

## Seeing God

The reading from John's gospel this morning is known as the Prologue. It is one of the most beautiful and theologically profound statements in our scripture about God: about who God is, what God is about, and to what and whom God is committed. It reveals this just as clearly as it is a declaration about the Word itself. Last week's reading from Luke is one of those places in the gospels where we get a glimpse of the humanity of Jesus. Today's reading, and in much of John's gospel that humanity is only seen dimly. John's understanding of Jesus Christ was only concerned with his divinity. John's gospel's narration emphasizes the by the way it starts: "In the beginning..." This opening takes us back to the first part—the opening words of the revelation of God to those claimed...when creation began with God's speaking it into being. John 1:1-3—"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 came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." This takes the place of the birth narrative found in Luke—for John's group of early believers, the incarnation was the progression of God's plan which had been in place all along. That the Word had become human was understood as a continuation of God keeping the promise made to humanity from the beginning...God spoke creation into being and declared it good. God's will is to redeem and restore creation. The Word was a partner in creation, in relationship with God, and has now become human in order to fulfill God's purpose present from the beginning. While some English translations of verse 14 read "And the Word became flesh and lived among us," the Greek word used is "skenoō" which means "to tent" or to "tabernacle", which was how God journeyed with the people of the Exodus...He accompanied them through the wilderness...his presence was near. Other translations will use the phrase "and dwelt among us." Eugene Peterson's work titled *The Message* uses another nuance, that of taking up residence with us. Peterson's version says the Word "moved into the neighborhood." In the incarnation, God the Father has made it known that the "mystery of his will" is to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. This presents us with a glorious reality that overshadows even our own redemption and forgiveness. It is the culmination of the reconciliation of estranged groups. God's plan is to sum up all things, draw everything together in conclusion, in Christ. The sense here is of recapitulation: restoration, reconciliation, and salvation. Everything in creation that has been separated out, divided, ostracized and "othered" will be gathered back together—this vision is all inclusive. The passage is separated into two parts: verses 10-13 and 14-18. The narrator of this portion identifies three responses to the one who has come into the world. First, there are those who did not know him, suggesting a lack of knowledge. Next there are those who did not accept him—his own people. It is interesting that the text does not say there is a response where he is rejected...only not accepted. This may put us into that group if we consider in what ways we do not accept and follow his teachings...in what ways we do not show our

acceptance of God's incarnational gift to us. Since later in John's gospel we will be told that Christians—followers of Christ—will be known by their love, we are invited to ponder in what ways we do not show this hospitality, this compassion toward one another. The focus of verses 10-13 is on that third response; on those who do receive him. Verse 12-13—"But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." These children of God are not designated by their flesh—that is any physical characteristics they may have like race or gender, but only by their complete trust in the one whom God has sent into the world and who faithfully reveals the nature of God. The nature and will of God for love to be the force to bring light and life into the world long in darkness is found in many places in the Hebrew Scriptures. Although God speaks through prophets' words of judgment, they are accompanied by calls to turn away from those ways, to repent and turn around so that they are living according to the ways God has revealed. In other words, judgment is a positive sense is never what God wills. Prophetic judgment is the announcement of the destructive consequences—effects—of what happens when God's will is not done. The declarations of judgement are paired with the promise and vision of what happens when God's will is done. In Jeremiah and Isaiah we have the promise that tells us God stays faithful to people who turn away. This is the definition of grace. Martin Luther in a debate with a group of his fellow monks in Heidelberg in 1518 offered the following proposition: The law says, 'Do this,' and it is never done. Grace says, 'Believe this,' and everything is already done. John 1:16-17—"From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Once the Word becomes flesh, grace is then incarnated in the rest of the Gospel. The entirety of the gospel narrative shows what grace looks like, tastes like, smells like, sounds like and feels like. According to John's gospel, God in becoming flesh in Jesus has committed God's self not only to revealing what God's grace looks like, but that God wants to know it and feel it as well. The last verse of this passage seeks to describe what the Word made flesh does to "declare," "reveal," and "make known" God and points to Jesus' origins. The verb used is *exago*, a compound verb combining the prefix "*ex*"n with the verb "*ago*" which means "to bring or to lead." In other words, the principle purpose of the Word made flesh is to bring God out, to lead God out, so that an experience of God is possible for those who encounter Jesus. It makes no sense for the Word to become flesh if God is not able to be experienced, and on every level of what it means to be human. Truly, God with us as promised so long ago when God told Isaac he would never be alone. Here God is now not only going where God's people go, but is who they are. The word grace is actually used only four times in John's gospel and only in this passage which tells us that "no one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart who has made him known." It is the incarnate which allows us to truly see God's nature; to understand the lengths to which God will pursue us. What these verses and those of Ephesians reveal is that our

destiny is firmly in God's hands. Our passage from Ephesians is about divine ordaining. Verse 1:3—God blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Verse 1:4—God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. Verse 1:5—God destined us for adoption as God's own children through Jesus Christ, according to the pleasure of his will. Verse 1:9—God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to God's good pleasure that is set forth in Christ. Verse :7—In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us. Christ is the one in whom we are blessed, through whom we are chosen and destined, and by whom we have redemption and the divine inheritance. This description of God's will represents a frontal attack on our human disposition of wanting to be in charge. It tells Christ Jesus is in charge—and we are not. God gives and we receive through Christ. There is much about God's choice that remains unexplained. Indeed, it is part of "the mystery of God's will which remains difficult to understand even though God has made it known. The fact of God's choosing has always been difficult to understand in the face of humanity's persistent disinclination to be claimed and follow, to trust and be obedient. John does not try to explain the inner logic or ethical reasoning of God's choice to come and dwell among us. Instead, he notes that it is a mystery, one for which we should joyfully receive and give our praise. In that same portion of Genesis where we are introduced to the Word who was with God and was God, we find that we were created in God's image. Genesis 1:27—"So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." When the Word became incarnate he revealed to humanity how to live in the ways of God; he revealed the essence of God and God's love, will and purpose for humanity to be healed and restored; he showed us how to see the image of God in all humanity through his teachings and ways. When John tells us of the three ways to respond to the Incarnate Word, we need to be among those who truly accept him, and in so doing we see God and truly become God's children. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.