

A Spiritual Journey - The Gospel of John
"The Way, The Truth, The Life"
Part 1

Most people, in one way or another, recognize that the Gospel of John is unique and quite different from the other Gospels. To me this Gospel is unique because it attempts to bring a comprehensive story about God to our attention. It was written around the turn of the first century, about 100 years after the beginning of a new time called the Common Era. For our Judaic Christian history it was after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE and the beginning of separation between Jews and the followers of Jesus. For others it was a world under the rule of Rome, the largest political and most pervasive power ever. While Rome was the political power, it was also a time when growing philosophical and religious differences were growing in areas around the region, even among Jews, Jewish/Christians, and Christians.

It is in this stringent and tumultuous atmosphere that John writes his Gospel. Our author was certainly Jewish but one who was aware of the growing tension between various Jewish parties and others becoming more unique followers of Rabbi Jesus. In this new Common Era there was hardly much commonality among many people. With division and tensions growing, John expresses a holistic expression of the Good News he recognized in Jesus the Christ - the anointed one - who came to explain and espouse the Kingdom or Realm of God on earth.

John starts his Gospel by going back to the creation story in Genesis, "In the beginning was the word...". In the authorized Spanish translation, "En el principio era ya el Verbo..." in English - "In the principle (or the beginning) it was already the verb...". In Genesis we are told that God spoke and it was done. When Moses asks God who he should say sent him to Pharaoh, God told him to say that "I AM" sent him - the verb TO BE. Jesus, according to John, was to be the living "Word" and "Verb" of God who came to establish and demonstrate the way God wants everyone to speak and act.

John the Baptist, a Jewish prophet, was the one chosen to prepare the way for the anointed one who was to come. The Baptist did not know who it

might be, but said, "I saw the Spirit come down as a dove from heaven and stay on him"; he knew that Jesus was "that one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit". Immediately after this introduction Jesus began to call disciples to follow him to implement God's Realm among them. Having gathered a sufficient number of disciples the Gospel concludes chapter one and moves in the next 10 chapters, giving signs and examples in word and deed, of what God's intentions were for the earth and all its people. It is this first section that I call "The Way" - The Way of God for the world.

Before we go further, allow me to introduce the reason for my outline. In chapter 14 of John, he speaks of Jesus being "The Way, The Truth, and the Life". In chapter 4:24 of John, Jesus explains to the Samaritan woman at the well that, "God is a spirit. Those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth". The Apostle Paul, the earliest writer of Christian Scripture, tells us in Galatians 5:22-23 that, "the spiritual nature produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There are no laws against things like that". In this part called "The Way", I will use these scriptures to outline the progress of God's Realm as heard and seen in Jesus the Christ as the Way of God's Spirit.

Keep in mind that LOVE is the key. The compassion and love of God for all people, in all time, and in all places is the essence that begets the other spiritual qualities. As we learn to love God with all our heart, mind, and being we too are able to say and act as those filled with God's Spirit.

JOY - Marriage and Wine. The first "sign" of Jesus in John's Gospel is a Wedding Feast in which Jesus turns 6 water jugs into wine. The "joy" of that feast was running low, according to John's story, and so Jesus was encouraged to remedy this situation. Joy is the Spirit of God's presence with us in every situation, good or bad, to bring life in all its joy.

PEACE - Healing the Official's Son. (John 4:46-54) "Jesus returned to the city of Cana in Galilee, where he had changed water into wine. A government official was in Cana. His son was sick in Capernaum. 47 The official heard that Jesus had returned from Judea to Galilee. So he went to Jesus and asked him to go to Capernaum with him to heal his son who was about to die". While Jesus did not go with him he did not dismiss his

request. Jesus healed the son of a political oppressor to many people under Roman rule and demonstrated the compassion and care of God for all people.

PATIENCE - The Samaritan Woman at the Well. A long story that most of us are familiar with but basically a story that shows the patient grace and compassion of God for a variety of religious understandings. Jesus speaks as a Jew and a Rabbi, but he does not denigrate the woman nor her faith. Jesus simply conveys the magnitude of God's great love and compassion for everyone - so much so that she brings back a crowd from her town to hear his message. When we truly accept this incomprehensible message about love for ourselves we have patience and we share more with others.

KINDNESS & GOODNESS - Jesus Feeds the 5000. When this story is interpreted as a metaphor or allegory we witness the Spirit of God but never **prove** God or anything about Jesus. This story teaches us that people, who are hungry and burdened by lacking the basic necessities of life, can never comprehend love and compassion by words alone. **They need actions to demonstrate that God is serious in providing** for those needs through all who are willing to serve God in providing those needs. We are called to be like Jesus in like manner serve and provide in our world today.

FAITHFULNESS - Jesus Walks on Water. In this sign Jesus is coming to the aid of his disciples when he "walks on water" to reach them in their boat on troubled seas. The popular interpretation here usually focuses on Jesus, whom the author of this Gospel introduces as the word or expression of God. So what does this sign say about God regarding people then and now? As we noted earlier, these are signs or metaphors wherein Jesus shows dramatic examples of God's love for us. Jesus' miracles were signs to demonstrate how all who would follow Jesus can bring God's faithfulness to the people on earth.

GENTLENESS - Healing at the Pool of Bethesda - [John 5:1-15]. This is the first of two stories showing God's gentleness. Jesus healed a man who was sick and unable to walk. On the day of the Sabbath, Jesus told him to take up his bed and walk. There are no laws in religion or government that should prevent the compassion of God, imaged in the stories of Jesus.

Gentility, by definition, is "elegance by virtue of fineness of manner and expression". God, we might say, is virtuous in word and in action. The elegance of this sign portrays Gentleness as the true Spirit of God and, as followers of Jesus. Gentleness should be part of our character as well in word and deed.

Healing The Man Born Blind - [John 9:1-41] In the second story, "His disciples ask, "Rabbi, why was this man born blind? Did he or his parents sin?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. Instead, he was born blind so that God could show what he can do for him". This is a long story wherein many believed he was born blind because of sin. When the blind man credited Jesus for his healing, the Pharisees threw him out of the Temple. When Jesus heard about this he said, "Blind people will be given sight, and those who can see will become blind." Some Pharisees who were with Jesus heard this. So they asked him, "Do you think we're blind?" Jesus told them, "If you were blind, you wouldn't be sinners. But now you say, 'We see,' so you continue to be sinners."

This Sign of Jesus, healing the man born blind, clearly signifies the reality of Sin as arrogance and the absence of gentleness. The meaning of **arrogant** is, "having or showing feelings of unwarranted importance out of overbearing pride" according to the dictionary. Self-importance is often the character of religious people even to our day. The word used here in the Greek for "sin" is "harmartia" which literally means "missing the mark". We are way off target, so to speak, when we act with arrogance and unwarranted self-importance.

SELF CONTROL - Jesus Raises Lazarus - [a sign of things to come]. In the story of Lazarus Jesus exhibits self control. Jesus demonstrates prayerful thoughtfulness in every facet of this story. His disciples cautioned him not to go because he might be killed, but he would eventually determine to go. He hesitated for four days. According to Jewish understanding a body after 4 days was considered dead. Jesus made this decision because he wanted God to be glorified, not himself. Jesus was criticized by the crowds and by Mary and Martha for his delay. The emotions of this occasion were so high that we are told even Jesus wept. As the living word and verb of God he demonstrated the emotions and compassion of God when

circumstances in our lives seem beyond hope. At the tomb Jesus will demonstrate what he taught, especially to Mary and Martha, **“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”** The noun for believe in Greek is πιστεύω and is commonly translated as Faith, to trust in God and Jesus the Christ. As a verb it would demonstrate that we are acting and doing what God would do. In his book, "Speaking Christian", Marcus Borg prefers to translate "to believe" as "to believe". When we truly believe God and Jesus the Christ, we will honor and act in ways that follow their example.

In this story Jesus introduces the term resurrection which is much more than resuscitation, coming back to this life. The text here emphasizes that "whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" This last sign of Jesus in the Gospel of John will later be revealed in the final chapters when Jesus himself is resurrected. In these first 11 chapters Jesus shows us "The Way" of God. In my next sermon, Part 2, we will discuss "The Truth (Jesus' discourses) and "The Life" (the death and resurrection of Jesus as the Christ).

Most people for most of the time here are cycling through routines while on autopilot. They are not really present in the here and now except for occasional moments of that presence of mind. Humans often find it hard to remain focused for very long on what may really be happening each day as they live from day to day. The Buddhists describe it as "mindfulness" or an awareness of reality in the here and now.

Paul Tillich, a renowned Christian scholar, put it as the "be - live - love" triad ("The Courage to Be") and the "ground of being" which he beautifully develops in his three volumes of "Systematic Theology". Instead of making the Gospel of John into a literal or historic account of Jesus, perhaps we would become more "mindful" and learn to "be - live - love" with the courage to be and become faithful followers. Having the awareness of God's presence more often, enables us to share God's compassion and love with one another as we should. AMEN.