

The Who Question
December 21, 2008
John 1:14-18

In Nashville it's all about "the hook." If you have any friends who are songwriters they are always trying to find "the hook"—this phrase, this turn of the words so that the song will be memorable. They are always looking and listening for some kind of interesting way to say something. They have this ability to capture all kinds of emotions in just a handful of words. Bonnie Raitt is one of my favorite singers. She sings a song, "*You can't make your heart feel something that it won't, and I can't make you love me if you don't.*" I don't care how good you're feeling, when you hear that song you are just wrecked for the rest of the day. "Man, I know how you feel, Bonnie. It's awful." See, that's "the hook." It's their way of grabbing you, and poets can do that. They have a way of using just enough syllables so you can never forget how they say it.

Those of you who know me understand that Christmas is a very frustrating time for me. I hate what our country does to Christmas and how commercial it has become.

“Hey, we’re glad you love Jesus, and we’ll give you a two-for-one sale.” You stand in line and people say, “You don’t have the Christmas spirit.” No, I don’t have the spirit to stand in line and to wait in a parking lot for a spot. I want to stand up in the middle of the mall and shout, “What’s wrong with all you people? This isn’t what Christmas is about!” Now, that will get you arrested in the Cool Springs Mall, so I guess that’s why my favorite carol is “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day. Then pealed the bells more loud and deep. God is not dead nor doth He sleep.” See, you have to be a poet to say that. You have to be a poet to get it.

Now, all of these years later after Jesus lived on earth, John sits down and tries to help you and me understand what happened in the life of Jesus and what it meant that He came into our world, and to see what it meant to have God that close to us. John does it in this grand poem we call “prologue.” How in the world do you describe God in our world? Aren’t we glad John was a poet? Turn to chapter one of his Gospel. We’ll start reading with verse 14. Stand with me in honor of God’s Word.

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' "

¹⁶From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.

¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus

Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the

Father's side, has made him known. (John 1:14-18) “The Word became flesh and took up residence among us.” This is God’s Word, for God’s people. Hear it, believe it and live. Let’s pray together.

A handful of words and several sentences on a page spread before us the truth that we can spend the rest of our lives trying to comprehend. So we pray that this will be a time of understanding, and from that understanding will come transformation, and from that transformation will come a whole new way of living for us—those among whom Your Son pitched His tent. For we pray this in Your name, Amen.

How in the world do you explain who God is? How do you say to somebody, “This is God and this is what He’s like. This is how He lives and this is how He acts. This is what’s important to Him and this is what values He has.” How many

words would that take, how many tons of paper? Some of you come into my office and you see all of the books there. You ask me, “Have you read all of these books?” Well, yes, most of them. But even all the books I have don’t even begin to scratch the surface of who God is. So if you want to know God, where do you look? If you want to see God, how do you do that? John, in a handful of words, said, “It’s simple. If you want to know what God looks like, then you look at Jesus. If you want to know what’s important to God, then you watch Jesus. If you want to know what God is saying, then you listen to Jesus.” Jesus is the Word. Jesus is God in human form—in flesh. You could see him, you could touch Him, and you could watch Him. Jesus Himself said, “If you have seen Me you have seen God.”

So how does John get us to think about the miracle of this babe whose birth we celebrate on Christmas morning—this babe who brings God to us? I tell you all the time, the miracle of Christianity is not that we tell you how to get to God. The miracle of Christianity is that God comes to us. Lost things cannot find themselves. Lost people have to be rescued. It is God with us, and John uses an amazing word for “dwelling among us.” You’ll see it translated in different ways in different Bibles. Some of your Bibles will have that “He took up residence,” that’s the Holman Christian Bible. Others will say that “He lived among us,” or “He pitched a tent.” The word literally means, “pitched a tent.” Now, you’re

saying to yourself, “That’s not cool.” Let’s really think about it. If God were to live in our neighborhood, do you really think He’d live in a tent? No, He’d have a nice house, wouldn’t He? And if He did have a portable home it would be like one of these big land yachts with a flat screen TV that folds out of the side. It wouldn’t be a tent.

John is a poet, and in one word he grabs one of the most important concepts in all of the Bible. Do you realize that the last half of Exodus is about one thing? From chapter 25 on it is about one thing—the Tabernacle. Now in those chapters Moses is told what kind of wood he is to use, and what kind of cloth. He is told the dimensions. He’s told what craftsmen will do certain things. He’s told how the posts of the Tabernacle will be constructed in certain ways, and what carvings will be there. He’s told how the washbasin is crafted, and the Holy of Holies is put together. He’s told where the ark is and where the sacrifices will be made. All of these things are laid out in exquisite detail, because this was the most important part of the camp of the Israelites. It was the Tabernacle—the tent where God lived among His people. Now this was a critical time in the history of Israel. They had been liberated from Egypt’s slavery, and now they were on their way to the Promised Land. They were in the middle of this no-man’s land, called the wilderness, wandering around. And they had the same question that you and I

have on this journey of salvation—from release from slavery to the Promised Land where we have not yet arrived.

In this wilderness we call life we have one driving question—“Is God going to leave us by ourselves?” That is the basic existential question all of us deal with, isn’t it? This thing that we are alone in the universe and nobody is here and nobody will help us. We don’t mind doing hard things. We don’t mind facing hard things. We don’t mind when bad things happen to us. What we mind—what we fear and what drives us crazy—is that we will have to face these things alone—by ourselves.

The Israelites whispered to Moses, “God got us out of Egypt. He tells us there is a Promised Land. Is He going to stick with us? Is He going to be here?” So Moses announced, “Yes, He is, and in fact, God wants us to build Him a tent.” That’s why the people got so excited and gave so much. Moses said, “You need to stop giving. I have enough.” This proves to me right there that Moses was not a Baptist! The Israelites were so excited because God was going to stay with them. “God is going to have a tent right in the middle of us. He’s going to be here.” No matter where you were in that camp it was designed so that you could see the Tabernacle wherever you were. The cloud of God’s holiness would hover over

that tent and that let you know God was there and when the cloud moved that let you know, “Pack up—we’re moving.”

There are two incredibly important Christian truths that John the poet writes about. One truth, our God is here and He is here to stay. The second truth, our God is always on the move. If you are going to be with Him then you will stay on your own journey, because Christianity is about a journey. It’s about becoming. It’s not about finding a place and staying there. It’s not about finding a place and putting down roots. It’s a matter of grabbing your tent and putting it as close to God’s tent as you can, so that you know where He is. When He moves, you move. It was called the “tent of meeting,” because if anyone wanted to hear from God they would go there and they would meet with God. In one word John says the “tent of meeting”—the Tabernacle, the living symbol that God is with His people—the living symbol that God is not going to leave us out here is found in one word.

It is Jesus. He lives among us. He pitched his tent with us. He lives in our world, eats our food, walks our roads, and hears our stories. He’s right in the middle of our lives, and John says, “We saw Him. We were there.” What did they see? “We saw the very glory of God.” This word, glory, is another great word we can’t translate. When you start talking about glory you end up saying, “You know, it’s kind of like. . .and it’s kind of like. . .” It is the essence of God. It’s all of God in

one word. Part of the word, glory, means weight—gravity. When God reveals His glory there is a serious, weightiness to it.

The sun holds all the planets in their orbits because the sun has the most powerful gravitational force in our little solar system. Everything is pulled into a relationship with the sun. God has such great weight and power He pulls everything into a relationship with Him. Everything circles Him. Light is that part of God that makes you hide your eyes very quickly. It's like looking into the sun, or being in a dark room and having somebody hit you in the eyes with a very bright light. You wince and try to cover your eyes, lest your eyes be damaged. It's what God let Moses see in the burning bush—this fire that never consumed the bush, for the fire was burning from itself. It's the power of God that exploded in creation. It's that part of an action movie where something blows up. If you're like me, you go to the movie to see something blow up! This word is that part where everything runs together and there is so much power contained in one little area that it explodes. It's the power of God, and the grace of God, and the mercy of God, the light of God and the holiness of God—all running into a space and then exploding out—so that it makes you fall in worship.

John said, “We saw that. We saw it when He calmed the storm. We saw it on the Mount of Transfiguration when the glory of God could not be contained in His

body any longer and He was transfigured. When He changed we saw that. We saw it in the resurrection.” This glory tells us that our God can help us. He’s strong enough and powerful enough to change things to help us.

Sometimes you will hear somebody say, “My life is so messed up nothing can be done. My life is so full of bad decisions that I’m so ashamed of that God can’t do anything with me.” Let me tell you about the power of our God and about His glory. Our God is so powerful that He can take that black hole of a moment—that moment that you would die if anybody ever heard about or found out about it, for you would be so ashamed and embarrassed, doing everything you can to hide that moment in your past. Our God is so powerful that He will take that moment and so transform it that it will become the centerpiece of your testimony. You will stand up in front of hundreds of people you do not know and say, “This is the mistake I made. This is what somebody did to me that caused shame in my life and that hurt me. Then I met Jesus Christ and His glory changed my life. I want to tell you about it.” You will make that point of shame the centerpiece of your testimony.

All things are working in your life because of the goodness of our God. That’s what John is talking about, and he does it with grace and truth. He brought both grace and truth together when we have a hard time keeping these together. We like

splitting them up. We like taking Jesus in little pieces. It depends on what is going on in our life as to what piece becomes our favorite piece. If we have messed up, and if we have sinned—especially if its one of those sins we like doing again and again—if it is one of those repeat offenses we love that He is gracious. We say to ourselves, “Jesus will forgive us when we mess up like this.” But we don’t want to have Jesus bring us the truth. We like the grace part, because mistakenly, we think it lets us off the hook. It doesn’t.

Jesus loves us enough that He always tells us the truth. One of the things He tells us in forgiveness is, “You can’t live the way you are living. You can’t do the things you keep doing. They will destroy your life.” That’s the truth. Sometimes we grab the truth, especially if, for once in our lives, we are right and a friend is wrong. We will grab the truth, like a club, and beat Jesus into them. All of a sudden the righteousness of Jesus becomes our self- righteousness. Jesus brings both grace and truth together. He comes to forgive. He comes in mercy. He comes to restore and to heal. He comes so your feet will be put on the right path, and your eyes will see the right thing, and your heart will know the right thing. That’s the truth.

The word for truth means “to reveal or to uncover,” to let you know what the essence of the thing is—so that nothing is hidden. Everything is known. Boy,

there is a lot of revelation going on in our world right now, isn't there? There is a lot of uncovering. A lot of what we are finding out about our system, about our nation and about each other is not that pretty, is it? 50 Billion dollars is gone, because it has been revealed that it was a Ponzi scheme. Countless numbers of people invested with this man in New York, and their money is now gone. People went to bed one night, thinking that they were secure and well off. They woke up the next morning dead broke. It was revealed. Corporations and institutions that we thought would last forever—at least until Jesus comes back—have now been revealed as being unsteady and unable to support the dreams that we had placed in them. This is a revealing.

You see, that's part of what Jesus does, isn't it? Simeon told Mary, "Your Son will be set up so that many will rise and fall because of Him." It is an awful moment, isn't it, when Jesus pulls back the curtain—pulls back the covering—and says, "This is you. This is your life. This is what you have hoped in and it is what you have counted on, and this hope holds your life." It is an awful moment. AA calls it "hitting bottom." It's that moment when you realize you cannot make it by yourself. You cannot undue what you have done. You cannot fix what you have messed up. Jesus reveals that.

But John makes sure we know something else that Jesus reveals. He reveals to us the one and only Father—the one and only God. Christianity is not about you getting to God. Christianity is about God coming to you. You can't figure out God. You can't dream up God. You can't sit down with a book of philosophy and get to know God. The only way you know God is when somebody shows you. The only way that any of us know who the Father is comes when Jesus says, "This is who the Father is. This is His heart. This is why He has sent Me—so that you can know that He is never going to give up on you. That's the grace. That's the truth. John writes that we have gift, after gift, after gift, after gift—all flowing out of who Jesus is.

It's a handful of words—a couple of phrases. God loves you enough that Jesus pitched His tent right in the middle of your mess—right in the middle of my life. This chasm between us and God that we could not cross—this valley that was too deep and too hard—Jesus Himself crossed and pitched His tent next to you, so that everyday, anyway you looked, you would know God is with you. The Savior is here in the tent He pitched next to you.