

## *“Christmas Jubilee”*

*Isaiah 52:7-10; John 1:1-14*

December 25, 2022

My mom had an expression she used quite as I was growing up. Way back when things were hectic and filled with things and events, mom would say, we need to regroup. “Let’s regroup” she’d say and we’d huddle around to get our new marching instructions. It was her way of letting us know we needed to take a step back from whatever it was we were engaged in and reassess what’s going on. We needed to slow down and reexamine the events and people in our life. We need to regroup.

I think such a statement works pretty well following last night. Wasn’t last night wonderful. Both here at church and at home, didn’t we all experience the kinds of warm feelings that we’re longing for come December of every year?

Christmas Day has a different feel from Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve is about the excitement and flurry of activity that takes us to the manger.

Today, however, is more quiet, less crowded, and more calm. Today is about slowing down, re-grouping, and taking another look at Christmas. St. John makes us face Christmas without the angels, the shepherds, Mary and Joseph, or baby Jesus in a manger.

St. John tells a very different Christmas story from the one St. Luke tells. It’s not better than Luke’s, just different. We need both.

Luke tells the Christmas story with facts, John tells it with poetry. Luke tells it looking from the outside, John tells it looking from the inside. Luke tells us what happened, John wants us to reflect on what it means. Luke describes an event, John describes a way of being. Luke tells a story of particulars – “In those days” and “in that region.” It’s about a particular place, time, and people. John’s story is cosmic – “In the beginning...” It’s a creation story. Luke has us focus on the child Jesus. John asks us to consider what it means for us to “become children of God,” for the Word of God to dwell in our flesh to the same degree it does in Jesus.”

John’s Gospel opens with this sweeping, cosmic vision of who Jesus is and what He means to and for us. In fact, there is some belief that parts of this cosmic opening were parts of an early Christian hymn. That would be an interesting thing to do, to set this entire piece of poetry to music. We’ll get Clayton on that for next December, right?

One of the things that makes John’s Gospel more difficult to preach is because of its sweeping vision. On top of that, we deal with huge concepts like creation and redemption, sanctification and justification. These are big honking terms in the Christian lexicon and John’s Gospel approaches them all without timidity in the opening verses of the book.

Another thing that makes John’s Gospel more difficult than Luke or Matthew or hard to preach is that it’s pretty theological. Doctrinal even as Timothy Keller tells us in a sermon he preached the last time Sunday rolled around on a Christmas Day. We don’t typically like doctrinal things. Especially sermons. If I were to get up here and talk about the stereological implications of the incarnation for thirty minutes, I doubt there would be an awake eye in the place. Frankly, if you get too theological, too doctrinal, you turn people off. And it makes sense, really when you think about the incarnation. Jesus took flesh to do save us from our sin. That is to say He did something far more than just talk to us. Taking is fine to a point but we are human beings after all. That is to pay homage to the fact that we’re in motion, we’re doing things.

Yes, John’s opening verses are doctrinal. And it should be pointed out that there’s a difference between doctrine and being doctrinaire. Doctrine, isn’t a bad thing. In fact, we all need doctrine in our lives Doctrine just means a set of beliefs that is taught by some group or organization. In this case, the organization is the church and the doctrine being talked about is the divinity of Jesus. And the church needs doctrine. First, our Bible gives it to us. One of the great things about leading a Bible study through the entire Book is that it exposes you on an ongoing basis to all the things that the church truly does believe because it’s recorded in the Bible. In our class we’ve been through Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Proverbs, Genesis, you name it, we’re doing it. We just got done with Proverbs and there’s a book that goes out of its way to tell you how to live your life. Which, in a way, would be meaningless without doctrine. For it is doctrine that tells us that Christ died in order to bring us to a new plane of existence. Being doctrinaire, on the other hand, can be annoying, small-minded,

insufferable, even. Being doctrinaire means – “seeking to impose a doctrine in all circumstances without regard to practical considerations. We all know people like this. I’ll never forget having a particular used car manager who was fanatical about particular things. I recall one day bringing him a deal sheet that I was working on with a customer. A deal sheet simply showed the cost of the car as it was being negotiated. But the thing is, I couldn’t find any other colored pen that particular day. So, to write the numbers down that we were negotiating on required me to write with this red pen. Well, I came up into that sales tower with that work up sheet and you would’ve thought I’d killed this guy’s mom by the way he yelled at me. “Red PEN?!?!?” he yelled. It startled me. What was so bad about writing things up in red pen? Well, it would turn out, this man had recently been to a sales seminar in which they suggested every deal be written up in GREEN INK. The reason why? Green says GO. Red says stop. According to these Sales seminar people, the color ink used to write up the negotiation numbers had a profound impact on whether or not people bought cars. I kind of disagree but it’s not my field so I’ll leave it be. I will say that I just didn’t appreciate being yelled at that morning.

So, we all know what it’s like to deal with people that are doctrinaire and it isn’t fun. Doctrine good, doctrinaire bad.

But we shouldn’t overlook that John’s Gospel does open with Doctrine. Going back to creation, John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus was very much a part of that. How does it do that? Well, John’s Gospel does that by calling Jesus, the Word. The Word, or Logos, was a concept from Greek philosophy. PBS defines it in this fashion – “A principle originating in classical Greek thought which refers to a universal divine reason, immanent in nature, yet transcending all oppositions and imperfections in the cosmos and humanity. An eternal and unchanging truth present from the time of creation, available to every individual who seeks it.”

By calling Jesus the Word, John is making a claim about Jesus standing in the Godhead. This isn’t some subordinate being, this is fully God. Sometimes we overlook this but this full divinity of Jesus Christ is what makes us Protestant Christians and not, let’s say, Mormons. The Mormons, for example, hold that Jesus isn’t God in the same way that the Father is. He’s a lesser being, created by the Father, just like you and I. That’s what the Jehovah’s witnesses believe as well. It’s one of the reasons why they don’t make nearly as big a deal out of Christmas as we do.

But we’ve made a big deal out of the full divinity of Jesus Christ since around the 300s. That’s right, in around the year 300, a group of believers began to promote a heresy. “There was a time when the son was not” was their catch-phrase. They basically believed what the Mormons or Jehovah’s witnesses believe that Jesus, while divine, was not fully God. In other words, it was like there was a hierarchy in God which is not Biblically present. But we believe, thanks in large part to John’s Gospel, that Jesus Christ is fully divine. That Jesus is very much God in the same way the Father and the Holy Spirit are God. John’s Gospel does that by turning the hands back on the clock, so to speak. Taking us all the way to the dawn of Creation, John’s Gospel reminds us that, even then, Jesus Christ was present and active. Philippians teaches us this as well, *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”*

In fact, the relationship between Jesus and God the Father is close, intimate. The actual language of the Gospel says the Word and God are face to face with each other. This language implies a deep relationship of intimacy and trust, the kind that could only appear among equals. The doctrine of the full divinity of Jesus was taken up by the Council of Nicaea and debated hotly for quite some time in response to the Arian controversy. Thanks to the work of a theologian named Athanasius, we claim that Jesus Christ is fully divine just like God. And we make that claim for a good reason. We believe that Jesus Christ has borne on his body the weight of all the sin of the world. For someone other than God, such an imputation would be impossible. Ah. But for God, as the Scriptures tell us, all things are possible. But don’t miss the fact that within all the doctrine, John’s Gospel is historical. These events did take place, Jesus did come into the universe. We know this because of the Bible, but also because of history. On numerous occasions, from court officials to official historians, Jesus and His followers are mentioned in primary historical documents.

Who we celebrate this Sunday morning and every Sunday morning was born and lived among us. This is important because it undercuts one of the dominant philosophies of the past 400 years. That there are things we can and can't know about God. Remember, Kant claimed that when it comes to God, there were things we just couldn't know. But the doctrine of the incarnation tells us otherwise. It tells us that Jesus, as fully man, as living under the sun in history, so to speak, is as knowable as any other human being. That I don't need a divine mind in order to know and acknowledge Jesus Christ because He came in the very same flesh that I came in.

So, John's opening to the story is both doctrinal and historical. It is also wonderful. It begins with the nature of our Lord Jesus Christ and then comes to deliver some wonderful news. John 1:12 – *“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”*

The great good news is that within this Cosmic creation story, our redemption through Jesus Christ is front and center. For it is through our faith in Him that we are justified before God. That's all it takes. Romans 10:10 – *“If you confess with your lips and believe in your heart Jesus is Lord you will be saved.”* Full stop.

And Ephesians gives us even better news. There, it tells us that the faith that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord is itself, also a gift so that no one may boast. Yes, the tradition of giving presents on Christmas comes as a reflection of the fact that, on the First Christmas Day, you and I were given the best gift of all...a Savior.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.