



April 3, 2016
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

The Story: The Birth of the King John 1

I'm so glad to welcome you back on this first weekend after Easter. I was surprised at how many people I ran into this week in town who were still buzzing about Easter. They loved the music, of course, but they were also talking about the sermon. And what were they talking about? Not the profound theological insights I presented. No, they were talking my humiliating Easter sermon back in 2004 when I tried to say, "Did not our hearts burn within us"—and something else came out... something PG-13. I was a potty mouth preacher; I didn't mean to be, but I was. If you weren't here last weekend, then you'll have to listen online because I'm not going to say it again! But it certainly held the attention of the kids—and some of the older kids, too!

Actually, it was a great way to introduce ourselves to our visitors. We are a church that takes Jesus and his Word very seriously and ourselves less seriously. You are worshipping today with a group of broken people who slip up and say and do things we aren't proud of—but who are so grateful that God loves us anyway. So, welcome back!

If last week's opening story was unusual, so is today's topic. Today, the first weekend after Easter, we are talking about Christmas! What!? Here's why. Back in September we began a journey through this book: *The Story*. It is an abridged version of the Bible—a way of looking at the whole sweep of scripture from beginning to the end.

We have watched as God's story unfolded over the millennia. He created all things including humans, but our human parents disobeyed God and broke his heart. But God, in his grace, began to rebuild that broken relationship. He formed the Jewish nation and promised that through him, he would bless the entire world. Unfortunately the Jews rebelled and suffered terrible consequences. But God never forgot his promise that one day through his people, he would send a Messiah (which means 'anointed One') who would save his people from their sin and restore the broken relationship with God.

That part of the story we call the Old Testament. And one of the most interesting and surprising things is to discover that this Old Testament—written hundreds and thousands of years before Jesus—point to Jesus again and again. We call it the Scarlet Thread. From the very first chapter, we see glimpses of a Messiah who will one day come to save his world. But by the end of the Old Testament, the Messiah

still had not come. And then came 400 years of silence when God stopped talking. Imagine, after centuries of God speaking through his prophets, he goes silent!

By this time the Jews were in real trouble. The Romans had conquered them and were squeezing the life out of them. More than ever they longed for God to keep his promise to send a savior who would kick out the Romans and set them free. But after all this time, the people began to lose heart. They wondered if God had changed his mind; maybe he had just given up on them. Think of it this way: what if Isis conquered the United States? Can you imagine the despair, the hopelessness that we Christians would experience? That is what the Jews faced 2,000 years ago—heaviness, heartache, longing and terrible silence.

And then suddenly—at last—God comes through. This week you are going to read about the birth of the Messiah, the long awaited (at-last) birth of Jesus. Only two gospels include the birth narratives: Matthew and Luke. But John starts his story of the Messiah before he was born. Wait, how can you write about someone who is not born yet? You'll see. I'm reading from John 1. This is some tough digging—are you ready for it? (By the way, when you hear the word "Word," understand this is John's code for "Jesus." So, every time you hear "Word" think "Jesus." (ESV)

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it....

¹⁴And 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.

One of the ancient church fathers, Saint Augustine, once said that these words ought to be written in gold on the walls of every church in the world. They are that sacred. John was Jesus' closest friend on earth. No one knew Jesus better than he, and when he wrote his gospel he wanted everyone to understand who Jesus really was. So, in the words of this majestic prologue, John makes three claims about Jesus—the Word.

First, he says Jesus is eternal. "In the beginning was the Word." In other words, Jesus wasn't a created being; he didn't come into existence at some point in time. When the beginning began, the Word was already there! In the beginning was the Word.

So the Word is eternal, and the Word is divine. "...the Word was with God and the Word was God." This is important, and it is mind-blowing if you've always assumed that Jesus was just a good man. John says, "The Word [Jesus] was, is, always has been God—nothing less than that!" Then he makes one more claim—the Word was the creator. "All things were made by him..." Remember how God created? He

spoke! "Let there be light!" What does one speak? Words! John says that the Word—the eternal, divine, Son of God—was the agent of creation of all things.

If you are new to the church and have always assumed that Jesus was an important guy, maybe a prophet or even a miracle worker, it might be a shock to discover that actually, this Jesus—this Word—is way more than that. He is eternal, he is God, and he created everything! It's mind-boggling, isn't it? We probably ought to remove our shoes because when we read these words, we are standing on holy ground!

But you ain't seen nothin' yet, because when we come to verse 14, we arrive at the most shocking, outrageous claim in the Bible. Upon this single verse hangs the whole of Christianity. If it is false, then this is all a sham. But if it is true, then we are gazing into eternity! "And 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."

Do you realize what John is saying? "Those stories that you read in the gospels by my buddies, Matthew and Luke—stories about the birth of a baby... you have no idea how special that baby was. When Mary gave birth to that little boy in podunk Bethlehem, she was holding in her arms the eternal, divine Word of God—the Word who became flesh." That helps us understand what we will read about the Magi doing this: they worshipped with their faces on the ground before the eternal God who chose to become a baby. Immanuel, God with us!

And just to underscore his point, John goes on: "...and we have seen his glory!" Do you remember that word? The glory of God is his awesome presence; like the brightness of the sun. The Jews called it the Shekinah... the Shekinah glory. God is so pure, so powerful, so awesome that mere human beings could not even approach him. It's like a moth flying toward a flame; we cannot bear the glory of God.

Do you remember when they were wandering in the wilderness after escaping Egypt, Moses ordered a tent to be built. God's glory, his Shekinah, would descend upon that tent and that was where Moses would go to meet with God while the rest of the people stayed back at a safe distance. Do you remember what that tent of meeting was called? The tabernacle—the tabernacle was where God's glory came down to meet with humanity.

Now, back to verse 14. "...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." Do you see that word, "dwelt?" Do you know what the Greek word is? "tabernacled! The Word—the divine, eternal, creative Son of God—put on human flesh and tabernacled with us, and we have seen His glory!

Do you see how the Scarlet Thread screams from this passage? That Glory of God, which only Moses could look upon, is now wrapped in flesh, safe for every human

eye to behold. When we look at Jesus we are looking at the tabernacle of God—flesh and glory. Flesh and glory together!

If you don't get this, then when you read about Bethlehem and angels and wise men, it will just strike you as a sweet story where God creates a new, perfect human being to bring a message of hope to the world. No, says John! When you read about Bethlehem you are reading the incredible story of a Glorious God who wrapped himself in human flesh so that we could look upon him as he saved our lives. It is shocking!

But it shouldn't have been! We shouldn't have been surprised. It was there to be found in the Story. The virgin birth of Jesus was predicted in Isaiah 7; suffering, despised Jesus was predicted in Isaiah 53; the crucified Jesus was predicted in Psalm 22; the resurrected Jesus was predicted in Psalm 16. More than 300 prophecies point to the coming of a savior—a shocking Messiah, a divine, eternal God who wrapped himself in flesh, hid his glory, suffered at the hands of his own creation, bore our sin and iniquity upon himself, and was murdered. And then was raised to life and restored to his place at the right hand of the Father, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, forever and ever, Hallelujah!

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us”—the most shocking eight words ever written, but they needn't have been. It was exactly what the Story predicted. But the people could not see who Jesus really was, because they had already decided what their Messiah must look like. And we do the same thing; we have decided what Jesus should look like. And he looks very much like a successful, middle-class American who blesses us financially, never wants us to suffer or be ill and lets us pretty much ignore the rest of the world because we are, after all, the chosen people.

Then, we take a closer look at Jesus and are shocked again. Here is the divine, eternal, creator God who comes to us and says, “Okay, do you see my humility? You be humble. Do you see my love for a broken world? You love my broken world. Do you see my servant's heart? You be servants! Do you see my suffering? Are you willing to suffer for me? Do you see me laying down my life? Will you to take up your cross and follow me? Flesh and glory—if you do this I will tabernacle within you... my glory will fill you and you will be an instrument of my peace.”

This table is the junction of flesh and glory. Simple elements: bread and juice, but in a way we don't understand—in an act of faith—they are made glorious by the Holy Spirit and they become to us, the body and blood of Christ. Flesh and glory—that is the life to which we are called.