

December 25, 2017 – John 1:1-18

When I was growing up, we had a tradition. Like many households, we had a nativity scene in our house. It was a very traditional nativity scene. A wooden barn like structure. Little ceramic figures of Mary and Joseph, shepherds and animals. A small manger filled with hay. Everything you'd expect.

Except for Jesus. You see my family had the tradition that you didn't put Jesus in the manger until Christmas Eve. Until you were actually celebrating his birth. Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the animals could all be hanging around waiting for him to be born, like we do during Advent. But we knew it wasn't Christmas until we saw Jesus.

That's really what Christmas is all about. Seeing Jesus. Seeing God made flesh. Seeing him right in front of us. Not just assuming that he's there. Hoping that he's there. Wishing that he's there. But seeing him.

God has always been with his people. That's a truth we've seen throughout scripture. God never leaves his people. Never abandons them. Never forgets them. But that doesn't mean they saw him physically standing among them. That's the difference with Jesus' incarnation. His birth. His life. His ministry. It was the visible presence of God made man, Jesus Christ.

*“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* There's a reason why we include John 1 in our Christmas readings, along with the nativity stories from Luke 2 and Matthew 2. This verse from John pretty much sums up the whole purpose of celebrating Christmas in one sentence.

In fact, this idea of seeing Jesus is one of those themes that the Apostle John hammers into us over and over and over again. In his first epistle, John echoes this statement about witnessing Jesus in the flesh no less than 7 times in 3 verses.

*“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us.”*

And throughout John's Gospel, the power of seeing Jesus becomes a recurring theme. When John the Baptist encounters Jesus for the first time, he cries out, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

When Jesus is calling his first disciples, Philip runs to find Nathaniel, saying, “We have found the man the prophet's promised to us. Come and see him.” The Samaritan woman says virtually the same thing to her friends, “Come and see this man who told me everything I ever did.”

On Palm Sunday, John quotes the prophet Zechariah. “See, your King is coming, seated on a donkey's colt.” On that same day some Greeks come to Philip, saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” And finally, on Easter morning, Mary's grief is turned to joy as Jesus reveals himself to her, and she runs back to the disciples with the news, “I have seen the Lord!”

Clearly, there's something powerful about seeing Jesus, in the flesh. And John wants us to know that. And that's all well and good for him. But what about us? Because as much as we may celebrate by putting little ceramic figures of Jesus into our manger scene to show that Christmas is here, that's not actually seeing Jesus. And we know it.

In fact, it can feel an awful lot like we're right back where we started. Assuming that he's here. Hoping that he's here. Wishing that he's here. But not actually seeing him here. Which can feel like we're missing out. Like Christmas is less complete for us because we weren't among those few privileged disciples who got to see Jesus in the flesh.

That's not really what John says, though. I mean, look back at that verse. *“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”* Yes, John did see Jesus. He did see his ministry. And, for that reason, we can trust what he has to say about Jesus, as an eyewitness to everything that happened.

But then he qualifies that, and he says, *“And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* Yes, John saw Jesus. But more importantly, John saw Jesus' glory. And it's the glory of Jesus that matters. It's the glory of Jesus that we can still see, even today.

What is that glory? I mean, there's a lot of glory that surrounds the nativity story. The glory of an angelic host above the fields of Bethlehem, singing to shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest!” There's the glory of a bright star leading magi to give precious gifts of gold and incense and myrrh. There's a lot of glory around that manger scene.

But when Jesus talks about glory in John's Gospel, he doesn't point to any of those things. Or anything like those things. He doesn't talk about his birth. Or his incredible miracles. Or his tremendous acts of power. Or his transfiguration. Or anything like that. When does Jesus talk about his glory?

When he is entering Jerusalem for the last time, and he says, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” When Judas Iscariot betrays him for thirty pieces of silver, and Jesus responds, “Now is the Son of Man glorified.” When Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he prays, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son.”

We talk about the glory of angels and stars, miracles and power. But Jesus talks about the glory of the cross. Which had no glory in it. It was brutal and bloody and the least glorified thing we could ever imagine. Except that it bore the body of God's Son for our redemption. An act of sacrifice that was indeed full of grace and truth.

John says a few verses later that “the Law was given through Moses,” and then immediately says, “No one has ever seen God.” It's not coincidence that he paired those two things together. Because Moses famously did want to see God. He wanted to see God's face in all of its glory.

And God told him, “No. You can't look at my face. You will die. But I'll let you look at my back as I pass by and I'll let you see my goodness and my mercy.”

No one has ever seen the brutal, unapproachable glory of God's face. But Moses was given the gift of seeing God's goodness and mercy, his grace and his truth. The Apostle John was given the gift of seeing God's goodness and mercy, his grace and his truth. We have been given the gift of seeing God's goodness and mercy, his grace and his truth.

Jesus has made God the Father known to us. Who didn't just give us the Law through Moses. He gave us his Son. And the Gospel, the good news, that the Word became flesh, dwelt among us, and showed us the glory of God by dying on the cross for our salvation.

Which means that if we want to see Jesus in the manger scene. If we want to see the true glory of Christmas. If we want to make Christmas as complete for us as the disciples who got to see Jesus in the flesh. Then we need to look not at Jesus' birth, but at his death.

Which is why whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. We proclaim the glory of God's grace and truth for the forgiveness of sins. From Christ's fullness we receive grace upon grace. The grace of sins forgiven on the cross. And the grace of sins forgiven at the Lord's Table.

No one has ever seen God. And yet we have seen God. And we do see God. For he dwelt among us. And he dwells among us. And we don't just assume that he's there. Hope that he's there. Wish that he were there. We see him there. In body and blood.

And in that we have fellowship. Fellowship with one another. But also fellowship with John and the disciples. With Mary and Joseph and the shepherds. With Moses himself. The fellowship of seeing God's grace and truth. The fellowship of knowing that unto us was born in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. Amen.