

Scripture Readings

John 1:1-18

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome^[a] it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵ (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and^[b] is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Footnotes:

- a. John 1:5 Or *understood*
- b. John 1:18 Some manuscripts *but the only Son, who*

Message

Preparing the Way

Welcome to the New Testament!

Today we mark the end of the first of ten weeks “overviewing” the New Testament. If you read your gospel passages for this week (E-100 Challenge) you read the great Christology of the Apostle John; his description of Jesus being the eternal Word of God who came into a world He created; a world which neither recognize nor received Him .

You also read some of the narratives surrounding Jesus’ birth;

- Zechariah & Elizabeth’s miracle son John, and later John’s baptism ministry,
- Mary’s calling (and her willingness) to be the mother of God’s Messiah,
- Jesus’ birth and the response of shepherds touched by “good news” proclaimed by angels and then shared with others, (Christmas in April!)
- the joy of Simeon and the words of the Prophetess Anna in the temple when Jesus’ was dedicated,

And finally, you read of Jesus’ baptism & temptations in the wilderness.

In short, if you read the five NT passages this week, you covered a lot of ground in these passages about Jesus before His ministry began. But such is the case with an “overview”.

And while we can grieve what was not covered in this overview, this week’s readings offered us an interesting perspective.

In fact, I believe that this week's overview proclaimed a crucial truth for followers of Christ; that just as Jesus chose to participate in humanity in order to offer God's salvation, so too followers of Jesus freely choose to participate in God's salvation plan so that others will be saved.

Well-meaning Christians will forever disagree about theological matters, but there is no disagreement that a Christian witness will affect other people's relationship with God. When Christians live their lives for God's glory, and share their God-stories with others, God will use those people to draw others toward Him and His salvation.

Sadly, the opposite is also true, that poor Christian witnesses; a Christian murderer or adulterer, or an abusive pastor, or a money-loving evangelist, or a lifeless congregation will give people reason to reject Christ. Also, Christians who isolate themselves from their world and even other Christians; their private lives will hinder God's transformative power from being seen & sought after.

A Christian witness will affect other people's relationship with God.

This week's overview of Jesus' life, before his ministry began, highlights the need for true witnesses; for godly participation through actions and words.

1. Jesus is our example as He chose to participate in our salvation.

Maybe it is too obvious to be noticed, especially if you've been around Christianity for some time, but you know, don't you, that we believe in a participatory God; a God who not only created the world, but whose love compelled Him to reach out to redeem us, and whose love compels

Him right now to be present in the Spirit, so to live in a new relationship with us.

The good news is that while we might “write-off” those who have hurt us and rejected us, God does not. His righteousness, faithfulness, love and grace led Jesus to choose to come and live among us; to become the Way back to God.

John 1:14, 16-18

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

..... ¹⁶ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Jesus chose to participate. Though it meant suffering and death, He chose to participate; He came to live among us, so that we would be saved.

Jesus' choice was seen, in this week's readings, not only in His birth but also in His baptism. When Jesus came to the Jordan River that day when his cousin John was calling for people to repent; to turn back to God and be baptized as a symbol of their new direction in life, John initially wanted Jesus to baptize Him. So great was Jesus' righteousness that even

John didn't feel comfortable suggesting that Jesus had a need to repent. And John was right. Jesus didn't need a baptism of repentance.

But, Jesus still had John baptize him. Why? Jesus said it was "to fulfill all righteousness"(Matthew 3:15b) In other words, it was what God the Father wanted.. it was the right thing to do. But this leaves us wondering, if not for repentance, why was Jesus' baptism the right thing to do.

Because, it demonstrated Jesus' participation in our human condition. Humanity was sinful; falling short of the perfection of God, and repentance was the first step in turning back to God. In baptism, Jesus was showing us the way we must all go by showing sinful human beings the starting line. Jesus chose to participate in God's salvation by becoming a human being who was baptized.

But we must also note that while Jesus participated in a baptism of repentance, He never participated in sin. If you look at the Gospels of Matthew, Mark & Luke you will see that right after Jesus' baptism Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by the Devil. Through obedience to the Father's Word used rightly, Jesus remained sinless.

Are we willing to be like Jesus and enter worlds full of pain and sin; to live among people needing God's salvation, while constantly resisting the temptations which would surround us in such a setting? This is not a hypothetical question; it's where we live now; right?

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? Do we isolate ourselves and protect ourselves. Or, do we participate in the world, always faithful to God's will, so that God's salvation is made known?

This week's overview of Jesus' life before His ministry formally began, reminds us that Jesus chose to participate in our lives and our salvation.

Our readings also revealed that

2. The participation of others brought the gospel of salvation to us.

One of my favorite religious cartoons depicts an angel's reaction to God's salvation plan once Jesus ascended back into heaven. "He did what? He left who in charge? People? You've got to be kidding!"

One of the great joys of the Christian faith is affirming that not only is our God a participatory God, but that He equips us, empowers us and invites us to participate in His work.

I loved this week's story of Zechariah & Elizabeth, because while this future mother of John the Baptist joyfully accepts the miracle of pregnancy in old age, it is her husband the Priest, Zechariah, who doubted and lost his voice until John's birth. I'd have to admit that their son's faith was probably modeled more by his mother than his priest-father!!

But there were many people mentioned in this week's readings who chose to play a part in bringing God's salvation plan to us;

- Certainly Mary & Joseph made choices which rocked their world. While it is said that every Jewish girl prayed to be the mother of the Messiah, I am certain it wasn't what Mary ever envisioned. While Mary & Joseph's choices certainly brought them unimaginable blessing, it also cost them socially and emotionally.

- How about the Shepherds in the field; they may have been caught by surprise at first, but when given the option they chose to act... to go and see what the angels had just told them. Then they chose to share their

excitement and good news of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem. Scripture tells us that all who heard their news were amazed (Luke 2:18).

- This week we also read the story of Simeon & Anna.. what wonderful people to meet through the scriptures; elders, devout, patient and spirit-led. Mary remembered their words about Jesus; who he was and what He would accomplish, and then she passed them on to Luke, the Gospel writer. Simeon & Anna made many choices in their service to God, and we got just a taste of how their choices impacted the world with their insights about God's salvation.

And of course, this week, we read about

- John the Baptist who accepted one of the most difficult assignments handed out by God. He chose it, though it would eventually cost him his life as his calls for repentance touched the lives of the sinners with great political power but no desire to repent. Jesus would say of John, *"Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist..."* - Matthew 11:11

Our scripture stories this week reminded me that like Jesus we can choose to participate in God's salvation plan.

But to state it more directly, to those of us living on this side of the cross and resurrection; I believe that

3. To be a follower of Jesus means that we choose to participate in God's salvation by impacting the lives of others.

How do you do that?

Maybe you get to be like....

John the Baptist... and as politically incorrect as it may be, perhaps God will guide you to some young person, or a peer, or a relative to tell them that the road they're traveling on will only lead to their destruction.

- Maybe they don't know that they have a choice they can make.
- Maybe they don't know that like the Prodigal Son, God will open His arms and welcome them if they choose to turn back to him.

Maybe you will participate like John the Baptist in God's salvation plan.

Or maybe you get to be like...

- Mary or Joseph... who chose to accept a radical calling that will turn your lives upside down but will impact the world in ways you'll never fully realize.

Or maybe, as you follow Jesus and participate in God's salvation plan, you get to be like

- the Shepherds/Simeon & Anna... recipients and re-transmitters of a joy and peace that passes all understanding; maybe you are given opportunity to be proclaimers of a Savior who is Christ the Lord; the One we yearn for; the source of all hope and the center of God's redemption plan.

But whatever form it take, your choice to be a part of God's salvation plan proclaims that you are follower of Jesus, the One who chose to participate in our lives and our salvation. And our motivation for following Jesus is our awareness of God's tremendous love for us.

For God's love compels us to define our lives as a response to what He has done for us. By coming to us in Christ, God has revealed His love and his salvation. And in response we do the same for others.

Outside the walls of Jerusalem, at a location called "The Place of the Skull", and as our recent holy days reminded us yet again, Jesus' actions transformed an instrument of death into a symbol of God's love and grace. And every Sunday we gather here, at the foot of that symbol, to worship a God, who

John 3:16

.. so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

But do we "get it"? Maybe in our heads we get it, but has it reached our hearts; has it touched that place within us where desires and actions combine to transform our lives?

When we were young and growing up in our respective families, most of us didn't get it; as children and young teens we took our parents' love for granted, rarely if ever thinking about the sacrifices they made to give us the kind of life we had. Actually, we kind of thought "they owe it to us" or, when we compared our lot in life with friends' and came up short, maybe we even got angry at our parents for not providing more. In many ways we were both ungrateful and unaware of their sacrificial love.

But then one day, something happened. Our parents' love suddenly became obvious, and found a place in our hearts. Do you know what I am

saying? Do you remember a time when you suddenly saw what you had not noticed before?

Suddenly there is a connection between our head and our hearts that causes us to see more clearly than we've ever seen before. For not only do we see all of our parents' mistakes which we've noted for years, but we now see a love for us that sacrificed for us, a love which compels us to return that love in words and actions. Do you know what I am saying?

Do you know that love of God for you? Has your understanding of God (HEAD) moved down into your heart (HEART) where deep desires and actions begin to change you?

Today I am asking all who call themselves Christians to live as followers of Christ; people compelled by God's love to choose life in response to God and God's plan of salvation. As others have responded to God by choosing to prepare the way for you to know His salvation, choose to impact the lives of others by preparing the way for them.

- Say "yes" when God calls you to serve Him in specific ways,
- no matter what it costs you,
- Proclaim the joy of God's salvation to the world, and
- Challenge people to turn to God,
a God who will welcome them;
a God whose love will transform their lives.

AMEN