

Last week Steven preached the second sermon in our series from the Prologue of John's gospel. His sermon was titled *Incarnation and Recognition*. Although God sent his Son as a love gift to the world, according to John, the world did not know him or recognize him. Even his own people, the Hebrew people, did not accept him. The Gospel of Luke's birth story highlighted by "no room in the inn" underscores the lack of hospitality that greeted the infant Messiah. Later Jesus would remark that a prophet is not without honor except in his own country. And "that foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has no place..."

Steven pointed out that one of the reasons people did not recognize Jesus as the Word-become-Flesh had to do with presuppositions. In part we see what we are prepared to see; we recognize that which fits into our worldview or into our *plausibility structures* (Peter Berger). Is our ability to see God at work hindered by our tiny plausibility structures? And so when Jesus conducted his three-year earthly ministry of preaching, healing and teaching, he often would say, "you have heard it said, but I say unto you..." Jesus taught helped people to see and understand God's kingdom.

How prepared are we to recognize God's words and God's ways? Are you good at noticing clues and reading signs? If you read signs incorrectly you may lose your way. If you do not know the names of the streets and the landmarks you may not reach your destination.

**Example:** GPS versus a map

John's gospel, Part I, is structured as a story featuring a series of seven signs. Turning water into wine at Cana is the first sign (John 2) and the raising of Lazarus is the 7<sup>th</sup> sign (chapter 11). At the end of the gospel (20:31) John says forthrightly that he has "written these signs so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Friends, let the reader be forewarned; John is out to woo you and to win you into the family of believers. Although many people *refuse* to receive the Word and *refrain* from believing in Jesus the Christ—John knows that many others will enter the narrow gate by faith.

And so we come to verse 12. "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."

In order to receive Christ as God's word to them, they also must have recognized Him. And yet they, and even we, do not *fully* recognize Him. I'm sure we don't—*completely* recognize Jesus. Paul prays for the Ephesians (Eph 1:17-18) that "God may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better." It is a life-long journey!

**Re:** *Your God Is Too Small* (J. B. Phillips) *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Yancey

But some people see enough to draw close and to welcome Him. *Recognition* leads to *reception*.

Some people read John's invitation in verse 12 and wonder if he is envisioning two faith steps. Is one step *recognition* and the other *reception*? Or is *believing* one step and *receiving* the other? Good

questions. I wonder a lot about what exactly happens in a person's heart when he or she comes to faith in Jesus Christ. The circumstances vary from person to person. So I am wary of formulas and *shibboleths* (Judges 12:1-5). The Scriptures tell us there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." But the details of seeing and believing are delightfully diverse from one person's experience to another's.

The earlier theme of *light & darkness* corresponds with this theme of *sight & blindness* and these interconnected themes are recognized as a signature of John. John was convinced that if you can recognize him, you will put your faith in Him. "*I once was lost but now am found; was blind but now I see.*"

**Example:** Kara Green Benham (blind but believing—donated corneas)

Let's look closer at the GOOD NEWS invitation in verse 12.

If you welcome him into your life, then He gives you *power* or *authority* to become children of God.

But what about the notion that all people automatically are God's *children*? Biblically speaking, this is not quite true. Let me explain this carefully. All people from all cultures and in all places are God's image-bearing *creatures*. Everyone bears or manifests God's image and as such is a creature of dignity whose life is of enormous value. But the children of God are those whom God has adopted as *children*. Biblically speaking we all are orphans until God brings us into the fold. And He longs to love us into his family. The OT idea of the **covenant** underscores this. The *signs* of the covenant were given to mark people as belonging to the covenant people...

We are physically children of our parents but spiritually we can become children of God. See verse 13. "...*children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*"

When John says it is not by birth or natural descent he literally says "*not by blood.*" The Jews believed that a child was born from the union of the seed of the father and the blood of the mother (a Jew is someone whose mother is Jewish). So the Johannine picture of sonship declares that this status as God's child does not come from any human impulse or desire or from any act of the human will; it comes from above, it comes from God. See the Nicodemus story in John 3; "*you must be born again!*"

No one can enter into friendship with God simply by his or her own will and power—there is a great gulf fixed between the human and the divine. We can enter into fellowship with God when God himself opens the way. And God takes the initiative to adopt us. The King stoops to reach out to us. He bends down to earth and speaks from a lowly manger (Reformed theology).

**Example:** king and commoner (king must invite before there is a meeting)

But of course there is the other side to friendship between king and commoner, between God and humankind. What God offers, a man or woman must receive or appropriate. A human father offers his son love, friendship and advice but the son may prefer to go his own way. It is so with God. The Almighty offers us the power and opportunity to be part of his Family but we don't have to accept it. He honors our freedom.

We can and do accept God's offer through faith in Jesus Christ—by believing in his name. Hebrew thought referred to God's name as emblematic of his character. When the psalmist said, "*Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God,*" he means we will trust in God's name because we know what he is like. The name of the Word has this same character!

And now (through the incarnation) we can recognize God the Son—as powerful and weak, as majestic and lowly, as above us and beside us. And seeing Him truly we can receive Him—we can trust our lives to Him.

Now if a guest walked in here today and had never heard of Jesus or the manger or Abraham or Moses—she might be asking, “*so why does one need to believe in his name or receive him? What am I lacking that this word-made-flesh supplies? I’m alive so what kind of life is on offer from God and his Son?*” These are good questions and we who know the Bible’s back-story can answer them, right?

How would you answer our visitor’s questions? At some point you likely would point out that humankind has a **sin** problem. We don’t emphasize sin at Christmas because we are busy with the story of shepherds and angels and the romance of the king being born in a stable surrounding by cooing pigeons and mooing cows. Gifts of the Magi, gifts under the tree—it’s a feel good holiday. Don’t cast a shadow over our Advent and Christmas, preacher, with words about sin and sadness and selfishness!

Hmmm. But we know (Matt 1:21) that the angel told Joseph, “*she will bring forth a son and you shall call him Jesus because He will save his people from their sins.*” There is that word sneaking into the story through a dream and the words of the angel. And I have to be honest with you. The sin problem appears even in this poem that introduces John’s gospel. Have you noticed it? It is in verse 5. “*And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.*”

*Darkness* is the poet’s word for sin that prevents us from recognizing and receiving God’s light. And darkness represents humanity’s inclination to avoid the light that shows us who and what we really are. “Darkness is just one word in a prologue of only 18 verses--but ‘*tis enough*’ (R&J quote).

Quote: “*Neither the language of medicine nor of law is adequate substitute for the language of sin. Contrary to the medical model, we are not entirely at the mercy of our maladies. The choice is to enter into the process of repentance. Contrary to the legal model, the essence of sin is not the violation of laws but a wrecked relationship with God, one another, and the whole created order*” (Barbara Brown Taylor).

The Bad News precedes the Good News. Otherwise we don’t need a Savior and we don’t need salvation. The Garden of Eden story is a way of telling us that God offered life and abundance the first time but men and women preferred going their own way. So God has offered grace and truth a second time through the Word, His Son—the light of the world.

The Word, the Son comes from heaven as a **gift**. John tells us, “*He came to bring life—abundant life and eternal life.*”

*But whoever did want him,  
who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves. The Message*

I invite you to believe in his name. I invite you to see God as bigger than you have recognized in the past. Like dear old Ebenezer Scrooge, invite the Spirit (the Holy Spirit) to show you what you need to see. Listen to Scrooge,

*Good Spirit, your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I may yet change these shadows you have shown me by an altered life. I will honor Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year.*

J. I. Packer was right when he observed, "*the richest blessing God bestows upon us is adoption--choosing us to become his children forever!*"

**Adoption story:** Grace Cheeley

Rob and Noelani wanted children and so they thought about adoption. They visited orphanages in East Asia. One day... visiting an orphanage and they saw a toddler curled up in the corner in a fetal position. "What about her," they asked. "Oh no, something is wrong with her. She doesn't talk. You don't want her." But they decided to choose her anyway and brought her home. They loved her and taught her and called her **Gracie**. And she began to blossom and flourish. Today, 18 years later, she is a senior at Hope College (Holland, MI) and she will graduate in May with a triple major: Chinese, Asian studies and philosophy.

**Adoption is choosing to love someone** into your family!

God is in the *adoption* business. **Choosing to love us**. And so is the church. At Tuckahoe we have chosen to *show love* to an Angel Tree family and children at Bellmeade... When God offers to adopt us in Christ, our part is to receive the gift.