

Palisades Presbyterian Church
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Come to Believe
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It is sometimes difficult to talk about John's gospel. It is absolutely beautiful and uplifting. And, this gospel, written somewhere around the close of the first century, is different – more different than the Synoptics are to one another.

The main purpose of this Gospel is to explain the mystery of Jesus. John takes us behind the scenes of Jesus' ministry determined and successful in giving us a glimpse into Jesus' eternal origin and divine nature.¹

You can hear it in the elegance of the opening words to his gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him not anything made that was not made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Then begins the gospel to secure Jesus' divinity:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John...

John's gospel is a narrative that records real events, but John goes beyond those events in interpreting them. His goal is to grip the reader in ways that affirm and confirm this divinity of Jesus. And, to do this, he uses techniques that are present in none of the Synoptics' writings.

A large part of the Gospel consists of discourses of Jesus. These discourses are not individual sayings (as in the Synoptic Gospels), nor even collections of sayings (as in the Sermon on the Mount); they develop a particular theme. Furthermore, it is characteristic of the Johannine discourses that Jesus is interrupted by questions or objections from the hearers – something that never happens in the other Gospels.²

And while we refer to the writer of this Gospel as John, we are not really sure who wrote it. Some believe it was the disciple John. Others think it was John of Patmos (the one believed to have been the author of Revelations). Yet we don't know.

¹ The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV. *The Gospel According to John*. P. 124 NT

² Ibid

While today we consider it plagiarism and violation of the law to write as another and take claim for it, such works, known as **pseudepigrapha**, were frequent in the ancient world. It was literary way to carry on the tradition of the person for whom the writing, in this case the Gospel, is named. It is the practice of an eastern custom that holds ancestors and predecessors in high regard, and that sees shared communal ideas as more valuable than individual ones. In other words, it was cool to do!

I mention this, because the story of Thomas in this morning's readings is unique to the writings of John. It appears in none of the other Evangelists' works, and may be more of the continuance of a tradition of overcoming doubt, powerfully presented as even among those who would be most faithful – than reference to an actual event.

Does such interpretation or literary license void the gospel's message or meaning and invalidate the reliability of the broader context of the collection of which it is a part?

Again, to answer these questions we need to return to the times during which it was written. It's the end of the first century, thereabouts. The followers of Jesus are being persecuted, challenged, forced into hiding, struggling for their lives and their faith. "Jews," as John uses it – is not about the Jewish race, but about those in ruling power – individuals – who executed Jesus. It has become a pejorative term with reference to the elite and powerful leaders of the historical period. That doesn't make it right or acceptable, it just points to the times and the antagonisms that were in play and how words were used.

John, internalizing and immersing himself in all he knew about Jesus, the times, and other events – through history, first-hand experience, inspiration, and his own mysticism – weaves it together into a story (not a history) of faith, focusing on Jesus' divine nature.

- From the beginning of his gospel quoted earlier, to the "napkin" – body wrappings found on the stone in a way that suggested the body of Jesus "disappeared," with the garment falling in place,
- to the appearance and disappearance of Jesus, ethereal and unable to be touched (in Matthew, the women feed the Risen Jesus a piece of fried fish and wash his feet)
- And to Thomas, the courageous pessimist and honest skeptic, being invited to put his hands and fingers upon Jesus's wounds

This is about Jesus' relationship with God as equally Divine. And then John begins the ending of his gospel with the words that caution those who would

question or doubt, expecting a Thomas-like experience to wipe away their skepticism:

Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet come to believe.

Then completes the narrative with:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

This is a powerful gospel, now, but consider how even moreso it was at a time when people were seeking assurance that their faith, their beliefs, their expectations and hopes were right and that they had not just been led been carried away by someone who was a great leader but no different than other great leaders.

It was a difficult time: many had died in the name of Jesus; persecutions abounded; faithful were challenged – literally – with their lives in play, all the time. Spiritual assurance and exhortation were in demand – the message of Jesus had to be carried forward – and John, in the best of spiritual and literary ways - did that.

There was no homologoumena (agreement) at the times of what were the “real” writings upon which to rely. John was fighting against real or imagined powerful contradictions and threats to the emerging young church, – it would not be until the Council of Carthage in 397 A.D. that the canon would be established, and this statement issued:

“Besides the canonical Scriptures, nothing shall be read in church under the name of divine Scriptures.”

Almost four hundred years to reach this milestone in the formation of the church’s emerging dogma. It was no easy task, and some – today – disagree with the choices. But consider, again, the times (as a way of informing us and future generations):

It’s always interesting to consider the obstacles of creating a church for the faithful: Think of this: the Bible was written

- over a 1600 year span,
- written in three main languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek),
- copied down on papyrus, parchment, vellum (calf skin), stone and clay tablets;
- that chapter and verse separation didn’t come until the 1300’s;

- and that the “original” gospels were not written until decades after Jesus’ death –

well, you get the idea of just how difficult it was, especially when considered against strict standards.

It points to the divide in interpretation that often separates our and other churches from reaching agreement on critical matters. Still, I think this is exactly how it is supposed to be now. I think that whatever is next for us requires a prayerful, careful, and considered study and understanding of the Bible and how it was constructed.

It makes sense to believe that John was writing to the doubters, the skeptics, the honest and courageous questioners, presenting them with a narrative that visually and spiritually impacted the senses of those who read it then and read it today. Filling and uplifting them with the Spirit in the most dramatic of ways.

Maybe all he was asking was:

“Do we really need to poke our fingers into the wounds of Jesus to believe in him and find him in our lives today?”

No. But we do need to gather, to talk, to pray, to write, to work with one another, to enter into the mystery each of us holds inside and allow it to speak to us and one another – through the ineffable presence that connects us.

Yesterday, I had a while to sit in a park on Long Island Sound. I focused on one small bud emerging sprout from the gently sloping current of life formed by the branch. I traveled the shoot back from the tip of that branch into the ground and to the very pulse of life that is this planet. There is no life on this planet without a living Earth. That tree and all other forms of life are simply an extension of a living planet, it wasn’t life at the tip of the plant but throughout that planet that showed itself in a young and delightful shade of green.

Life demonstrated in many different and wonderful forms, some easier than others to discern – some that will never be seen by human eyes, still and deep – flowing, ever-flowing...

So, it is, I think, with us. This faith of ours life the budding shoots of springtime, emanating from a living God beyond and in everything we know. Like the poetry of nature, our Scriptures reveal enough, it seems, to encourage and exhort us – and then, in many amazing ways, pique the mystery that promises us there is more, and invites us to recognize our place in the mystery. We are, simply, the mystery.

In the Genesis reading that Jack read a few minutes ago, it stated that in the day that God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up – a stream would rise up and water the whole face of the ground.

Why wouldn't the ancients and the post-moderns write of faith using such metaphors? Can we not know God's face to us on this day as the earth is being watered by the rain that brings life, in the same way our hearts are watered by the faith of others and in these writings? The streams and the rain are no different than the life of the words in these books.

The rain is not life any more than words are life. But, just as the rain will stir life in the fields, so can these words stir the God-life that is in us.

You know, maybe John is not so difficult, after all.

Amen.