

Believe in His Name

John 1:1-18

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First Central Congregational UCC

5 January 2014

With your imagination, let's take a trip together for a moment. Let's travel to the ancient world. Let your mind roam across the oceans of time and space back two thousand years to the eastern Mediterranean.

Now, you might imagine that we are going to Bethlehem, but we are not. Instead of settling down at the inn or beside the manger or in the shepherds' fields, let your imagination take flight south, across the Judean wilderness. Let's pass over and beyond those barren hills into the emptiness of the Sinai peninsula and the great sand desert. Remember those terrifying desert sequences in the film *Lawrence of Arabia*. But, let's keep moving and cross the Red Sea into more fertile regions to the delta of the Nile River. There, let us enter the ancient and splendid city of Alexandria. It is a great city built on the coast by Alexander the Great. Let's go down by the sea shore and there, standing before us, is that glorious ancient monument, the Library of Alexandria. Together let's enter its hallowed walls and come into its rooms of learning. Here is a well-ordered, rational world. The stately columns of the Greek architecture inspire in us a sense of stability. They command civility and decorum. Sitting here we can understand the world; we can plumb its mysteries and bring order to its chaos. Let us imagine we are ancient, Alexandrian scholars, studying the best learning of our day.

It is early in the second century of the Common Era, and we open a newly arrived volume and read, "In the beginning was the Logos and the Logos was with God and was divine." We read on that all things came into being through the Logos and that the Logos would enlighten all people.

We nod in agreement, because these words and ideas are familiar to us, they resonate with centuries of the best philosophical learning. And we recall some things from the tradition.

Six centuries before, Heraclitus took this common term logos that means "word," "reason," "statement," "reckoning," "account," and used it metaphysically. Heraclitus asserted that the cosmos is governed by a fire-like Logos, a divine force that produces the order and pattern discernible in the flux of nature. He believed that this force is similar to human reason and that human reason itself partook of the divine Logos.

A couple of centuries after Heraclitus, a group called the Stoics conceived the Logos as a rational divine power that orders and directs the universe; they identified it with God, nature, and fate. The Logos is "present everywhere," and through the faculty of reason, all human beings share in the divine reason. The Stoics stressed the rule "Follow where the Logos leads."

Sitting in second century Alexandria, we would also recall that great Jewish thinker Philo, who taught in this very city just a century before. Philo had used the concept of the Logos in his effort to synthesize the Jewish tradition with the works of Plato. According to Philo, the Logos is a mediating principle between God and the world and can be understood as

God's Word or the Divine Wisdom, which is immanent in the world.

As we listen to the words of this scroll as it is read to us, all these thoughts run through our minds. This is a text that agrees with the best wisdom of our time. It is a philosophical text, speaking of a well-ordered world and one made so by divine reason.

But then the reader says "And the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us" and we are astonished. Scandalized even.

The Alexandrian students of the second century who may have read the Gospel of John would have been astonished because while the whole of their philosophical tradition was confirmed in the opening sentences of the Gospel it was wrenched apart in the remaining words. Into this majestic text the vulgarities of fleshy, human existence invade.

These gospel words are among the most radical ever uttered. Because they tell us this great divine Logos became flesh, became a particular human being. I can't emphasize enough how this would have flown in the face of centuries of received wisdom. The Logos is divine and orderly and rational. But this author is telling us that the Logos became flesh. It became a human being. It was a baby. Babies wet themselves and throw up and have runny noses. This isn't order and wisdom. And everyone knows that the crying of babes is far from rational. Here is the heresy of heresies, the Logos became flesh!

Much is made of the fact that Jesus did not live up to the expectations of his Jewish contemporaries who believed that the Messiah would come in power and glory. Not enough is made of the fact that this life also upset the understanding of the intellectuals of the ancient world. They were used to goodness and truth being found in what was beautiful and noble. And the beautiful and noble were well-ordered and rational. Their architecture was formal and symmetrical. Their cities were laid out according to well-thought out plans. They were themselves elites who valued the civilization they had created.

And here come the Christians saying such vulgar things. The Christians emphasized the poor and the uneducated and the powerless. They elevated women and outcasts. They glorified the body, even celebrating it during a ceremony called the Eucharist. And the greatest affront of all was that the divine wisdom was incarnate not in Caesar Augustus but in a Jewish peasant who had no power and no apparent glory and was executed in the backwater of the Empire.

The author of this gospel gives the eternal Divine logos a name, Jesus. He claims that we can become the children of God if we believe in this name, Jesus. That from this belief will come grace and truth and the glory of God. That Jesus is the light of the world who enlightens all people.

The Logos is not some concept, some spiritual truth, some esoteric wisdom. It is a real person with a body and a name. Jesus. One who "knew hope and fear," whose eyes saw the night stars, who tasted honey and apples, who thirsted and touched, and even smelled the rain in Galilee.

And it is in this one that the Gospel tells us that we are to believe.

For the next few months I'm going to be preaching from the Gospel of John. John is a fascinating and sometimes enigmatic book. It is the last of the gospels and so very different

from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Scholars do not think it is a reliable account of the historical Jesus, as it is much more a theological and philosophical reflection on what Jesus came to mean to the early Christians.

And one of the key themes of this gospel is “believing.” We encounter it here in today’s passage in this idea that we can receive the power to become the children of God if we believe in the name of Jesus. Nearly 100 times “believe” is used in John, though it is quite rare in the other gospels.

What does it mean to believe? And what do we believe? I want to explore these questions during the season of Epiphany.

And that might make us a little uncomfortable, because the liberal mainline Protestant churches have in the last century or so come to focus less on belief and more on action. And for good reason that change occurred. We once cared more about doctrine. Confirmation class, for instance, would have once been much more about memorizing what the church had come to believe about a series of theological issues. But today we are much more concerned that we live a certain way. That we be compassionate and forgiving. That we commit ourselves to service for those in need. That we care for the sick and hurting. That we advocate for justice for the oppressed. The measure of what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, is not whether we intellectually assent to the creed; it is about how we live. And I wholeheartedly endorse that transition.

But, that doesn’t mean that believing is unimportant. To speak logically, belief may not be sufficient in the Christian life, but it may still be necessary. Of course, we must also consider what it means to believe. Is belief limited to intellectual agreement with a list of doctrinal statements? I think you can guess that I’m going to say “No” to that. That definition is most definitely not what the author of the Gospel of John has in mind. And part of what we’ll explore in the coming weeks is what this gospel means when it speaks of “believing.”

My perspective has been guided by the writing of the theologian James McClendon. He wrote that Christian conviction includes a vision, faith, and moral living. We might be able to speak of these separately, but they are actually one organic whole. This means that our actions and how we live cannot be completely separated from what we think and believe and hope for. When he spoke of doctrine, he focused on what churches should teach, and especially what they teach so that people ended up living the Christian life. He explored the question, “What must the church teach to be the church now?” In other words, if we are going to be people of service, compassion, forgiveness, and justice, those actions only result from us thinking and believing certain things.

Pick up one of the pew bibles for a moment and open the back cover. There you will find a bulleted list entitled “What We Believe.” This is part of a description of who the United Church of Christ is. And you can see what some of the core principles we teach are. And you’ll realize that we have only become the church that we currently are—one committed to equality, the environment, peace and social justice—because these were the doctrines that have guided us. Doctrines that emphasized freedom, diversity, charity, and the continuing revelation of God.

At the root of all of these doctrines lies our conviction that in Jesus of Nazareth the life-saving purposes of God are revealed. Let’s get back to the Gospel of John for a moment.

In this grand and beautiful opening chapter, the gospel boldly proclaims that a historical

person, Jesus of Nazareth, was the physical incarnation of the eternal and divine Logos that created the world and enlightens human reason and understanding. And that it is by believing in this person, Jesus, that we receive the divine power and glory in ourselves. This is audacious, maybe even outrageous, and I suspect it is something that many in this room find impossible to believe.

So, let's talk about that this Epiphany. Can we believe? What does it mean to believe? What is the content of our belief? How does our belief help to supply meaning and coherence for our lives?

The simplest lesson we can take from today's gospel reading is that what we are searching for will not be discovered in those persons and places filled with glory and might. It will not be found in the great but abstract philosophical systems. Instead, the Christian story is that our meaning can be located in human flesh. It is a bold and wonderful claim and in it we will find our salvation.