

As Richard indicated last week, we will be spending the season of Advent in the prologue of John - the first 18 verses of the fourth Gospel which begins with this compact fusion of Greek philosophy and Hebrew theology. This is the second in the series - last week Richard talked about creation in verses 1-4 and I'm going to focus on verses 9-11 and what it means that this profound event of God breaking into the world went by without a whole lot of notice. So let us read together John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.")

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

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What you see depends largely on the assumptions you bring to your viewing. The Hungarian chemist and philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi argues rather convincingly that all observations and knowledge claims rely on personal judgments. He probably took exception to Jefferson's framing our Declaration of Independence around self-evident truths, because he believed that anything we assume to be true corresponds to the assumptions we formed beforehand.

Indulge me in a little thought experiment. Have you ever been to a movie or seen a play, viewed a piece of art, or listened to a piece of music and developed a significant impression to that piece of music, movie, piece of art, only to find in conversation with someone who was also present for that performance of gallery viewing, that they formed an entirely different impression?

One of my favorite movies of all time is Rowan Joffe's masterpiece, *The Mission*. If you are in 7th-12th grade, there's a high likelihood that you've seen at least a scene from the movie. If you're in 6th grade or younger, stick around... It's a story about grace and the virtues, faith and the

power of forgiveness in collision with colonial greed, Western imperialism, and a compromised church - if they had somehow worked in baseball, it would be the perfect movie. The film is set in South America in the eighteenth-century. It portrays a group of Spanish Jesuit monks who venture into the rainforest above the Iguazu Falls of the South American Interior to found a mission among the indigenous Guarani people. One of these Jesuits is a former enslaver of the Guarani who joins the order and comes to the mission as penance for having killed his brother in a passionate duel over a woman they both love. The mission is a tremendous success and the viewer is shown an idyllic picture of Jesuit teaching blended with Guarani culture. They share all things in common and the best of western culture and local tradition are married in a captivating and beautiful way. But a European treaty which transfers the land above the Iguazu falls from the hands of the Spanish, who have laws which protect the Missions, to the hands of the Portuguese who have no such laws places the security of the Mission in jeopardy. Near the story's end the Mission is threatened by the encroaching Portuguese military and the Guarani are forced to choose between the way of Father Gabriel who urges non-violent resistance, and Roderigo Mendoza, the former slaver who wishes to take up arms against those who would oppress the people he has come to love. The climax is tragic and in the final moments the film shifts between Mendoza's intense and ambiguous gaze as he lies bloodied from his failed attempt to mount a defense, and Gabriel's steady, focused eyes as he moves forward with the Guarani, peacefully carrying the cross and eucharist toward a volley of Portuguese bullets.

A few minutes after the film was over, and we were able to catch our breath, my friend Ryan McKenzie and I were brought to conversation about this inexplicable expression on Mendoza's face and I ventured an interpretation - I said it was his realization that his pursuit of violent resistance was, in the end, a failure of Christian discipleship. To which my friend replied. "Oh, I don't see it that way at all." He had just spent the last year working as a researcher for the HBO series, *Band of Brothers* and offered the interpretation that Mendoza's expression was fixed on Gabriel and when Gabriel is ultimately slaughtered by the gunshots of the Portuguese, Mendoza is crushed by the failed hope of deliverance. So we went back and forth about this for a while, ultimately agreeing to disagree.

The difference in our interpretations was primarily theo-logical, that is to say that what we each saw in this sense, critical moment in the film had everything to do with how we understood the logic of how God operates in the world and in the life of the Christian community. The logic of God's movement in the world, in the lives of individuals and in the church is not always so easy to perceive. It is virtually impossible without a mind tutored by the scriptures. This is why it should not surprise us that the gospel declares, "Jesus was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him." How Jesus can come among "his own people, but they did not receive him." That Jesus was an unlikely messiah is made clear throughout the gospel accounts. We see these twin statements demonstrated clearly in two very different groups of people: the disciples, and the teachers of the law.

When Peter responds to Jesus' question, "Who do people say I am?" he surveys the different religious and political options available to him. "Some say you are Elijah, others John the Baptist, or one of the prophets." But ultimately, Peter catches on to something - you are the Messiah, the one whom we have long awaited. You are the one who, as the prophet Isaiah wrote and as Dick read, will "make his glory known" and who will "come with power and might" and restore us to power and glory, who will provide the strength to return Israel to her preeminence among the nations. You are the one we have longed for.

Peter finds it incomprehensible when Jesus explains how he will be not be recognized as having such power, but will instead be rejected and killed. Still clinging to his ideal of what a Messiah is and should be, he explains to Jesus that this is no way for a savior to talk. After all, to save means to have power and control and those with power and control don't really need to worry about death, so Jesus should cut out the nonsense. He simply can't understand that Jesus' power is different because as far as he knows power has only ever taken on one form and that of Empire. But Jesus' power is rooted in the very nature of God and looks like sacrificial giving and service.

So in brief Jesus takes the functional equivalent of a stick of dynamite to Peter's concept of what the messianic office is about. He does the same thing to James and John when they ask to be placed in positions of privilege. The powers of this world cannot comprehend the kind of power that is released through sacrificial service. If nothing else this should tell us that it's hard to recognize God when he is in our midst. Peter gets the answer right, but then he's told that his category is all wrong. What we see has everything to do with what we expect to see.

It's easy to understand how, "the world did not recognize him." The world of first century Palestine was desperate for a shake-up. The Hebrews were oppressed again. The once free and prosperous chosen people of God were under the boot of Rome. Peter saw what Jesus could do to the demons. He saw Jesus heal the sick and strengthen the muscles of the weak. Surely the one who could still the storm could snap a few Roman spears. He saw in Jesus the single best shot for overturning the existing order and returning things to the way they should be. He saw in Jesus someone who could make sense of it all.

Peter's hopes reflect the popular opinion that the coming Messiah was one who would come with a winnowing fork and overturn the existing powers and principalities. The logic of God, according to this view is one that would put right what is wrong in a way that corresponds with the wishes and hopes of a particular group of people. It was about regime change, not about a new power structure altogether.

By contrast, the Pharisees are the ancient equivalent of the theological faculty of Jerusalem Divinity School. Their understanding of God's action in the world was given shape by the presumption that everything that has gone wrong has done so because of Israel's sin and collusion with the impurities of ungodly gentiles. They had lost their way as a people because of hard-heartedness and because the influence of non-Jewish had led them to pursue other priorities, abandoning God's law. So their impulse about moving forward lay in creating a more thoroughgoing program of recovering and expanding the law. Designing a set of practices and rituals that would enable them to retain their distinctive identity as God's people.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law find Jesus' claims of divine sonship blasphemous, not the least of which because he has a reputation for eating with sinners and consorting with Gentiles. A central scene that appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke has the Pharisees and teachers of the law lying in wait to see if they can catch Jesus violating the Sabbath by healing a man with a withered hand. The dilemma, as they see it, is whether Jesus will place the local, particular needs of the moment over the eternal, unchangeable decree of God. Their intentions are mixed. On the one hand we get the picture that they are envious of Jesus' authority - he speaks and people listen and what he says is often different than what he says and so he is a threat. On the other, their attention to the law arises from an overwhelming desire to honor and please God - to be faithful to the commandments. But in their singular attention to a particular detail of the Mosaic law, they miss that same law's sweeping concern to care for the poor, the oppressed, the helpless. And in their

presumption that they are the authorities about God, they cannot recognize the one who embodies the authority of God when it appears in their midst.

When Jesus forgives the woman caught in adultery we hear echoes of the Psalms and the prophets that remind us that God hears the pleas of a broken and contrite heart that he desires repentance and obedience more than sacrifice and pietistic posturing. That Jesus would not recognize the validity of the religious authorities' interpretation about Sabbath keeping or ritual purity was enough to indicate to those authorities that he was a heretic at best and demonic at worst.

And so it's not entirely difficult to understand why "his own people did not accept him." The prophetic witness indeed makes the case that there was a direct correspondence between Israel's turning away from the law and the predicament they found themselves in. The logic of God, according to this view is that He desires us to pursue personal righteousness as a condition of being right with God and keeping away from anything that might compromise that righteousness. But the way of the pharisees was to pursue an insular righteousness that neglected to live up to their calling as a light to the nations. It is hard to be a light to the nations when you don't want to go out among them.

What we will see has everything to do with the assumptions we bring to our viewing. So how shall we presume? What set of assumptions *should* we carry with us as we look to understand how God works in the world? There are so many ways that people understand God - if the disciples get it wrong and the religious leaders get it wrong, how *can* we recognize God?

The Greek word that gets translated in our bibles as *word*, is *logos*. It's also the word and the concept that we translate as "logic" or "reason". Most of us, in the few quiet moments when we are able to rest and reflect, spend a good deal of our lives pursuing answers. Einstein spent the last thirty years of his life trying to know the "mind of God." We are trying to understand how to raise families, negotiate demands, play conflicting loyalties off each other. Is it possible that there is some kind of logic that pulls the mysteries of the cosmos and the mysteries of our complex lives into harmony? We want to know the logic of God. We want to behold the light that enlightens everyone for what it really is.

In the beginning was this logic, the *logos*. We cannot know God without rationality, and there is no logic outside the logic of God that gives order to all things. Richard talked last week about how it was this logic that shaped the creation of all things. John tells us that this logic points to God – there is a logic that transcends human logic: what we could call the logic of God, the "word of God".

And then John the gospel writer delivers his awesome summary in the most significant words in all of history, theology, literature and philosophy. "The word became flesh." Or as Eugene Peterson puts it, "The word...moved into the neighborhood." The logic of God became an actual person. The mysteries of the cosmos, born in a manger. The great and mighty Yahweh, the one whom the children of Israel were warned they could not even set eyes on, came among us as a human being. The *reason* of God became like us.

Advent is the season in our life as God's people when we celebrate that joyful moment. Today we are invited to recognize that the logic of the universe is embodied in a tiny, fragile infant. The whole triune life of God is organized, the whole shape of the universe is structured, the whole logic of the cosmos is ordered, for this moment: that God loved what he created so much that he

become fully present and entered into relationship with us in the person of Jesus Christ. Advent is the time we recognize that the logic of God did not manifest itself in militant conquest or in the harsh demands of the law, but in God's own self being born in obscurity and dying in agony for the purpose of saving and transforming us.

If we want to recognize God, we need to look at Jesus. In his life, Jesus did not spend a lot of time overturning social systems - he mounted no revolutions and drafted no legislation. Instead Jesus created a community that would be an alternative to the powers of this world. A living, breathing community of people, imbued with the Holy Spirit. A servant community that reveals the very life of God drawing people into a covenantal relationship with Him and with one another. In his life, Jesus did not introduce new rituals for cleanliness or decry the influence of outsiders, but ate with sinners and tax collectors and drew them into a community that would become God's own being on earth lived in and through believers for the single purpose of seeing each person transformed to look like Jesus. Friends when and where you see a community of people who exist to see every person become like Christ, there you will see God at work. There you will recognize the word become flesh.

While it contains elements of each, our faith is not primarily a theological structure, or a moral code, or an institution: it's fundamentally about a person, the word made flesh, and about the marvelous and mysterious relationship between the logic of God and our fuzzy logic, between God's faithful presence to us in Jesus and our wavering faith in response. Christianity is the story of that person and that relationship. The church is the story of how God's logic is set about transforming this world.

At Christmas we celebrate a God who goes to extraordinary lengths to be present and in loving relationship with a people who needed him but didn't recognize him and who weren't at all sure they much wanted him. So perhaps the way that we can celebrate Christmas is by going to extraordinary lengths to be present and to offer loving relationship to people who need God but have a hard time recognizing him and who aren't at all sure they much want him - to people who need the life of this community but who aren't sure they want it.

A community of people being transformed to look like Jesus. That would be hard not to recognize.

Amen.