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John 1

John 1.¹⁴⁻¹⁸

¹⁴And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

¹⁵John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, “This was he of whom I spake, ‘He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me.’” ¹⁶And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. ¹⁷For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

We have all had occasion, I suppose, to introduce ourselves to another, offer an introduction of another, or be the object of another’s introduction. Introductions assume a previous unfamiliarity and even ignorance, and transform the unknown into the known. The author of the Gospel of John began his work with an introduction. “In the beginning was the Word.”¹ This “Word,” about whom he will have much to say in the course of his Gospel, is to be the principal subject of his work.

Sometimes an introduction might be accompanied with a qualifier. For example, an introduction might go something like this:

“Let me introduce you to Scott.”

The follow up qualifier might go something like, “My friend,” or “My neighbor” or “My husband,” or “My pastor.”

So, here, the evangelist offers qualifiers that identify “the Word” as “God” and the “Light of men.”² In his work, he will greatly expand upon this introduction and the accompanying qualifiers.

Having ever so briefly introduced his main subject, the evangelist moves on to a second introduction: “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.”³ The evangelist’s introduction of John is common enough but something strange happens when he moves on to the qualifier, for the qualifier does not tell us who or what John *is*, but what he is *not*. “He was *not* that Light.”⁴

Huh.

A few verses later, we encounter another introduction and another qualifier. Religious leaders, based in the religious capital of Jerusalem, sent emissaries out into the Judean wilderness, we are informed, to ask the Baptist, “Who art thou?”⁵ Of course, we would be within our rights to assume that they very well knew his name. Rumors about him had spread like wildfire. So, what they were really after was a qualifier. But, again, we are presented with a strange qualifier that once more focuses on who or what he

¹ John 1.¹

² John 1.^{1, 4}

³ John 1.⁶

⁴ John 1.⁸

⁵ John 1.¹⁹

is *not* rather than who or what he is. “He confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ.”⁶

Huh.

After repeatedly being pressed for a more informative introduction, the Baptist finally offered, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.”⁷

“Well, da! We know you are not part of the establishment, but an untrusted outsider. We are also aware of your belief and teaching that Israel, God’s chosen people and land, is a spiritual wasteland. But we demand justification for who and what you are and what you do.”

I am not sure how pleased they were with his response.

“There standeth one among you, whom ye know not; he it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose.”⁸

These seems, like all that has gone before like an attempt to deflect attention from himself to a “preferred” other. Later, when John and Jesus met at the water’s edge, the Baptist repeated his now familiar refrain, ““This is he of whom I said” he “is preferred before me.”⁹

Again, all of this is more statement about who the Baptist was *not* than about who he *was*. Apparently, the Baptist felt—and the Gospel writer agreed—that his interrogators were asking the wrong questions and focusing on the wrong person. Indeed, it is as though both John, the evangelist, and John, the Baptist were worried about the Baptist becoming a distraction, causing audiences present and future to lose focus on him who truly IS—the God who is Christ. History suggests that this is not an unreasonable worry. Servants of God, prophets in particular, often seem to have an unintended diversionary effect on believers and unbelievers alike. I reckon my own LDS faith with its strong emphasis on prophets to have often fallen into this trap.

This concern about prophetic diversion explains the rather stark contrast found in this reading between prophets—typified by the prototypical Moses—and Jesus. “The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” Just imagine living in a world of law without divine grace and fidelity to the individual! That’s the world of prophets without Jesus. For even the best, most enlightened of prophets possess not one iota of grace that they can offer to another. Nor do they possess the smallest fraction of fidelity to others that Jesus possesses. Stark, to say the least.

This, then brings us back to introductions and to the one introduction that is more important, more life-changing, and more life-saving than any other. This introduction is found in verse 18 of today’s text,

“No one has ever grasped God. The only child, God, who is particularly intimate with the Father, he it is who has introduced Him.”¹⁰

It is the evangelist’s testimony that Jesus came to earth to make an introduction. He came to introduce his Father to humankind. Jesus was able to do this because he is born of God in a way unlike any other and so

⁶ John 1.²⁰

⁷ John 1.²³

⁸ John 1.²⁷

⁹ John 1.³⁰

¹⁰ Author’s translation

knows God more intimately than any other.

Now, personal introductions are necessary because parties are unfamiliar with each other. Obviously, in the case of Jesus' introduction of God, it was not a matter of God being unfamiliar with humanity. Rather, it was a matter of humanity being unfamiliar with God. It is the Evangelist's view that all that humanity had ever said, thought, or heard about God had been, at best, incomplete. It had often been downright wrong. In his teachings and, even more importantly, in his manner of life (and death), Jesus presented, introduced God as He really is. He could do this, of course, because he was God.

Because of the nature of Jesus and the perfect introductory portrayal of God that he is, the Gospels arguably contain the most intimate and accurate, the most first-person revelation of God found anywhere in scripture. In Jesus, we find the true temple of God, where "dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily,"¹¹ where God's face is best seen, and where His beauty shines most resplendently.

If John the Evangelist and John the Baptist are obsessed with the person of Jesus and with pointing out, over and over again, the inferiority of themselves and all other servants of God, we would do well to become similarly obsessed. We would do well to examine the Jesus of the Gospels and to directly and intimately seek his presence in our lives. We would do well to accept his invitation and allow him to introduce us to his Father to whom he was so devoted and who was so devoted to him. And what better time than the Christmas season.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 22, 2024)

¹¹ Colossians 2.⁹

³⁷And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, “What seek ye?”

They said unto him, “Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted, Master,) where dwellest thou?”

³⁹He saith unto them, “Come and see.”

They came and saw where he dwelt, and abode with him that day: for it was about the tenth hour.

⁴⁰One of the two which heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother.

⁴¹He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, “We have found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ.” ⁴²And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, “Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone.”

Words matter. Alma concluded that words, the word of God specifically, “had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just.”¹ Words can also have deleterious effects, as Americans have recently witnessed as the beguiling and deceitful words of powerful people have stoked confusion, hatred and insurrection.

As we have pointed out elsewhere, although the first uttered mortal words might have been near anything, Genesis’ author/ editors chose these arrogant and dismissive words as the first recorded words of a mortal being: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” This choice of first words serves as a signal of the author’s/ editors’ view of the nature of humans in a fallen, mortal world. They all too often are self-serving and dismissive of the needs of others.

In like manner, Jesus’s first words might have been any one of dozens. His first “ministerial” words might have been any of thousands. Each Gospel writer offers his own first recorded words. Luke, for example has Jesus’ first recorded words as those spoken to his mother when she expressed dismay at his seeming insensitivity to her feelings and worries when he had seemed lost to her.

“Why have you been searching for me? Didn’t you know that I would certainly be in my Father’s house?”²

Luke uses such first words to indicate the centrality of the Father in Jesus’ thoughts and actions. This same author chose to end Jesus’ mortal words with those in which Jesus makes his final mortal appeal. “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”³

In beginning his Gospel, John has spoken of Jesus in the most exalted terms. Jesus is “the word of God.” He *is* God. He is the “Light.” He is chuck full of “grace and truth.” His origins are in “the bosom of the Father.” He is “Messiah,” “Son” and “Lamb of God.” Given all of this, we might expect Jesus’ first recorded words to be some heavy, deep theological insight. We are surprised, then, by the mundane nature of Jesus’ first words as recorded by John. Seeing a couple of the Baptist’s disciples hanging around, seemingly curious about Jesus, the “Word of God” asks, “What seek ye?”

However mundane, perhaps the simple question is meant to send a powerful and hopeful message. Jesus is interested in other’s needs, what they want and what they “seek.” The question Jesus poses to two

¹ Alma 31.⁵

² Luke 2.⁴⁹, author’s translation

³ Luke 23.⁴⁶

strangers in Judea is the question he poses to each individual who is curious and interested in him. He lived on earth then and lives in heaven now to selflessly assist others in all their heartfelt searches, in all uncertainties, and in all their needs. As we contemplate John's witness that, while Jesus is someone extraordinary, he is sincerely interested in meeting the real needs of all, we are reminded of the Psalmist's similar testimony.

“Though the LORD be high,
yet hath he respect unto the lowly.”⁴

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 22, 2024)

⁴ Psalm 138.⁶

⁴³The day following Jesus would go forth into Galilee, and findeth Philip, and saith unto him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴Now Philip was of Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, "We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

⁴⁶And Nathanael said unto him, "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?"

Philip saith unto him, "Come and see."

⁴⁷Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!"

⁴⁸Nathanael saith unto him, "Whence knowest thou me?"

Jesus answered and said unto him, "Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee."

⁴⁹Nathanael answered and saith unto him, "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel."

⁵⁰Jesus answered and said unto him, "Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? Thou shalt see greater things than these." ⁵¹And he saith unto him, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man."

In his introductory chapter, John has been a very busy evangelist, indeed. He has imbued Jesus of Nazareth with a host of titles and divine attributes. Just have a look! Jesus is

The Word
The True Light
The Only Begotten of the Father
The Lamb of God
The Son of God
The Messiah/ God
The King of Israel

He is
Full of grace and truth
In the Bosom of God
God's Introducer
Holy Spirit Baptizer
Like unto Moses

Oh, and we left this one out: God. Jesus is God.

Phew.

Up to this point It is the evangelist that has done all this heavy lifting in naming and characterizing Jesus. But now, at the end of the chapter, Jesus flexes his muscles. Astounding Nathaniel with his insight, Jesus warns, "you ain't seen nothing yet."

"Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man."

This seems a clear reference to the Hebrew Patriarch, Jacob, and his experience at Beth-el—House of God. Here, he saw a ladder, its foot rooted in the soil and its head extending into heaven. All night, Jacob watched angels march up and down the ladder, descending to the temple and ascending into heaven. Unbeknownst to him, Jacob had alighted and slumbered at the center of the earth. The earth's navel.

In encountering Jesus, Nathaniel, unbeknownst to him, had come to Beth-el. Or, in this case, Beth-el had come to him. John allows Jesus, God, Himself, to end his introductory chapter of naming and characterizing with a flourish.

Jesus is God's temple.

He is the dwelling place of God.

Jesus is the place one must go if they wish to meet and greet and understand God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 22, 2024)