



December 8-9, 2018
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Reel Christmas: The Welcome of Jesus

John 1:9-13

Wow...that's harsh, isn't it? Well, if you...or someone you know...are feeling a little "Scroogey" this morning...you've come to the right place! We are journeying through the mysterious and magnificent first chapter of John. Last week John introduced us to the most amazing person ever. He calls this person the "Word" (which is "Logos" in the Greek). And John makes astounding claims about Logos: he is God, he is eternal, he is the creator of all things and the bringer of light that decimates all darkness!

We quickly realize that Logos is John's codename for Jesus...and this opening chapter is his version of the Christmas story. This is not your Hallmark Christmas. No angels, shepherds, magi or mangers. No baby Jesus, meek and mild. No...this is the Logos...the eternal, divine, creative light-giver who is about to make his appearance on the earth.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...

Two weeks ago, Cyndi and I went to Ace to buy some lights for our first Christmas in our new/old home. Compared to our neighbors' decorations, they are pretty pathetic: a little strand of blue lights hanging on our porch. But have you ever wondered why Christmas is all about light? This passage is one of the reasons. Notice how many times the word "light" appears! Last week I told you John borrowed the first words of the Book of Genesis to start his gospel: "In the beginning!" Well, light plays a HUGE part in Genesis, too. One of the most impressive displays of God's power is when he speaks into the darkness and says, "Let there be light!" And...there was! Boom. Just like that. The darkness of the void ... shattered by the light-giving word of God.

John carries on that theme! But there is a new kind of darkness. Not the void of nothingness that preceded Creation. No, this darkness is the sin of humanity. Despite all God has done to bless his creation, humanity is in full-blown rebellion. I don't suppose any of you parents ever found yourself saying to your children, in a moment of frustration, "You are so ungrateful! After all I've done for you, you treat me this way?" No...not with our wonderful kids. But if someone you KNOW ever said something like that, you have a hint of how God felt about the way his earthly children treated him: Ingratitude, defiance and rebellion.

What's a God to do? He could wipe them all out and start over. In fact, he tried that once. Remember? Noah and the flood. But he said he'd never do that again. He has another plan. God says, "I'll come to earth incognito! I'll put on human flesh and come down and visit them. Maybe if I appear as one of them, it will be easier for them to understand who I am and how much I love them and how much better it is if they live their lives the way I created them to live."

And that's what he did. He made plans to come to earth. He chose a particular people...the Jews... to be his earthly family. He even sent "Save the Date" announcements through his prophets, reminding everyone of

his impending visit. For centuries, God prepared the world for his arrival. He chose a family, he reminded them again and again that he was coming...and then, finally, that day came.

That's what Christmas is about. This Logos...this powerful, eternal, creator God... humbled himself, dressed up in human flesh and came to visit. Not as a conquering warrior. Not as a magnificent king. But as a baby. God "snuck up" on us...came quietly so we wouldn't be intimidated. Then, that baby grew up. He learned how to work in his father's carpenter shop. He went to synagogue with his family. He played with other kids and lived with siblings. He was loved by a mother and loved her back. And when his father died, he took over the family business. For 30 years, Logos-incognito lived as a sinless human being; lived the way all of us were intended to live but had never done.

And then...then...finally the day came. Jesus' coming-out party. A guy named John baptized him in the Jordan River and then, Jesus began to do the most incredible things anyone had ever seen. He taught with authority. He healed people. He cast out evil spirits. He performed miracles. He even raised people from the dead! Of course, if you are the divine, creator of the universe...this would be no big deal for you. It's what you do! But for his people who saw this unfolding before their eyes...it was a huge deal.

Surely... surely...they would recognize who Jesus was? Surely they would see this was the long-awaited visitor, the Messiah promised by their forefathers? Surely this would be the greatest welcome celebration ever? Right? Well...not exactly. Listen to what may be the saddest words in all the Bible: The true light...was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him...

Cyndi and I flew back to North Carolina to spend Thanksgiving with our daughter, Rachel. Because her apartment is tucked up in the mountains, she told us where to meet her. We arrived as directed and moments later, Rachel came tearing up, jammed on the brakes, jumped out, ran over and threw her arms around me. Then she ran around the car and did the same to her mom. Then she guided us to her home...and for the next few days gave us a tour of her new life. She offered us her bed, she gave us her time, she provided food for us, she took us to the Biltmore, the largest home in America... everything she did told us how happy she was that we had come; how excited she was to welcome us into her world.

When JESUS came to visit...not only did they NOT receive him...they didn't even know him! His own people! And when they DID figure out who he was, they were so threatened by how he was going to upset their lives, that they opposed him. And some conspired to kill him.

Heartbreaking, isn't it? It's like that scene where nephew Fred comes to Scrooge's office to invite him to Christmas dinner. Fred wants to welcome his uncle into his family's joy. He wants him to come and feast and delight in Christmas. And Scrooge repays his kindness with bitter contempt. He is so wrapped up in his mean, miserly world of accumulation that he has no time or interest in joining the family celebration.

Do you know a person like that? A person who, for whatever reason, is wrapped up in their own life? Pinched and miserable? You would love to share with them the joy of Christmas...the joy of your faith. But so far...so far, they have resisted you...rejected you...pushed you aside. If YOU have discovered the light and life of Jesus, it can be pretty heart-breaking, can't it? Because you KNOW the difference Jesus has made in your life...and could make in the life of your Scrooge-y loved one.

Ahhh...but John leaves us with hope. He has one more, wonderful line. Yes, it's true, Jesus came to his own people and they rejected him. But listen to this good news: "But to all who DID receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God..." That word, "believe," is a really important word. It means more than intellectual assent. It means personal belief...personal conviction!

In these few words, John captures the bittersweet nature of the gospel. Those who SHOULD have received Jesus with greatest joy, considered it nothing but humbug. But...those who did receive...who did believe personally...even the outsiders... even if they did not have the proper bloodline or religious upbringing... even curmudgeons... IF they received Jesus...God was ready to adopt them into his family! There's HOPE!

You know, I always felt John could have used an editor in chapter 1. It starts out magnificently: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God..." It continues poignantly. "He came to his own and his own people did not receive him." "It ends triumphantly: "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." But there in verse 6... plunked right down in the middle of the Logos stuff...is that passage about John the Baptist being sent as a messenger by God. He's not the light...he's a witness to the light, etc., etc. That section about John always felt choppy to me; out of place.

But watching Christmas Carol gave me a new insight into this "interruption." We know Scrooge gets visited by three spirits who reveal the source of his bitter loneliness and the horrible, friendless destiny that awaits him if he continues on this path. But it is the witness of Scrooge's friends ...the ones who keep pointing him to the true meaning of Christmas...that eventually win him over. Remember this scene?

This is one of the most Christian moments in the movie. Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's ill-treated clerk, has every reason to loathe the man who so misuses him. And yet, he graciously offers a Christmas toast in Scrooge's honor. It is this unexpected, undeserved act of grace that begins to turn Scrooge around. And the final act of Scrooge's redemption occurs in his nephew Fred's home.

How many years had Fred popped into Scrooge's office to invite him for Christmas? How many years had he put up with Scrooge's nastiness? But Fred didn't give up. He returned kindness for bitterness, generosity for stinginess. And finally...unexpectedly... Fred's witness wins out. Scrooge appears at the door, hat in hand...and says, "I've come to dinner...if you'll have me." And the room erupts as they welcome Scrooge in.

The message of this movie...and the message of the gospel...is that God uses the stubborn kindness of his people to welcome even curmudgeons into his family.

We have a story like that in OUR Chapel Hill family. Morgan Hutchins is a child of this church. He was raised here...in our church and in our faith...but for a season, turned away... dramatically. Yet today, he confessed his faith and was baptized and came into full membership in our church. The story of this young Scrooge turning into a joyful believer is worth hearing:

(interview)

There is NO season like Christmas where the doors of spiritual conversation might be pried open...even with the Scrooggiest of your loved ones. The wonderful hope of the gospel is, no matter how many times they have resisted or mocked or rejected your invitation...it only takes one time...one more gracious moment of witness...one more invitation...to turn their hearts around. "But to all who DID receive him, who believed in his name, to them he gave the power to become children of God."

Don't be afraid. Don't be intimidated. Reach out. Again. Ask. Again. Invite. Again. This might be the year!