



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
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Sermon: New Year
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John 1:1-18

John 1:1-18 (NRSV)

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

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The 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. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who 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. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ 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.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

John the Baptist is never called 'the Baptist' in the Gospel of John. He's not so much the wild haired evangelist, "clothed with camel's hair," and eating "locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6) of the synoptic Gospels. In the Gospel of John, he is a witness. A testifier. "This is the testimony given by John" starts the story in v. 19. When Jesus and John meet as adults a few verses later, "John testified," says v. 32, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it

remained on [Jesus].” “I myself have seen and testified that this is the Son of God,” he says in v. 34. “You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him... He must increase, but I must decrease,” John concludes in his final speech of the Gospel in John 3.

He came as a witness to testify to the light... He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. Throughout the Gospel, John is pointing away from himself, and towards Christ, the Son of God.

A commentator I read this week mentioned an interesting motif in Renaissance paintings of John the witness, these curious pictures of Baby Jesus and Baby John together.¹ Following the style of the times, the babies look, odd – like little grown men. Baby Jesus is often in Mary’s arms, as he is in this piece by the Italian painter Fra Bartolomeo, with his hand raised, exactly here in the center of the painting, held high in a blessing.² John the witness, the one who must decrease so Christ may increase, in contrast, stands off in a corner, eyes upturned to Jesus. And if you look at his hands closely, you see he’s actually pointing to Jesus, as if to say, don’t look at me. Look at him. John witnesses to the Christ, come into the world.

That pointing is a common motif in depictions of John. Here, again, you see two, curiously old looking infants, depicted by the German Renaissance painter Lucas Cranach the Elder.³ Jesus again is higher. He holds the cross while stepping over and conquering death, symbolized by the skull. John again is lower, this time kneeling down before Jesus, his finger pointed upward. Again, John seems to tell the viewer to stop looking at him. John witnesses to the Christ come into the world.

The paintings are remarkable for a number of reasons: their rich symbolism, illuminating scripture and tradition; their careful use of light, as if depicting heaven on earth. To the modern viewer, I imagine, a striking dissonance comes with the whiteness of the infants. These babies and Mary are deeply European, aristocratic even in the paleness of their uncalloused features. Quite at odds with modern recreations of First Century Jewish men, such as these fairly recent depictions of Jesus compiled by forensic scientists and archeologists, showing us what Jesus would have actually looked like in Israel at his time.⁴

There’s a contradiction here. The art of Renaissance Europe sought to point to Jesus. Painstakingly, they depicted John the witness, pointing away from himself, testifying to the Christ, and yet they paint Jesus himself in their own image. In this way, this European Jesus

¹ Michael L. Lindvall, “John 1: (1-9) 10-18,” in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C*, Vol. 1. Joel B. Green et. al (Eds). (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 141-142.

² Fra Bartolomeo, “Madonna and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist,” 1497.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435614>

³ Lucas Cranach the Elder, “Adoration of The Child Jesus by St John the Baptist,” circa 1530-40,
<https://fineartamerica.com/featured/adoration-of-the-child-jesus-by-st-john-the-baptist-lucas-cranach-the-elder.html>

⁴ See Henri Neuendorf, “Medical Artist Reveals What Jesus Christ Looked Like Using Forensic Science,” *ArtNet News*, Dec. 16, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/jesus-face-forensic-anthropology-art-392823>

points back to the cultures who drew him, with the racial, class, and beauty hierarchies of their time very much intact.

How often does the church today do this, point to ourselves as we seek to testify to Christ? Like,

- when we ask the people who walk through our doors to look or behave or fit our ideas, our labels, our expectations;
- when we ask our community partners to jump through our hoops, to answer our questions, to meet our standards;
- when we excuse ourselves from the hard and difficult work of unearthing how we are entrenched in the sinful systems of today: racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism
- when we excuse ourselves from the incomplete work of our city, striking inequities in housing and homelessness, legal status, policing, school opportunity, living wages, clean water and air, the lists continue.

Sometimes, instead of stretching in the ways that Christ calls us, Christians excuse themselves by pointing to the good work we are already doing.

I'm a good person after all, just look at me.

How often does the church today point to ourselves rather than witnessing to Christ?

Another Renaissance depiction of pointing John the witness comes to mind, the Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald, a giant polytich of the crucified Christ that Grünewald originally painted over a number of years for the Antonine Hospital, an infirmary in France dedicated to St. Anthony.⁵ As I started thinking about this sermon, I first was going to lump this painting in with the Renaissance paintings we viewed earlier. After all, there is a white, very German looking John the witness there to the side, pointing to the crucified Christ. Behind John, scrolled in Latin are those famous words from the Gospel, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” On the other side, a European Mary, white as a sheet, is held up by the Beloved disciple, as Mary Magdalene, her blond hair flowing down her back, kneels and prays.

At the center of the painting is, also, a European Christ crucified. And yet, looking closer, there is a difference here. Grünewald’s depiction is known as one of the most gruesome renderings of the crucified Christ of the Renaissance era.⁶ Jesus’s hands are upturned, again as if in blessing, but they are warped, disfigured by the piercing nails. The same is true of his feet. And, as I’m sure you’ve already noticed, his skin has the color of death. Throughout, it is spotted and torn.

At first, I thought this was simply a depiction of the violence of the crucifixion, and it certainly is that. But after looking into the history of the painting, I found it goes much, much deeper.

⁵ Nikolaus Hagenauer and Matthias Grünewald, “Isenheim Altarpiece,” circa 1512-1516, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grunewald_Isenheim.jpg

⁶ This interpretation draws deeply from Tessa Davidson and T.J. Davidson, “Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald (brief overview),” DavidsonArtOnline, YouTube, Feb. 23, 2018, <https://youtu.be/BIENU32TfxM>

Again, the painting was originally composed for a hospital dedicated to St. Anthony. Art historians point out that that hospital housed victims of what was known as St. Anthony's fire disease, a fungal infection that attacked the skin, causing sores to develop across the surface of the entire body. The illness led to convulsions and gangrene. It was common for those suffering from the disease had to have their legs amputated at the knee. The skin of Christ crucified, is not just torn from the crucifixion. Rather, Grünewald depicted Christ as a fellow sufferer of this horrendous disease.

This is most striking in the bottom panel of the polytich, where Jesus is laid in the tomb. You'll see the panels are split right at the knee. This is precisely the place where residents of the hospital would have had their legs amputated. Christ suffers with them.

What a poignant depiction of God with us, Immanuel. Far from a caricature of Renaissance hubris, I learned this week, the painting is, in many ways, like the pointing finger of John the witness, pointing to, in fact, the God who comes to us in the person of Jesus, born in a manger, because there was no room in the inn. For God, in Christ, as depicted in our scriptures, is not of the aristocracy. God does not choose company with the rich and the comfortable. This is the God in the margins, with those pushed to the margins; God in the streets; God with those trampled by empire; God with those cast aside to forgotten hospital corners.

This is the "grace upon grace" that Christ brings. This is how God chooses to be, when God comes into the world. When God enters our suffering. When God stands beside us and suffers with us, and suffers especially with those who most suffer in our world.

Grace Covenant in this New Year, who will we point to? How will we point, not to ourselves, but to this Christ?

What expectations do we as a community need to lay down? What are you carrying, today, in this new year, that you need to lay down in order to see Christ, to point to Christ, to witness to Christ?

I think of the ministry taking place at Grace Covenant: in education and formation; in the work of dismantling white supremacy in ourselves and our community; in partnering with our neighbors experiencing displacement and homelessness; in environmental justice; in ministry with those who are hurting and grieving, from two years of pandemic, isolation, heartache, and loss.

It is a mistake to think that God is not already at work in each of these places and far beyond what we see and expect. For God is with us, Immanuel.

In this new year, may we seek Christ already at work; may we proclaim Christ in solidarity with those who hurt, especially those most pushed to the margins in our city; may we find ways to join Christ in the work of equity and justice, reparation and healing, truth-telling and love.

May we follow in the footsteps of a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to Christ.

And for that, we say, thanks be to God. Amen.