled with evil and suffering and we do *not* have the ability or knowledge to know how to solve it ourselves. And if there's to *be* any light or help, it's going to have to come from outside the human race...that's not a popular message.

Everything in our culture is conditioning us to *not* believe that. *Everything* in our culture is *against* that. And this is a problem because Christmas is not going away. It is a commercial bonanza. They will *never* be able to get rid of Christmas, *ever*. At least not in the foreseeable thousand years. And therefore what are we going to do when the message of Christmas is very *opposite* of what the culture tells us?

I saw an ad in the Dallas paper the day after Thanksgiving, and I meant to grab it and take it with me, but I forgot. And I haven't been able to find it again unfortunately, but basically it was an advertisement for a product – some tech product as I recall – that was obviously alluding to Ukraine and Gaza. And the copy said something along the lines of “the meaning of Christmas is that love will triumph in the end and that together we will be able to create a world of unity and peace.” But you know, *only* if we all subscribe to this data retrieval service or something.

Well, I hate to be the Grinch, but that is the *exact opposite* of the message of Christmas. Because see, the message of Christmas is not “*from* them”, a light has come. It's “*upon* them” a light has dawned! It comes from *outside* of us! We can't *possibly* generate that kind of light. We do not know how to solve our own problems, our evil and suffering, we just can't. It's the opposite of the conventional message. The culture is going to be constantly trying to re-engineer the message of Christmas, but it won't work.

Vaclav Havel, who was the first president of the Czech Republic, and he had lived under communism *and* he lived under free market capitalism, and you know what he said? Neither of these things are going to solve the greatest human problems. It's not going to be a simple political solution – but boy everyone wants to try it their way, right? “Just vote for us and we will bring light to the darkness!” Listen to what Havel said in a very famous speech:

“In 1968, I felt that our problem could be solved by forming an opposition party that would compete publicly for power with the Communist Party. I have long since come to realize, however, that it is just not that simple and that no opposition party in and of itself, just as no new electoral laws in and of themselves, could make society proof against some new form of violence. No "dry" organizational measures in themselves can provide that guarantee, and we would be hard pressed to find in them **that God who alone can save us.**” (*The Power of the Powerless*)

And that's the message of Christmas. So this world is a dark place, that's point one. *But, point two*, the other thing we're told here is that **There is a Light**. Yes, it's outside the human race, but there *is* a light, the light we need *does* exist. Well, where is it? And by the way, later in verse 14 - which we're going to get to in the coming weeks - it says that the word of God is Jesus.

Now I'll get back to this term "*word*" later. But right now you can just put the word "Jesus" in there in its place. So you could translate what we read this morning as, "In the beginning was Jesus and Jesus was with God and Jesus was God." Alright, let me show you how absolutely startling it is when the two truths that are being given to you in this sentence are put next to each other.

First of all, it tells us Jesus is God. It doesn't say Jesus is *a* God. There's no article in the Greek. It simply says Jesus Christ was *God*. If there was an article - if it said Jesus was *a* God - then there'd be more than one God. Right? The Bible is not saying that. It's saying that "You know God, the *one* God? Jesus *is* that one God".

But *then* right next to it, it says, Jesus was God and Jesus is with God. Now the word "with" means to have a relationship. If you see your buddy more than

once with the same girl you might ask, "Are you *with* her?" The Bible uses this in the same relational way. In **Mark 3:14** it says that Jesus, "*He appointed twelve that they might be with him...*" There's a level of intimacy implied with the 12 disciples that is not there with the rest of the followers. So to be "with" someone, that's a term that in the Bible means to be in a relationship with them.

So here's what it's saying. There's only one God and Jesus is God, and *yet* Jesus is in a love relationship with God. And by the way, even though the Holy Spirit's not mentioned here, the same thing is applied to him. This is the doctrine of the Trinity - and if you think that's a minor doctrine that doesn't really matter, I spent a couple of years writing a very long doctoral dissertation that says otherwise! See me after class.

So there's only one God, not three Gods. *But*, within that one God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, *love each other*. And from eternity. There's one God, but inside that one God, there's three persons who from all eternity...look, notice what it says. **V.3** says, "*Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*" Which means that before anything was made - from *before* the beginning - the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, have all *endlessly* known and loved each other.

Only Christianity then, says that at the very heart of God is a dynamic love relationship. From all eternity, in the very *being* of God, there have been three persons who have known each other, and loved each other, and glorified each other, and adored each other. And therefore, the meaning of life is relationship in love. See if there was one God, who only had one personality - one person - and then that person - that God - *created* other beings, then love comes in later, right? There's power and *then* there's love. Isn't that right?

Love must have an object – it is relational by definition. This is the problem with the Big Bang – that only describes a universe birthed in power. So first God is powerful, and then later on comes in love. But if you have a Triune God - if you have a God who is the Father, Son, Holy Spirit from all eternity - then love *is* first. Love *is* the most important thing. And relationships are the most important thing. And communication is the most important thing.

In fact, a bit later, the old KJV translates John to say, (**John 1:18 KJV**), “*No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, **which is in the bosom of the Father**, he hath declared him.*” What is that language about? I think that John, by using that language, is deliberately trying to get you to use your imagination for a minute. So let's do that.

How many people are there in the world right now, that if you were lying on a sofa, you know, without even asking permission, could walk right over to you and sit down and lean right up against you, and that would be fine? How many people are there like that? Not many, right? And the ones who *can* do that are in the most intimate relationship possible, right?

So I think this is what we're being asked. If you want to understand who God is and what God is like, then you have to start to imagine the time in your life when you felt the most loved. Now multiply that by a trillion trillion trillion! Imagine the time in your life when you felt the most understood, the most appreciated, the most adored, the most secure, the most significant. And you remember the joy of that, okay?

And yet it's impossible really to hold on to that because, you know, we're selfish beings. And so even if you're in a *good* marriage, those kinds of times come and go. Even if you're in one of the best marriages, those times, they come and go, because we tend to be selfish and we tend to want to - not *give* to each other - but we want to *receive*. And so there's conflict and tension and resentment. And therefore *those* times in which we have been the *most* blissful, the most loved, the most joyful, the most adored, those times, they're fleeting, right?

Now, imagine *three* persons who are *perfect* persons, who always love and glorify the people they love, who never are saying “you’ve got to serve me” but they’re always serving each other, and that they’re giving themselves to each other exhaustively and completely from all eternity. So you have to take the few moments in your life that you’ve experienced some of that, multiply by a trillion trillion trillion, and that is, God!

God is *infinitely* happy. God is infinitely loving. The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit are just pouring joy and love and glory into each other’s souls, *endlessly*. They’re bathed in the *joy* of each other, they’re bathed in the *love* of each other, and they are therefore infinitely happy, infinitely joyful, infinitely loving. And, you know, *why* would God have created other beings? To *share* in it. Why would God create beings that are in God’s image? So that we can do it with each other - and with God - just sharing all that.

Now you say, “What does all that have to do with the theme?” Everything! *Because* here’s what I’m trying to show you, **1 John 1:5** - John wrote three letters as well as the gospel of John - says, “*This is the message we have heard from [Jesus] and declare to you: **God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.***” Well, what is the light? That’s kind of abstract? What is the light? *This* is the light.

This infinite love, this pulsating love...this isn’t just kind of a general sentiment, we’re talking about real live interaction, communication. This is *the light*. *This* is what we need. Why?

Because look at our darkness! Every single bit of evil and suffering in this world, the darkness of this world, what is it at the bottom? It’s always a lack of love, it’s a loss of love. What is war? What is racism? What is injustice? What is crime? What is violence? What is divorce? What is a broken family? What is bereavement? What is grief? What is sorrow? What is it? It’s *always* the loss of love. It’s always the *lack* of love, *always*. That’s our darkness. And why do we have problems? Why can’t we generate our own light? Because we’re selfish. Because there’s something about our heart that says, “me first”.

The day after our Austin shooting, a man shot four professors, killing three at UNLV. He turned out to himself be a professor who couldn’t get a job. We don’t yet know the exact motives – the gunman was killed - but the victims appeared random other than they had jobs in a field that had repeatedly rejected him. “Me first! I want what you have.” That’s the *end* of love – the death of love.

Love is “You first. I will give you what I have.” And *that’s* God. And that’s the dance that the Trinity has been doing – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – since *infinity*. And because God is therefore infinitely unselfish and loving, God is infinitely happy. And we don’t have that, and so we’re in darkness and we need that light.

And by the way, before we move on to the practical application – to the conclusion. Let’s keep in mind how different the historic Christian view of the universe - that love preceded power – is from both ancient paganism and modern secularism. Here’s how ancient paganism says the universe came about. There were these multiple power centers called gods - there was all these different gods, terrestrial, economic, elemental, etc. - and they fought with each other, and that’s how the earth got created, and that’s how this and that happened. Almost every pagan creation myth explains the universe being created out of a power struggle.

Modern secularism doesn’t believe in gods, no...but it believes in an impersonal universe. Impersonal. And it believes that the world got here through violent explosive forces, and that human beings subsequently evolved through survival of the fittest - nature red in tooth and claw, the strong devouring the weak.

So ancient paganism *and* modern secularism say the essence of the world is power and struggle. That’s at the heart of Nietzsche and Darwin and Marx and Freud and Capitalism and Communism. But Christianity says, “In the beginning there was love, man.” When we move to San Francisco, I’ll be able to walk to Haight-Ashbury, but those hippies got nothing on the Christian creation story. In the beginning there was love, infinite love, endless love, powerful love...and that love is the light we need!

Okay, **thirdly then, How do we Receive the Light?** How does it happen? Now, obviously, this is the beginning of the book of John. The rest of his Gospel is all meant to answer that question. But even here at the beginning there is a hint. It says Jesus – the true light – came into the world, and in **v.11**, “*He came to that which was his own, but his own **did not receive him.***”

Now, what this is saying is pretty simple. And that is that Jesus Christ came into the world...to be rejected. He *knew* he would be rejected. But the ultimate rejection was not only that his own did not *receive* him, more than that, his own *killed* him. Why would they – why would *we* – do that?

Well, because this is the darkness in our hearts. We want love and yet at the same time we're afraid of anybody coming in and saying, "You have to serve me." "No, no, I don't want to serve anybody." My heart says *I* want to be in charge. And so what Jesus Christ had to do was he had to overcome the barrier between ourselves and God. The Bible says that our sin – our selfishness – had created a barrier between us and God.

And what did Jesus do? He went to the Cross, and on the Cross, two things happened. Darkness came down. Remember that it was the middle of the day – we read this a few weeks ago- but it became completely dark; darkness came down. Why? The light of the world descended into darkness. But that darkness in the sky was only symbolic of what was really happening at the heart of the cosmos.

Because right after it says darkness came down, we are told that Jesus cried out and said – what? – "*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" You see, we've been making a connection between light and love, darkness and selfishness. And so let's just make the connection here. What was happening to Jesus on the Cross? *Outwardly* darkness came down, *inwardly* darkness was coming down - what was it? It was the loss of love.

Jesus Christ went to the Cross to take the penalty our sins deserved. Well, what is the penalty for selfishness? See selfishness is its own punishment. Selfishness results in the loss of love. You know, if you're in a marriage, and both of you are being selfish, you know, nobody has to come along and *fine* you. No one is going to blow a whistle; "We've got a violation of spousal needs on the play; 15-yard penalty and repeat the down." No, you're losing love. You're pulling away from each other. It's awful. I mean, it's true in friendships, it's true in families, it's true *everywhere*. So what is the punishment that selfishness *deserves*? It's the punishment that selfishness always *gets*...the loss of love.

But what Jesus was experiencing...you know, the counselors and psychologists will tell you - but you don't need them to tell you because you know this intuitively anyway - there is no greater pain and trauma than the loss of a spouse through death or divorce. The loss of love; why? Because it's a very, very deep kind of love. So the more intimate the relationship, the more devastating the loss of it.

But don't forget, even if you are married for 50, 60, 70 years! - even if you had a great relationship - two human beings can only love each other so much. But what did we say? The Father and the Son have loved each other *perfectly* from all eternity. Can you imagine? No, actually, we can't imagine. We can't begin to imagine the agony - the *hell* - that Jesus experienced on the Cross. That loss of love was greater than anything you and I have ever experienced as a nuclear warhead is greater than the sting of a paint ball.

And the reason why that is the key to connect into the light is this, number one, objectively, our sins are forgiven. Jesus died for our sins – all our violations of love. So when I say, “Father forgive me, because of what Jesus did”, God can forgive my sins and now come into my life and begin to start to fill me with His love – the love that I have forfeited. So that I begin to be somebody who actually can start to love other people, and you can become someone who can love other people.

As we've said recently, it's a simple matter of economics. It's very, very hard to be generous to others when you can't pay your own light bill. Okay? But if you have a lot of money, then it's easy to be generous - a lot of people still *aren't* generous with it, because it's always a matter of the heart in the end - but it's at least possible.

And the same thing with love. It's very hard to love other people and not be selfish when you yourself are so needy inside - when you don't feel very lovable yourself. But when God's love starts to pour in through the Cross - when you see that Jesus Christ lost, infinite love out of *love for you* - that begins to melt your heart. And that begins to fill you up. And you become rich in love, so you start to be able to give other people love without always doing in that kind of selfish way, or manipulative way.

So that's what Jesus has to do, but here's what *you* have to do. Here's what you have to do. You have to make Jesus your reason for life. Now what do I mean by *that*? What I'm about to tell you in the next two minutes could have been the whole sermon. But I like to go back to the very beginning where it says, (v.1), “*In the beginning was **the Word** and **the Word** was with God and **the Word** was God.*” Why is Jesus Christ called “the word”?

It's the Greek word *logos* from which we get our word “logic” – so it means logic or reason. And actually, when John says Jesus Christ was the *logos*, he is deliberately connecting to a major cultural debate that was going on at that time. Because the Greek philosophers believed that there was a *logos* behind the universe - there was a *reason* behind the universe.

To understand their argument, think of it like this. You do not know how to use – for example - an appliance, unless you know the reason it was made. So, if you take a space heater and you try to cook on it, you might burn down your house. You know why? Because the *logos* of the space heater is not to be cooked upon, it's to heat your space. And if you're not aligning yourself with the *logos* of the space heater, you're actually in danger.

Well, the Greek philosophers said, “Ok, what if there's a *logos* to human life? What if there's a *logos* to the world? What if there's a *logos* behind the universe? In other words, what if there was a purpose for human life, and in order for our lives to go well, we need to identify and align with that reason?” So they thought the *logos* was a proposition, a way of living, and they argued about what exactly it was.

And there were these various schools of thought. And some philosopher says, “Well, I think it's this.” And other philosophers thought “No, *this* is the *logos*” and some philosophers even thought, “There *is no* *logos*.” But they *all* said you get to it through philosophical contemplation; through philosophical reasoning and thinking, you can *discern* the reason that human beings were supposed to live and *then* you align yourself with it.

And along comes John – his is the most philosophical of the gospels, by the way - and he blows it all up. And he brought an idea, and that idea was revolutionary in the history of human thought. He says, “Yes, there is a *logos*. Yes, the universe does have meaning. Yes, there actually *is* a reason for life. There *is* something you were created for. But that *logos*, that reason, is not an abstract proposition...it's a *person*, that you know in a relationship of love. It's Jesus Christ, and he's come into this world, and you can know him, and you can love him.”

Do you know how revolutionary that was? If *Jesus* is the reason for life - that's what it means when it says “In the beginning was the *logos*” - if *Jesus* is the reason for life, then I don't have to be a philosopher to discern it, *anybody* can have a relationship with him. *And* it means that the meaning of life is not so much knowledge and contemplation and philosophical comprehension...it's love!

And therefore, let me ask you a question. Is *Jesus* the reason for your life? Is *Jesus* the reason you get up in the morning; is he the reason you get out of bed? I'm not asking do you *believe* in *Jesus*? Do you pray to *Jesus*? Do you hope that *Jesus* will help you? No, I'm asking, is *Jesus* your very *reason* for life? Is that the *whole* reason you're living?

You were *his*! Would you think about that? Jesus was perfectly happy in heaven. He was doing fine. He had all the love he could ever possibly need. Why did he come? Why did he go through all that? What was the very *reason* for his human life? Why veiled in flesh? It was you and me!

His very reason for life was you and me. Now you go make him *your* reason for life. It's only fair. Isn't that what marriage vows are – mutual declarations of love? And when you make Jesus your reason for life - the very reason that you live your life day to day – Jesus will fill you with love. And you'll become part of the solution that this dark world needs, instead of part of the problem.

Let's pray...