

## **January 3, 2021. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis**

Today is the first Sunday of 2021, and we begin the year with the first words of the gospel of John.

The gospel of John is such a fascinating and beautiful gospel, but it is very different from the other Gospels. The other Gospels fall more into the narrative style, some compare the experience of reading them to the experience of reading a comic book. A lot happens and it flows from one event to the next to form this great cohesive narrative.

The gospel of John is nothing like that.

Instead of one greater narrative containing many events that all flow together, John seems to just put together a smaller number of events that are complete narratives in and of themselves. Less happens, but John goes into more detail.

John also writes with more irony and sarcasm than we see in the other gospels. And many of the events that we see in the three other gospels don't appear here. And again, there are characters here in John that don't appear in the other gospels.

It's almost as if John read or heard the other gospels and was like, I need to do something completely different. Instead of an epic narrative, John's gospel reads more like a courtroom. It's as if there is a lawsuit going on and Jesus is on trial. And John tells us what he's trying to argue.

John, chapter 20, verse 31, reads “<sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

John is using his gospel to prove that Jesus is the messiah.

Using this motif, our scripture for today is the opening argument where John tells us exactly what he is going to do in this trial – how he's going to argue – he just does it so brilliantly we don't recognize it. And then moves to his evidence - he tells of seven signs or miracles that Jesus does to prove that he is the messiah.

Then he closes by saying he is the one testifying these things to be true and then says there is so much more he could have written about Jesus and his miracles to prove that he is the Messiah, but if he tried to do so – there couldn't be enough pages to contain the words.

John 21:24-25 “<sup>24</sup> This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. <sup>25</sup> But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

And that’s it. That’s how he ends the gospel, how he closes his trial.

But to understand the beauty of it all, we need only look at his prologue, our scripture for today. And it’s appropriate we read it today, on this first Sunday of a new year, because John also starts his gospel at the beginning. Not only the beginning of Jesus, but the beginning of it all.

“in the beginning was the word.” John here immediately invokes Genesis 1, which also starts with “in the beginning” John also alludes to Genesis one again through words. “The word was with God and the word was God.”

In Genesis 1, God speaks life in the world. God creates through words, through speaking. Genesis 1, 3 “<sup>3</sup> Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.”

Then John introduces John the Baptist, as the one who will testify to the light, to help prepare the world for the light that was to come, Jesus Christ.

And then John points back to Jesus, saying that while Christ was birthed into the world, we did not know him, we did not recognize him, we did not accept him.

For any time or age, for today, this prompts the question – do we recognize Jesus today. Do we know him? Do we accept him?

This prologue testifies that Christ is the son of God, born into the world, both fully human and fully divine. It states that Christ was born into human flesh so that we might come to know God, to see God, whom we could not see or know any other way because of God’s glory.

And while there are a seemingly endless number of sermons to be preached on the beginning of the gospel of John, today I take you to just one line. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” John 1:5.

And the darkness did not overcome it.

Notice that John does not say defeat, or vanquish, or destroy. Just overcome. Here John concedes that darkness is part of our life, even life with Christ.

The Greek verb for “overcome” translates more literally as to obtain, to seize, or overtake. Christ does not allow the darkness that is always there to seize us, to overtake us. His goal is to not defeat the darkness but to shine through it, in spite of it, maybe even shine brighter because of it.

2020 was a dark year for many, in so many different ways. And while we enter into 2021 filled with hope, here Christ, through John’s prologue, reminds us that darkness will remain. It is part of life, woven into the fabric of the universe.

Despite what happens on January fifth, despite whom steps into our highest office January 20<sup>th</sup>, despite how quickly the vaccine circulates through our communities, darkness will remain.

But Jesus, the light of the world, will step into that darkness and illuminate.

As Julie Peeples writes, “Darkness does not mean that God has abandoned us to our misunderstandings, evildoings, fears, rejections, lack of purpose. God’s presence enters our darkness, illumines it, and resists its power to extinguish God’s presence. God is with us in the midst of our griefs and sorrows, loneliness and disappointments, loss and brokenness. Darkness does not have the last word.”

The power and love and glory of the word made flesh is that Christ steps into the most vulnerable moments of our lives and brings light.

It is easy to want a God who defeats our darkness, it takes courage and vulnerability to ask God to step into the darkness of our lives, and illuminate it. Illumination, light, brings truth – truth that is sometimes difficult to hear, but always brings us closer to God.

In his book, *echoes of scripture in the gospels*, Richard Hays compares John’s gospel to the portraits of famous Dutch painter Rembrandt. If you do a quick google image search of Rembrandt’s portraits, you will see much of the same technique used in them all: a Dark background contrasting with a light subject. The darkness behind the subject illuminates them in such beauty that they pop into the foreground and capture your eye.

Hayes describes John as “the master of the carefully framed, illuminous image that shines brilliantly against a dark canvas and lingers in the imagination.” And that instead of painting a gospel of many events, “he prefers to focus on singular, artistically selected instances that repay sustained meditation.”

Much in the same way you might find yourself lost in time admiring the beauty and illumination of Rembrandt’s portraits, and how the light shines in the darkness.

As 2021 begins to unfold before, continue to choose hope. But place your hope in the light that shines in the darkness. not in a darkness defeated, but a darkness overcome. For it’s there – in a light that overcomes the darkness, that John, in his courtroom, argues the truth of Christ: that the word made flesh steps into the darkness of our world, and brings light to our lives.

Thanks be to God. Amen.