

Signs of the Times: Lenten Readings from the Gospel of John

Session 1 -- Introduction

Written by John the Beloved Disciple (whose exact identity is not known), the Fourth Gospel speaks to our deepest longing, the longing for love and unity. In it we learn how to be part of the divine life that binds the Creator and the creative Word into a family of Father and Son, through the intervention of the Spirit, who will teach us all that we need to know. The gospel itself instructs us in who Jesus is, with the avowed purpose of bringing us to believe that he is Messiah and Word, the first step in becoming part of the divine life.

The four New Testament books that seem to have emerged from John's pen (the Fourth Gospel and the three epistles of John) As we read these four texts, we can see that the author was a leader and spokesman of the apostolic church, trying to preserve his understanding of and teaching about Jesus. We can also tell from these four works that they were written to and for a community that had suffered from serious internal disagreements about the legacy of the Beloved Disciple. Above all, we can see that he was a beautiful and poetic writer and a profound theologian. Whoever the Beloved Disciple may have been, he had clearly meditated, taught, and preached for many years on certain key incidents, conversations, and teachings by Jesus.

The gospel that he produced is divided into four sections:

- the Prologue (Jn 1.1-18);

- the Book of Signs (Jn 1.19-12.50);
- the Book of Glory (Jn 13.1-20.31); and
- the Epilogue (Jn 21).

The key to John's vision of Jesus and his mission can be found in the prologue.

Like Mark, the Beloved Disciple begins his gospel at the beginning. In fact he goes back to the very beginning, the creation of the world, by echoing the first words of the Bible, Genesis 1.1, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." This prologue is thought to combine a hymn popular in the community with the familiar story of John the Baptist, thus juxtaposing two beginnings, the beginning of creation and the beginning of Jesus' story. Beyond the story of the Word and the story of John the Baptist, though, the prologue weaves in a third story, how believers are transformed by the Word, but only after the Word becomes human.

It is vital to our understanding of the gospel that we see how it blends the two levels of reality. For John and his community, it is essential to keep before our eyes that Jesus is simultaneously both "God's only Son, he who is nearest to the Father's heart" and a man from Nazareth who gets thirsty after a hot and dusty walk and cries when his good friend Lazarus dies. In fact Jesus' unique existence as God and Man makes possible what he has come to do. As the prologue says, "to those who put their trust in him, he gave the right to become children of God, born not of human stock, by the physical desire of a human father, but of God."

These four Lenten gospels are all chosen from the second section, the Book of Signs. In that section, the evangelist has chosen out of his tradition, seven principal signs by which Jesus can be known as the Messiah -- the changing of water to wine, the healing

of a child, the healing of a paralytic at the pool of Bethesda, the multiplication of the loaves, the healing of a man born blind, the raising of Lazarus, and the Resurrection (referenced in the Book of Signs (Jn 2.18-22) and described in the Book of Glory (Jn 20.1-18)) -- and embedded them in a series of discourses by Jesus, and debates and conversations with his opponents and others.

Here we have two of those seven signs -- the healing of a man born blind and the raising of Lazarus -- and two dialogues -- Jesus' conversations with Nicodemus and with the Samaritan woman at the well -- providing four of the Gospel lections for this Lent. Traditionally in Lent, we strive through prayer, almsgiving, and fasting to go deeper into the heart of the gospel so as to prepare spiritually for Easter and the resurrection. This Lent in Year A, we have readings from the Old Testament and the Epistles of Paul that concentrate on two questions about our common human situation -- how did we get into this mess? and what can be done about it? The answers involve a recognition of human failure through the fall, an acknowledgement of God's loving intervention through covenant and the giving of a Messiah, and our response. These four Gospels challenge us to respond to God with messages about salvation, healing, rebirth, and the gift of the very stuff of life in light, food, and water. In Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, he contrasts water baptism (like John's and his disciples') with spirit baptism; he uses the well water as a way to talk about God and eternal life with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. In the signs of the healing of the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus, John reaches back to the prologue for the key concepts of light and life and illustrates them with these signs that also reflect the divine power and glory, the themes of the Book of Glory, the third part of John's gospel.

Session 2

Rebirth: John 3.1-17

The conversation with Nicodemus is full of contrasts and apparent disjunctions, beginning with the basic contrast between light and darkness, but going on to contrasts between heaven and earth, spirit and flesh, judgement and salvation. In it, Jesus constantly prods Nicodemus, challenging him to go deeper in his encounter with God.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to him,

‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’

‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Focus

- Most of this conversation focuses on being born from above, or in another translation, being born again (the Greek word Jesus uses means both, which is part of the source of Nicodemus' confusion). What does it mean to be born from above?
- John 3.16 (For God so loved the world ...) is arguably the best known verse in John, perhaps in the whole New Testament, and here we see it in its context within the Gospel -- how does it relate to what precedes and follows it?

- In the synoptic gospels, Jesus' teaching in Galilee is full of parables and sayings about the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God. In John he only talks of it here. What is the Kingdom of God in John's Gospel? How do we enter it?

Session 3

The Water of Life: John 4.5-42

In this conversation, the figure of water is used as a recurring symbol. Jesus speaks on a spiritual level about the living water, whose recipient will never thirst, but the woman hears him only on a physical level at first, as speaking about the spring water that feeds the well. Once again as in the story of Nicodemus, the conversation is challenging, but here it is the woman who challenges Jesus -- as she comes to understand the enormity of what he is offering, she challenges him with tougher questions! This seems to be a kind of response that Jesus approves of in those who seek him out.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in

them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’

Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’ The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’ The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’ Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, ‘Rabbi, eat something.’ But he said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about.’ So the disciples said to one another, ‘Surely no one has brought him something to eat?’ Jesus said to them, ‘My food

is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, “Four months more, then comes the harvest”? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, “One sows and another reaps.” I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.’

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.’

Focus

- The woman recognises Jesus first as a prophet and then as Messiah, and by her testimony about him, she brings her neighbours to believe as well. In this way she is like the evangelist, who has picked these particular signs and events in Jesus life so that we, his readers, might believe. How do we recognise Jesus as prophet and Messiah in our lives?
- How do we worship in spirit and in truth? What does that mean in our daily lives?
- What does it mean to reap that for which one has not laboured? Does this apply to us as well as to the prophets? How?

Session 4

Light for the World: John 9.1-41

All the evangelists tell us stories about healings that Jesus performed -- in many cases choosing events that were reminiscent of healings earlier performed by the prophets. In this story of the healing of a blind beggar, John emphasised the unique nature of what Jesus has done in curing a man born blind. By adding the story of the Pharisees' reaction, the evangelist also was able to work on two levels, as in the stories of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman as well, contrasting spiritual blindness with physical blindness, and showing Jesus as the bringer of light on both planes.

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like

him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.' The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered

them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.

Focus

- The dialogues between the Pharisees and others, such as the beggar and Jesus himself, contrast physical with spiritual blindness -- how are the Pharisees spiritually blind? How does the beggar demonstrate spiritual sight, even when he

is still physically blind?

- Notice that the name of the pool means "sent" -- how can we apply that both to the beggar and to Jesus?
- Insofar as we are called to imitate Jesus in the world, we must also strive to be light for the world -- what does that mean in our lives as individuals and as a church?

Session 5

Resurrection and Life: John 11.1-45

This is the final sign of the Book of Signs, and the one which precipitates the plot to arrest Jesus. The story of Lazarus' raising also provides the context for perhaps the best known of Jesus' I AM sayings -- I am the resurrection and the life.

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been

speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also

weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Focus

- As he had emphasised the uniqueness of Jesus' ability to heal a man born blind, here the elder sets Jesus' act apart from that of Elisha by having Martha point out that her brother had been in his tomb long enough for decomposition to begin, four days in a hot climate. Jesus' reply to her uncompromising practicality looks

ahead to the later section of the Gospel: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" How does Jesus demonstrate the glory of God here and in his own death and resurrection?

- Martha gets all the good responses in this story, likely because she is the sister who keeps on pushing. For example, it is to her that Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life." What does this tell us about our own interaction with God? What does it mean to acknowledge a God who welcomes our pushing?
- Here as in the prologue, light (as in Jesus' words to the apostles about daylight and walking in darkness) and life are mingled. There the elder wrote, "What had come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people." How is the life we encounter in Jesus our light?

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