

# ***“See for Yourself”***

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***The Word who is God is still changing the world one life at a time.***

***John 1:35-42***

***January 9, 2022***

***A wide angle***

Linda and I returned this past Wednesday from a week-long trip to Hawaii. Most people go to Hawaii for its unique adventure opportunities – surfing the waves, seeing an active volcano, snorkeling among coral or manta rays, touring Pearl Harbor, gazing at tropical waterfalls, experiencing a Polynesian luau, and eating Dole pineapple soft serve. Hawaii is a wonderful destination, but we weren’t there as tourists.

We spent most of our time doing what we would have done if our son and his family lived in Myrtle Beach or Mountain View. We played Legos, magnet tiles, and hide-and-seek. We read books, watched Spidey, and enjoyed table talk. We cooked meals and ordered takeout. We cleaned up and helped catch up on home projects. We were there to see three individuals, especially our 4-year-old grandson, Arlo.

The Gospel of John begins with what Pastor Amy called last week a “beautifully messy introduction to a beautifully messy Gospel.” The first 18 verses are usually called John’s Prologue, and they present a wide view, a long view, of Jesus. In the beginning the Word was with God, and was God. The Word is God’s self-expression. He became flesh and tabernacled among us for a little while. In the Word we have seen God’s glory.

Beginning in verse 19, the focus switches from this larger picture to another theme John will develop – Jesus one on one. Jesus wants a personal connection with individuals. The first three gospels focus on Jesus’ popularity soaring from the start of his public ministry. John begins with individual contacts.

The way John describes Jesus’ initial call to his first disciples is different from the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. While I am familiar with the other accounts, I’m

not going to spend time comparing them. I'm very interested in how John tells the story and why. He wants to show how Jesus invited his early disciples to "see for yourself" who he is and why he came. It's personal. He's very interested in them as individuals.

That's also true for you. As we study John, I invite you to see Jesus for yourself.

Before we continue, I need to sort out a common point of confusion. The fourth Gospel mentions the name "John" about 25 times, almost half of them in chapter 1. Since this Gospel is traditionally known as "The Gospel according to John," the natural question arises, "Is the John who is mentioned the same John who wrote the Gospel?"

The short answer is definitely "No." For good reason, early Christian tradition credited the fourth gospel to one of Jesus' disciples named John. The "John" we encounter in chapter 1 is commonly known as "John the Baptist." If I say "John," I am speaking of the Gospel writer. If I mean John the Baptist, I will say, "J.B."

### ***A pivotal week***

After the prologue, John begins with a pivotal week (literally seven days) when the identity of Jesus is revealed. John gives no detail at this point in the Gospel about Jesus' family or early life, but he is surprisingly specific about what happens on Days 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7 of Week 1. Let's look briefly at Days 1 and 2, then in more detail at Day 3.

On Day 1 (19-25), some priests, Levites, and Pharisees question J.B. about his baptism. John points out three aspects of J.B.'s baptism that prompted this inquiry. First, John wasn't baptizing in the Jordan River. Baptism, a kind of ritual cleansing, was not all that unusual in John's day, but it usually took place in a pool called a *mikveh* designated for that purpose. Second, the ritual cleansing usually meant dipping oneself in the water, but John was dipping other people. Third, so many people are going out of their way for J.B.'s baptism that the religious leaders need a delegation to investigate.

The religious leaders want to know who he thinks he is. Is he claiming to be the Messiah? Elijah? A prophet? He says no each time. "Then who are you?" they ask.

J.B. quotes Isaiah: "I am the voice calling in the desert, 'Prepare for the Lord.'"

They continue the inquiry: "Then why are you baptizing?"

J.B. says, "I baptize with water, but someone you don't know about yet will be so much greater. I'm not even important enough to be his slave." That's Day 1.

On Day 2 of this inaugural week, J.B. sees (important word) Jesus and makes a brief speech about him. Apparently the religious leaders are no longer around, but John doesn't tell us who hears J.B.'s testimony. We are left to presume it is probably the crowd or maybe his own disciples or close followers. The bullet points –

- *Jesus is the Lamb of God*, who takes away the sin of the world. This makes a lot of sense to you and me, but on J.B.'s lips it is rather surprising – especially on Day 2 of Jesus' first week in the public eye.
- *Jesus existed before John*. This is a remarkable statement, since biologically and publicly Jesus followed John.
- *Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit*. John witnesses to what he had seen when he baptized Jesus – a dove descending on Jesus. We're not yet told what it means to be baptized by the Holy Spirit, but it's more than just water, more than physical.
- *Jesus is the Son of God*. Again, don't jump too far ahead to fourth century creeds or even the end of John. J.B. is saying more than he understands. Once again, notice that J.B. says, "I have *seen* and testify."

What's clear on Day 2 is that J.B.'s role is exactly what the prologue had said it was. He's not the guy, not the Messiah, not the light. His role is only that of witness. J.B. has been sent to point out the light.

### **Day 3**

On Day 3, the circle grows. Let's look at this section in greater detail.

35 – "The next day J.B. was there with two of his disciples." In a moment John will name one of the two. Who is the other one?

36 – "When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, 'Look, the Lamb of God!'" J.B.'s role is to redirect attention from himself to Jesus.

37 – "When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus." The word "follow" is important in all the Gospels, including John. J.B.'s two disciples have been with J.B., but when he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" they changed directions.

38 – "Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, 'What do you want?' In this moment "What do you want?" is a fair question about what's on their minds. It's also a deep discipleship question that is relevant to you and me.

These are the first words of Jesus quoted in John's gospel. It may not be an overstatement to say that the reason the Word became flesh is so that human beings might through Jesus discover what it is they really want and find it.

Curt Thompson's new book, *The Soul of Desire*, begins with these identical words: "What do you want?" He says a big reason he has a job as a psychiatrist is that people don't know what they really want, so they substitute unhealthy desires or they allow the culture around them to exploit their desires in unhealthy ways. I highly recommend the book – especially chapter 1 titled, simply, "Desire."

Their response begins, “Rabbi,” which literally means “my great one.” It was an honorary title used for those who attached themselves to a particular teacher. They have transferred their spiritual loyalty from J.B. to Jesus. You are now “my great one.”

The parenthesis is another hint that John is writing both for Jewish and a Greco-Roman audience. By the time he writes his gospel, perhaps fifty years or more after the death of Jesus, Christianity has become, for all practical purposes, a global gospel.

Their question follows: “Where are you staying?” This is one of his favorite words – used 40 times in the Gospel. Perhaps most significantly, Jesus will say, “I am the vine, you are the branches. The one who abides (stays, remains) in me will bear much fruit” (John 15:5). They are asking how they can take the next step to connect with him. Jesus loved that question and he still loves it.

39 – “‘Come,’ he replied, ‘and you will see.’ So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.” In the Greek it’s a Middle Voice, which can be translated, “Come and see for yourself.”

Seeing is such a personal word. It’s both literal and figurative. They say where he was remaining, abiding, staying. When they stayed the rest of the day, I’d love to know what they talked about! Was this like the Sermon on the Mount? Did they just hang out, eat snacks, tell jokes? John doesn’t think we need to know.

But he includes a very interesting little sentence. “It was about four in the afternoon” (in some translations, “about the tenth hour”). There’s only one reason to include this detail. It has no symbolic significance that we know of, no meaning in ancient Jewish festivals or religious life.

What it tells us is that the memory of the author is vivid at this point. This fact, coupled with the rather obvious omission of his own name, is why many commentators believe the unnamed disciple of J.B. is none other than John the apostle, who wrote the Gospel. One of the evidences that John wrote this book is that whenever he is talked about – he’s never named. We conclude from this little detail that John clearly remembers the first time he encountered Jesus – “about 4 in the afternoon.”

40 – “Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what J.B. had said and who had followed Jesus.” Here’s where the other man is named.

41 – “The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ). We only meet Andrew three times in any of the Gospels, and all three are in John. We meet him first here, when he brings Peter to Jesus. We next meet him in John 6, when he brings to Jesus the boy with five loaves and two fish. Finally, we meet him in John 12, when he brings to Jesus some Greeks who were wondering who Jesus is. In other words, every time we meet Andrew he is not the main character. His role is to bring someone else to Jesus.

42 – “And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas’ (which, when translated, is Peter.” The “someone else” he brings is Peter. When John says Jesus “looked at him (Peter),” this is the same word “saw” but intensified. He stared at Peter, gazed at him, locked eyes. It’s a wonderful moment in the Gospels. It’s a preview of the central role Peter will take in the Gospel and later in the early church.

Jesus tells Peter his name will be changed. Cephas is Aramaic and means “rock.” Peter means the same in Hebrew. John’s gospel may be “beautifully messy,” as Pastor Amy said last week, but it is also intentionally directional. John is going somewhere because Jesus is going somewhere. All that is Day 3 of the big week.

Day 4 is recounted in the rest of chapter 1, and I wish we had time to talk about it. Two more disciples, Philip and Nathanael, follow (43), see (46), and believe (52).

John skips Days 5 and 6, but chapter 2 opens with Day 7 of the same week, when Jesus further reveals his glory with his first miracle-sign, turning water into wine. We’ll talk about Day 7 next Sunday.

### ***Questions for a new year***

Jesus’ first week as recorded in John’s Gospel raises some questions for us.

First, *what do you want?* Curt Thompson says our deepest human longings are to be seen, safe, soothed, and secure. Notice how the first one, to be seen, is so prominent in John 1. Jesus is seen and he sees. A great way to spend January is to ask, “What do I really want?”

Second, *how is your follow?* This is also a great time for an assessment. The question is not designed to inflict guilt or add shame. You and I know that the Lamb of God came to take away our sin. When we believe in him, we don’t worry about performance or acceptance, but still we center our lives on looking for deeper intimacy with Jesus and closer following. My colleague Kevin Watkins is finishing up seminary. For one of his courses, he wrote out his pastoral call. I love his deep reflection on how that pastoral call is centered on a personal call to listen to the Holy Spirit, meet with a spiritual director, limit trivial distractions, and be kind. What’s yours?

Third, *who is looking for Jesus?* I love Andrew, for the same reason I love J.B. Andrew isn’t Peter, but he brings Peter to Jesus. J.B. isn’t Jesus, but he points others to Jesus. As Pastor Paul says, invitation is evangelism. Evangelism doesn’t just mean that we spray Gospel pellets from a shotgun. We recognize the variety of ways Jesus meets people, and pray for and look for opportunities to direct the desires of others to Jesus.

What we learn at this early point is that there are so many ways individuals discover him. Some are curious. Some hear a tidbit of truth and want to know more.

Some spend time with him. Some need evidence. Some need personal connection. Some need witnesses. Some come to Jesus by seeing, others by hearing, others by moving. It's always a work of the Holy Spirit, and he never stops drawing.

Finally, *how can you see for yourself?* Last month I encouraged you to read a book called *Do It for a Day*, by Mark Batterson. It is about making and breaking habits. I want to break the habit of prioritizing email and make the habit of daily reading and writing.

The book I chose to read while traveling the last couple of weeks is called *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, by Tom Holland. Holland opens with an extensive Preface about how remarkable it is that a crucified man was ever worshiped by anyone as a god. We've become so accustomed to that paradox that we hardly blink when J.B. speaks prophetically of "the Lamb of God."

Holland writes, "That a man who had himself been crucified might be hailed as a god could not help but be seen by people everywhere across the Roman world as scandalous, obscene, grotesque" (6). Nobody, especially anyone who was Jewish, thought that someone who had received the ultimate shame of a slave's torturous execution should even be remembered, much less honored, and even less worshiped.

In the conclusion Holland adds, "It is the audacity of it – the audacity of finding in a twisted and defeated corpse the glory of the creator of the universe – that serves to explain, more than anything else, the sheer strangeness of Christianity, and of the civilization to which it gave birth."

Holland does not by any means overlook or understate the atrocities committed by followers of Jesus against other followers of Jesus or against Jews and Muslims and other unbelievers in the intervening centuries. He says, "The standards by which they are condemned are themselves Christian." The revolution that has made and is still making a world where human dignity, justice, and hope emerge never could have or would have happened without those who worship a God who was crucified – in John's language, without the eternal Word who is also "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

John's gospel is just getting started. The impression John wants to make is that this one who is the Word, who was with God and was God before the beginning, who is the Son of God and the Messiah, will change the world one life at a time.

My invitation at the beginning of John's gospel is simple: see for yourself. Jesus is inviting you and me to a different level of experiencing him. I wonder if something here has you more curious of what Jesus wants you to see, how Jesus wants you to follow, how Jesus might be taking the next step in changing the world through you. Come see for yourself. Invite others to see him through you and with you. The next step in the Christian revolution is yours. Amen.