

## **REDISCOVERING JESUS** **John 1:1-18**

**by Rev. Russell B. Smith**

When I went before the elders of First Presbyterian Church, Orlando, to be examined for preparation for ministry, my pastor Dr. Howard Eddington asked my wife and I to give our testimonies. I stumbled through my story, making a reasonably coherent statement of my faith. Then Tammy spoke. I was floored. Here was my wife who had always claimed that she never knew what to say when giving her testimony. There before the elders and pastors of the church, I saw her give an articulate and passionate statement of faith that made them believe she was the one called to ordained ministry rather than me. In that moment, I saw my wife in a brand new light. I was humbled that God had brought me together with such an impressive woman. I rediscovered Tammy in a deeper and richer way. And I'll have you know that God reminds me of that rediscovery at the most inconvenient times – for instance, when I'm in one of those "I'm the Bible Scholar, and I'm right" moods.

My hope and prayer is that as we work through John's gospel, each of us will rediscover Jesus Christ in way that energizes our lives. I pray that we will see something new about Jesus that we have never seen before, or that we will be reminded of some of the old truths that we have taken for granted. The amazing thing about Jesus is that every time we consider him, he touches us in a deeper, more profound way, or in a new and unexpected way.

John, as any good author, summarized the *purpose* of his book near the end. In John 20:31 he wrote, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." The purpose of the book is that we might *believe*. But it's the introduction to this gospel found in John 1:1-18 that identifies in *what*, or rather in *whom*, we are to believe. John made it clear that Jesus Christ was not just a prophet. Jesus was not just some wandering sage offering good advice. Jesus was not just an ordinary human. John clearly stated that Jesus was both fully God and fully human. Based on those truths, I believe that we should expect to encounter Jesus, particularly in worship, and that encounter should energize us to go and tell our stories.

John began his gospel with poetic imagery, referring to Christ as "the Word." In the ancient world, "the word" was an image that was used differently by various religions. The Stoic philosophers used the term to signify a non-personal principle that ordered the universe, much like "the force" in the Star Wars movies. The Israelites, on the other hand, used the term to signify the creative power of God. Here John took this term that was used by other belief systems and redefined it to make the gospel more understandable. If John were

writing in our day of Oprah-esque spirituality, he might have used the term “spirit.” In defining Jesus as “the Word,” John established a few key points:

1. John 1:1-2: Jesus is fully God. From the very beginning of the universe, Jesus was with God – quite literally standing face to face with God. Jesus and God were indeed the same.
2. John 1:3: Jesus is the organizing principle of the universe. Through him all things were made. This means *all things*, not just material things. It was through Jesus, present at creation, that the laws of physics were established; it was through Jesus that the laws of mathematics were established. Proverbs 8:27-31 uses very similar language to explain how God established the world by his wisdom. John’s use of “the word” is very similar to Proverb’s use of “wisdom.” Jesus is, in effect, wisdom incarnate. John wanted us to understand the cosmic significance of this person Jesus. Augustine once wrote, “I believe in order that I may understand,” and that’s exactly the point: your faith in Christ is a faith in the author of all that is true, and thus all truth points to him. This cosmic significance of Christ helps establish the third point.
3. John 1:4-5: Jesus provides victory over the darkness. We will explore this theme more fully later in this series.

In John 1:10-13, we also learn that the very eternal God whom we encountered in verses 1-5 is active in the world and has made it possible for people to become his children. John’s was not a passive God who created everything and then checked out so he could go fishing. The Deists of the 18th and 19th centuries believed in a god who carefully crafted a world of order and logic, and then left it alone – this is not John’s God. God *is* in the world; God *does* come to his people; and God *does* give a new birth to those who receive him.

The most astounding thing about this active and present God is in verse 14: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” Don’t breeze over that statement just because you’ve committed it to memory. Let it sink in. Chew on it for a while. Meditate on it. John was saying that God put on flesh – this is what we call the “incarnation,” it’s one of the central elements of our faith. The force that unleashed a million suns, the power that set the planets in motion, the immensity that hand-carved every atom in existence and set them spinning, the very design for everything that is, was and will be – all of that was contained within a real, flesh-and-blood human body: a real body that got sunburned, that grew fatigued, that needed sleep and food and water; all that power within a

body that could be cut and bleed and die; all that power within a man who loved and laughed and cried. Does anybody dare raise his hand and say, “I understand”?

Our minds can't grasp the incarnation in its entirety, but we can understand enough to know that as God, Jesus deserves our worship, and as human, Jesus relates to us as an individual. God, in Jesus, is fully present, fully real, and fully there for us. As the writer of Hebrews put it, “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Heb. 2:18); and, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). The point is that Jesus' full humanity gives us access to a sympathetic ear. We can connect with this awesome eternal force because this awesome eternal force has empathy for us.

While I was a student at Wake Forest University, I had the opportunity to study under poet Maya Angelou. Dr. Angelou had adopted as her motto a quote from the Roman Poet Seneca: “I am human. Nothing that is human is foreign to me.” If that was true for Seneca, and it was true for Maya Angelou, and it is true for you and me, how much more is it true for Jesus who was the perfect human.

Now, if what the Bible says about Jesus is true – and it is – then we can fully expect a personal encounter with Jesus. If Christ is fully God and fully man, then we can and should expect that when we come to worship, we will have a personal encounter. It will be a spiritual encounter, yes, but it will be an encounter nonetheless. The very nature of a personal encounter means it will be different for each of us. You may experience Christ bringing you comfort in the midst of sorrow, or strength in the midst of trial. You'll come under conviction of the specific sin that is in your life. You'll feel the intense personal joy that comes through the redemption you have in Jesus Christ. You may sense a calling to a certain ministry, or you may feel peace in resting where you are. Each of us will experience Christ in different ways while we're in worship because Christ needs to do different things in each of us. Just to share with you from my experience, I often experience Christ when taking communion. I often find myself strengthened spiritually, emotionally connected to my brothers and sisters in the faith, and intellectually reminded of Christ's sacrifice for me.

An important note here: Our experience of Christ need not be something we can immediately identify. C.S. Lewis states in his *Letters to an American Lady*, “The presence of God is not the same as the sense of the presence of God.” In other words, God may very well be here working in you even when you least know it. Please do not think I am saying that we should have an emotional event every time we worship. Rather, I am saying that because of Christ's full divinity and full humanity, each of us can and should expect Jesus' personal involvement in his or her life, especially when in worship.

So, John established Jesus' full divinity and full humanity. How do we respond to this fully divine, fully human Jesus who involves himself in our lives? As we work through the gospel, we will hear stories of people relating to Jesus and responding to him. We get a taste in this very passage as we read about John the Baptist. In verses 6-9, we learn that John the Baptist came as a witness to the light, that is, as a witness to Jesus (John 1:4-5). And the Baptist is mentioned again in verse 15 ("John testifies concerning him"). We see that John the Baptist was indeed sent as a special messenger. We also see that he clearly distinguished between himself as the messenger, and the fully human and fully divine Jesus as the subject of the message. The messenger, whether it's John the Baptist or Billy Graham or Russell Smith or you, is always less than the Living Word. The messenger always points to the Living Word rather than to himself. The principle that we draw, then, is that we respond simply by telling our story – the story not of ourselves, but of what Christ has done in us.

John Wesley, early in his career, was on a sea voyage with his brother Charles. They were crossing the Atlantic to Georgia where they would do mission work in America. During the passage, a great storm arose – such a great storm that the passengers and crew thought they may not survive. Even Wesley feared for his own life. But below decks he found a group of immigrants who were singing hymns and praying. These were the Moravians, religious refugees from central Europe and Germany who founded one of the greatest missionary movements of all time. These Moravians were completely calm, and they kept on singing and praying through the whole storm. After the crisis had passed, Wesley spoke to one of the men in the group about their incredible calm. At one point, Wesley asked, "Were not even your women and children afraid of dying?" to which the man replied, "No, our women and children are not afraid to die." Wesley was so impressed with the Moravians that he spent time getting to know them and finding out about their simple yet profound faith in Christ. It was later at a Moravian prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London that Wesley experienced that warming of the heart that so energized his later evangelistic ministry. Wesley, through that encounter, rediscovered Jesus. I invite you over the next weeks and months to come and rediscover Jesus too.