

13 September 2020

Fleshing Out Scripture

John 1:1-14

Our scripture today is one of the most familiar readings in scripture – traditionally read every Christmas. It is also one of the most direct statements of the doctrine of incarnation. We read from the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 1-14:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

For the past month, we've been doing a deep dive into the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ and some of its ramifications. Today we finish that series, with one final application of that doctrine. But before we get there, let's pause over another puzzling thing about incarnation. In the reading you just heard, we have one of the most expansive statements of Christ's divinity in all of scripture: Christ was the Word – the Logos – of God, who existed before the beginning of time, before creation. Indeed, this Word of God was the means by which God created, and it continues to be the source of all being. Then, as the passage continues, we also have one of the most direct descriptions of Christ's humanity: *the Word became flesh and lived among us*. The way that the Church has always put such passages together is by saying that Christ was completely God *and* completely human.

Yes, but how does that work? If Jesus was both at the same time, does that mean, for instance, that time when he was exhausted and fell asleep on the boat, that God also went to sleep? When he was hungry in the desert, was God hungry? And when Jesus prayed, who was he praying to? Himself? In the end we have to say that in *certain* ways, Jesus' humanity was separate from his divinity. Now, some of you are already rolling your eyes and thinking, "Does this matter? It's a mystery, all right? Do we need to hash out the specifics of how a mystery works?" Well, yeah, this time we sort of do.

Here's one example of why we do. As a human being, Jesus was male. And ever since then, there have been some in the church who have pointed to that and said, "See! Jesus was male. Therefore, God is male. Therefore, males are more like God than females. Bring me my slippers, woman." For millennia, Jesus' maleness has been used to justify the subjugation of women; and because of that history of church-sponsored misogyny, many women have rejected

Christianity, being fed up to here with male gods and males who think they are. But to elevate maleness because Jesus was male isn't valid. Genesis 1:27 says clearly that males and females were made equally in the image of God. God is beyond gender. It's just that we humans are not, and so when God became human, one gender had to be chosen. That's why we need to separate between the characteristics of Jesus that reflect his divinity and those that simply reflect the specific circumstances of his humanity.

(By the way, a side note here. The Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson has a response to those women who reject Christianity because they're suspicious of male deities. Johnson first outlines in detail how Jesus in his life treated men and women with identical honor, never indicating that one was in any way superior to the other. Then Johnson concludes, "The problem is not that Jesus was a man; the problem is that more men are not like Jesus.")

Anyway, we do need to separate to some extent between Jesus' humanity and his divinity. The fact that he was a male doesn't mean males are more godly. The fact that Jesus was Jewish doesn't mean that Semitic people are holier. Things like gender and race are the accidents of humanity; they have nothing to do with Christ's divinity. Now, here's why I did all that. There is something else that is human that we also claim is divine: scripture. And I think the distinctions we just made might be helpful in understanding that belief as well.

So here's the issue. We claim that the Holy Bible is inspired by God, and yet . . . it's pretty obviously human, too. It was written in Hebrew and Greek, with a smattering of Aramaic. These are not the languages of God; they are human languages, whose origins and development can be traced linguistically. Scripture was also written by individual humans with distinct writing styles and vocabularies. Paul has a distinct (and distinctly confusing) writing style; John's much easier to read. Hebrews is written in classical, literate Greek; Revelation is written in semi-literate, frequently ungrammatical Greek. These things reflect the personality and limitations of the human authors, not the personality and limitations of God. At least I *hope* God could do better than Revelation. (In fact, I want that on a T-shirt: "I hope God can do better than Revelation.")

The human side of scripture goes deeper than just language and grammar, though. The books of our Bible also reflect the pre-scientific world view of the human authors. When the Bible was written, the world was conceived of as a level expanse of earth floating on the watery deep and covered over by a flat, hammered out dome that held back the waters of the heavens. That's the picture we find in Genesis, but it's not really how God sees the world. Moreover, the Bible was written before humans understood such things as germ theory and mental illness. It was written in a culture that saw such things as drought, locusts, sickness, infertility, earthquakes, and physical disability as being divine punishments. But the fact that the biblical cultures saw the world that way does not mean it's so. All these things, like Jesus' sex and ethnicity, reflect the circumstances of a human context. We don't have to see them as coming from the mind of God. As with the incarnation itself, we have to separate between the human element and the divine.

If those things should be seen as human, then where is the divine element? Why do we still claim that this book is somehow God-breathed, inspired? Here is my answer to that question – and understand that what I'm giving you is a statement of my faith, not a rational proof of anything. I find God in scripture in two ways, first in the surprises, and second in the arc of the story as a whole.

First, the surprises. As I've just said, much of the Bible reflects the culture of the time when it was written. But scattered throughout the text are these gleaming moments when, suddenly, the Bible goes a different way. For instance, Ancient Near Eastern society was thoroughly patriarchal, and that shows in the text, but then in incident after incident we notice that God is not. God works through female ancestors, judges, and prophets in exactly the same way as God works through the men. Surprising. The Ancient Near East was also tribal – in the negative sense of being suspicious of those who aren't a part of your own group – and Ancient Israel was, too. But God isn't. God demands equal justice for foreigners living in Israel, demonstrates love and concern for foreigners and even enemies living outside of Israel (Rahab, Naaman, the Shunnamite woman, Ruth, the whole blamed city of Nineveh). Over and over in our scripture, we find God breaking cultural rules in ways that no other book, ancient or modern, does. Those are the moments of surprise when God shows through. Call them “gleams of God.”

The second place I see God in scripture is in the arc of the story as a whole. Understand that this is not a book so much as an anthology of books, written over the course of more than a thousand years, and yet, remarkably, there are consistent themes that we find throughout – threads that hold the different parts together. Here are some of those themes: God cares about humanity, God hears and responds to the cry of the poor and oppressed, God is just, God is forgiving, God is unimpressed with earthly power or wealth, God is free – beyond our control – and has granted us freedom as well. These themes may be familiar to you – well, I hope they are – but don't let their familiarity fool you. These are not normal ideas. These are not the things that human beings usually come up with on their own. Every one of them is a dramatic challenge to typical human culture – *every* human culture, not just Ancient Near Eastern cultures – and yet they inform the story of scripture from start to finish.

That's why last summer I started the Bible Journey Project – attempting to tell the whole arc of the scripture story from start to finish. If we are to comprehend how stunningly counter-cultural, how revolutionary, how life-changing it really is, we need to see the story as a whole. Yes, it's a human book, written by various historical human beings – most of them anonymous to us – and it contains human errors. There are scientific errors, medical errors, errors of consistency, and even basic grammatical errors. It's human. And yet it is also divine, providing glimpses into the mind of God that we simply can't find anywhere else. John called Jesus the “Word” – the *logos*. That Word is bigger than this written one, but there are some similarities. God appears in human expression here, too, just as God appeared in human form once 2000 years ago in Judea and Galilee. This I believe.

The Bible tells me so.