

BIBLE READING: John 1 (Especially verses 1-18, and secondarily, verses 19-51)

THOUGHTS ON THE READING:

+ John is the last of the four New Testament stories about Jesus - the gospels - to be written, somewhere in the mid to late 90's A.D. (CE). If we compare the beginnings of the four Jesus stories, we begin to see the development of the theology about Jesus, and how it evolved over time from Mark to Matthew to Luke and then to John, from roughly 70-100 CE. We can see even more development if we go back to the even smaller body of details about Jesus from Paul, who wrote from 50-64 CE. In both written and oral tradition, the legacy of Jesus and his legendary status grew wider and deeper. The first and second generation memories of the human Jesus gradually faded away over time, giving way to a growing theological and iconic portrait of the divine Christ. Followers of the Jesus "Way" were spreading throughout the Roman Empire, but they were a diverse assortment of movements under the general umbrella called "Christianity." The significance of their Jewish roots and temple worship were beginning to fade by the time of John's gospel. Many of John's terms and phrases are unique, as is his perspective. Mark, Matthew and Luke talk about Jesus ushering in the "Kingdom of God" (Matthew also uses the phrase "Kingdom of heaven" interchangeably), but suddenly John talks about a Jesus who offers "Life" and "Eternal Life" instead. John couches the story in the context of the mostly gentile (non-Jewish) and Greek-influenced world of Roman society, and the more universal story of Creation. Mark, Matthew and Luke seem to focus more on the horizontal nature of faith (our relationship with others and creation) while John seems to focus more on the vertical aspect of faith (our relationship with God). Mark, Matthew and Luke refer to Jesus as the Old Testament "son of man", while John uses terms like "Light" and "Word" as fitting labels for this spiritual leader. John's Christmas story in chapter 1 is therefore a more universal and timeless story, taking the story of Jesus "outside and beyond the box" of the Jerusalem-centered realm of religious thought and theology of 4 B.C. (BCE)

+ "Word" -- The Logos of God is the creative power by which God created the world. God spoke the world into existence with "Logos" (Word). John claims that same creative power and life of God is what (who) appears in bodily form in the person of Jesus. God is re-creating, or continuing creation, through the human life and "Way" of Jesus. His Way points us to a new life, eternal life, God-life. And it's a life available to us now, not later when we die. When we follow Jesus, we are fulfilling the purpose for which we exist -- being vessels of God's ongoing work of creation.

+ "The Word became human and pitched a tent among us." The verb for "lived" in verse 14 is rooted in the concept of tabernacle. The tabernacle was the place where the God of the Hebrew people lived -- literally a tent -- before God's people built a temple building in Jerusalem. When God's people were wanderers, the tabernacle went wherever they went. God was mobile, on the move. Maybe John is referring to a closer, more accessible God than was perceived by the God of the Temple in Jerusalem, and certainly not a God bound by geographic location. After all, in John's day, the Temple is destroyed and Jerusalem is no longer a symbol of power. That dream had been surrendered. What good to John's readers is a God who lives in a destroyed temple in a distant city that used to be prestigious? Jesus showed us a mobile, on-the-move God, who is always near and accessible, wherever we are.

+ "In him was life, and this life was the light of all people.... The true light, which enlightens everyone was coming into the world." (verses 4 and 9) Think about the concept of light. It makes darkness (that which causes fear and uncertainty) disappear. We can function better with adequate light. Jesus helps us see more clearly what our lives are supposed to be about. Light also helps us see ourselves, each other and God's world more clearly. This is not altogether good. If light exposes the truth of what is able to be seen, Light like that of Jesus helps us see our faults and imperfections more clearly, as well as our human power and potential for good. Jesus can show us a new, better way to see and be ourselves -- more fully human (John 3: Jesus and Nicodemus have an en-LIGHT-ening conversation at NIGHT.)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER...

+ John's gospel was written differently -- from a new perspective, considering a different context -- because things had changed in John's world compared to Mark's and Paul's world. The culture had shifted significantly. Have you ever experienced a shift or change in your faith, in your spiritual journey, because things in the world around you had changed, because life now looked differently than it did before? (Think of WWII, 9-11, Hurricane Katrina, as well as the former and current economic depressions.) What is scary or disconcerting about a changing or shifting faith? What is exciting or energizing about a faith that changes or evolves?

+ Some people use the phrase "word of God" to refer to the Bible... the Bible is the word of God and the word of God is the Bible. But John's gospel helps Christians understand that the phrase "word of God" is so much more than just the Bible. It is the creative power of God, it is the message of God throughout history, and it is the life and work of Jesus. How have you experienced the "word of God" apart from the Bible? In what ways have you used words to share God's creative power of love and life with someone else?

+ What are the implications of trusting in a mobile, on-the-go God instead of a God who is tied to one location or one specific context? What are the implications of understanding God as intimate and close rather than God as distant, constantly appearing and disappearing without consistent cause or reason?

+ Jesus, his life, his story, and his Way help us see things differently. (Again, you may want to read the story of "Nick At Night" in John 3.) Looking at life and the world through the Light and lens of Jesus, what do you see more clearly? What looks different to you that may not be apparent to someone who is not using the Jesus light or lens? How can we help someone else see the world and their life in (the) Light of Jesus, or through the Jesus lens? How have you experienced seeing something very differently than someone else, because you purposefully looked at a situation or event or relationship through the Jesus lens?

Blessings on your Faith Trek as we journey together,

Pastors Jay & Charlie