

Kenneth Lonergan director of “Manchester by the Sea” interviewed and discussing music choice in the the movie. A piece from “Messiah” and asked about it, as an atheist... is the music a source of a contemplative state that is good... “whole spine relaxes when you hear the music.” “And the text of the music, if only you could believe in that, ‘come unto him all that are heavy laden and he will give you rest...’ A wonderful, if imaginary idea, that it would happen... to be comforted by a Supernatural being... which I don’t believe.” Mythology.

How often do I approach Christmas in the same way, ‘what a wonderful idea...’ We come to Christmas and I wonder if we approach it all too normal. As if the baby Jesus is like tinsel, a needed decoration for the season... Should not the truth of what is sung about and celebrated each year blow our minds and seem so distinct and frankly, far-fetched, that even those that claim faith in Jesus might wonder ‘can this be true?’

This morning we will hear an account of Jesus’ arrival, but one absent the great scenery of that night that the promised baby was born, instead it is a declaration of who this Savior is.

Jesus as the light of the world is a wondrous reality that changes everything.

John 1:1-18

John’s Gospel, written by the young apostle that followed Jesus, has the expressed goal of getting you the reader to believe in Jesus, to know him, his identity, his miraculous work, his death and resurrection, all that you would have faith in him and submit to his rule and rest in your life. Here in the prologue, the introduction to his book, he puts before us exactly who Jesus is and what he came to do, and how humanity can claim or reject this Christmas present.

I won’t say all that can be said of John 1:1-18 today but we do want to notice three movements in the text - first Being, who Jesus is, then Beholding, what it means to see Jesus and finally Believing, how do we respond to this light, this Savior.

As we progress, the goal (just as John states it) is to bring us to belief, but I think more than just an intellectual assent to the information; a breathtaking awe at the reality of the nativity - that it really is a wildly unreasonable fulfillment of promise and gift of grace.

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1) Being

In the beginning... Repeating the opening words of the book of Genesis, the account of the creation of all things, here we have a new beginning, a new genesis of God’s kingdom brought to be by the same One who created all things.

The Word, the logos - but not merely like the Greek definition of wisdom, this is the word spoken that is the spark of the formation of all things. And he, as John will make clear he is speaking of Jesus, was with God and is God. The unfolding of the Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit, one in nature and three persons. The Word was not created or thought up in some heavenly strategy session long ago, he was with God, his existence is God’s existence.

John wastes no time, and little ink to get you to the most confounding reality of Christianity. You see everyone is fine with the idea of a baby born in a tumble-down stable, even growing up to evade evil kings and become a wise teacher, a good role model of behaving and caring for the “least of these.” But say he is God. The one and only God. No other gods, he is supreme, king, to be called Lord... oh no! Say all that and you will get some Buzzfeed articles harassing you for holding such outlandish beliefs. You can have your sweet, little six pound baby Jesus... but don’t make him God, in charge of it all.

He is God. That babe, that can be held, that has no credentials... he is God. The Word. This is a big deal.

He is the Creator himself - nothing was made without him...

Colossians 1:16-17 “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. [17] And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Hebrews 1:3 “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”

All other deities have agents accomplishing their work and will... but here God is taking on the agency for himself.

That is enough to leave us spinning. I wonder how many times some of the first readers of John’s gospel heard these words and had to go back, read them again; ‘say what?!’

But there is more. Not only is he God and creator of the universe, in him is life and the light of humanity... and he shines in the darkness - darkness as the absence of something, the absence of light... but now the light has come, he brings to the dark world knowledge - he is the code breaker of all the prophets promised, he brings purity into corruption, he brings the presence of God into the darkest of places and he illuminates it. And there is no darkness that can beat out the light of Jesus.

“Christ is to the souls of men what the sun is to the world. He is the centre and source of all spiritual light, warmth, life, health, beauty, and fertility. Like the sun, He shines for the common benefit of all mankind, - for high and for low, for rich and for poor, for Jew and for Greek. Like the sun, he is free to all. All may look at him, and drink health out of his light. If millions of mankind were mad enough to dwell in caves under ground, or to bandage their eyes, their darkness would be their own fault, and not the fault of the sun. So, likewise, if millions of men and women love spiritual “darkness rather than light,” the blame must be laid on their blind hearts, and not on Christ... But whether men will see or not, Christ is the true sun, and the light of the world. There is no light for sinners except in the Lord Jesus.” J.C. Ryle

And what a light he is! The radiant center of all things. That baby on the mantle in the nativity scene... whoa. This is the One the prophets spoke of, this is the One that John the Baptist prepared the way for.

In the beginning and forever. Five verse of the Bible can change everything - because it’s true. The true light, which gives light to everyone, came into the world. He can be seen... you can behold him.

2) Beholding

1:14 “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

God himself enters into the flesh of humanity. He literally pitched his tent, he moved into the neighborhood. You think Christmas Card Lane has lots of lights... the light of the world has taken up residence.

His glory has been seen in person, and he is full of wisdom, the truth - all truth and grace where some envision their god as unapproachable, absent from the human experience, here is the real God in the manger mud, fully human.

“The plain meaning of these words is, that our divine Savior really took human nature upon Him, in order to save sinners. He really became a man like ourselves in all things, sin only excepted. Like ourselves, he was born of a woman, though born through a miraculous manner. Like ourselves, he grew from infancy to boyhood, and from boyhood to man’s estate, both in wisdom and in stature. Like ourselves, He hungered, thirsted, ate, drank, slept, he wearied, felt pain, wept, rejoiced, marvelled, was moved to anger and to compassion. Having become flesh, and taken a body, He prayed, read the Scriptures, suffered being tempted, and submitted His human will to the will of God the Father. And finally, in the same body, He really suffered and shed his blood, really died, was really buried, really rose again, and really ascended up into heaven. And yet all this time He was God as well as man!” J.C. Ryle

How does that even happen - we know of myths that suggest maybe people, great heroes, can become gods... or gods that lose their divinity and are demoted to humanity... but in Jesus, the divine and the human mingle, fully God and fully man.

He is not a Savior that must be convinced of what it is like to live in our world, or that doesn’t have firsthand knowledge of every emotion, temptation, trial that we experience. And it is not that he has these experiences to say ‘well I got through it, so should you,’ no he says “I know, and I am here.”

This light is now seen, revealed, touched... God has a pulse.

1:18 “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.”

For generations God can not be seen. Moses has to be protected as to not be consumed and is only allowed to see the passing of the tail of his robe. Even angelic beings, humble the greatest of warriors. In the promised babe, the light of the world, God is saying, look me in the eyes, face to face.

In that face to face reality he uncovers the redemptive work of God through all of Scripture, he points out his place as the anointed One come to save. Miracles show his authority. He raised the bar of the law to perfection and then perfectly completed it for us. And he didn’t just choose to illuminate the Old Testament prophecies that were about abundance and favor... no he took on the life of the suffering servant, the One attacked, oppressed and beat down for his faithfulness.

I sometimes wonder what it will be like to see Jesus in person. For some reason and in his divine plan, he came in the first century to those that were destined to see him and then tell his story to us. Now we can see Jesus through his Word and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit... it’s personal; but we are headed to the day when he will say look me in the eyes...

Jesus has made the only God known, because he is the only God. He is the God-man that came into the mess to remake it and it all began one dark night surrounded by unknown people and the cold of the world.

He reveals God's glorious plan to save the world. God is not far off and aloof, he understands your life and he is present and to be found. He can be believed in.

3) Believing

1:10-13 "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. [11] He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. [12] But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, [13] who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

Jesus has come, the light of the world, everything has his imprint and yet he was not known, rejected even by his own people. The ones he came to reject his divinity saying he was a crazy man, a blasphemer. They also reject his humanity, thinking he has no worth, and could be beaten and killed for standing against the prevailing mood of the culture.

But there are those that did receive him, those that upon seeing and now hearing of him receive or welcome and submit to him, those that believe in him. Believe that he is fully God and fully man, who lived to reveal his light and died to give it to us. To these he gives the right to become Children of God - saving faith precedes becoming members of God's family through adoption as his children.

Christmas is an invitation into this, into belief in the light of the world, the Word that has come. That this babe in the manger is the creator and sustainer of the universe, that he is fully human, that he is fully in the mess of life... and that those who believe in him are adopted into his family, made Children of God.

This is a tall order. We can understand why some would not receive him. But it is true... it happened and God has come. And what's more, none of this saving, this children status is done by our finding God, or weighing the options... born again into the family of Christ not by birth or our free will but of God. By his will and provision of himself.

All of it is bore by the shoulders of that baby who has come into the world. This is the greatest of miracles, that we could be sons and daughters of God.

If someone asks you if you are a Christian, the answers is not "of course I am..." but "yeah I am and how crazy is that... that I could be saved and made a child of God!" And that the grace doesn't end... it keeps flowing!

1:16-17 "For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. [17] For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

From his abundance, from his light we receive wave upon wave of grace, an unending supply of unmerited favor... through Christ, through his work, through who he is. His superiority to Moses, prophets... The grace and truth of God's steadfast love, his covenantal faithfulness to his people, in the once-for-all sending of his one-of-a-kind son to save the world.

And this changes everything. Our hope. What drives our lives. How we treat each other, what we live for. The light of Christ as our compass giving us vision and direction.

As people hardwired to live in awe of something... God gives us himself... "In grace, God does battle for the awe of our hearts. You could argue that one of the fundamental purposes of the great redemptive story and the person and work of Jesus is to recapture our hearts for the awe of God and God alone." Paul Tripp.

How do we not walk around utterly stunned at the miraculous truth of this Jesus and his incarnation, his entry into humanity... Christmas! We can!

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This is the absurdity of Christmas; that the Creator of all things, the life and light, God himself would come to earth as the provision promised long ago. That he would take on flesh, blood would pump through his veins, that he would need food and sleep and friends... That he would come to save and would make all who believe in him children of God, co-heirs with him for all of eternity. And that his grace would flow unstopping, inexhaustible from his fullness - his all of himness.

Receive the light - welcome him and submit to his Lordship, his guidance his call in your life. Let Jesus radically change everything. Let him in to do his work. Receive his grace, let his loving kindness and unrelenting grace draw you back to Jesus over and over again.

Believe in him - he really is God, he really did arrive as a babe in the manger taking on our mud and filth for his glory and our good. Know it is true like you know nothing else in life. You are a child of God. You have been adopted by the king forever!

I have been thinking a lot about nativity scenes this week. We all have one... some have a few... but I have been wondering if we could come up with a better scene... instead of the cleanly dressed white people around the babe in a perfectly made bed of hay... Maybe, if we did it right... our nativities would just be a bright light unmatched in brightness... a light we could touch and that would warm us, remove all fear, all pain, and bring only smiles and the feeling of belonging, of being home.

We don't need to design one, we don't need technology to do it. Jesus has come. We can see him. By his Spirit we can feel him, know him and be warmed by his light.

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May we see it and savor this truth this Christmas.