

Week 1 Veiled in Flesh | The Deity of Christ

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Introduction

Good morning, Union Church. My name is Kyle, and I'm one of the pastors here. It's my privilege to open up the Word with you in this Advent season.

Advent, for those who don't know, traditionally runs through the four Sundays leading up to Christmas, and we at Union often will take a break from whatever we've been preaching, we'll noticeably shift the tone of our services, and include some extra elements during Advent to help us *lean into* the season of preparing for Christmas.

This year, for example, Jenn Hershberger has put together once again our annual "Advent Project"—which is a weekly devotional and reflection that includes varying pieces of art and music created and curated by Union Church people to help you and your families to engage in some Advent practices. You can find this year's Advent project at unionchurchmi.com/advent. Another thing happening is our Union Kids—at least, the older ages (Pre-school through second grade)—will be following along with our sermon series, which allows, for families to reflect on themes together after church or during the week. So, I'd encourage you to follow up on that with your kids.

Of course, all of this extra "holiday" stuff could very easily become mere sentiment. Sentiment that actually could be dangerous. Tim Keller: "One of the problems with Christmas is that we think we are getting meaningfulness too easily... You go to a service, you get together with family, you sing carols, and you get all dreamy and happy, and it's good, because you're connecting Christmas to family, gifts, break from work, things like that. But we settle for too little."¹

The meaning that we are meant to get at Christmas is not mere consumeristic endorphins from finding the best Amazon deal or the rush of opening gifts—or packages that show up at our door daily like a capitalist Advent calendar. The meaning we are meant to get flows from a person—because it's all about waiting for a person.

What we're all doing, over the next four weeks, is waiting. We're waiting, anxiously, for Christmas. And the point of that is to stoke in us a similar kind of anxious, hopeful waiting, waiting for Jesus Christ to return. But, if you're going to be a person who is hopefully waiting for Christ, you better have a good idea of exactly who it is you're waiting for.

Think about when someone is excited because they get to meet a famous person, or someone they've admired from afar for a long time, and they finally meet them, and they're radically

¹ Sermon preached on December 13, 2009: "The Word Made Flesh". Accessed at <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/the-word-made-flesh/>.

disappointed, because who that person really was did not match what they expected. The worst thing for anybody who professes to be a Christian and is looking forward to Christ's return would be for him to be someone totally different than we expect. If we don't know the person we are waiting for, then what is our hope grounded on? Nothing but sentimentality and positive feeling.

So, this Advent season, we're going to look at the first 18 verses of the gospel of John. You know that there are four books we call "the gospels" in the New Testament, accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Well, often during Christmas time, we will read and preach from the gospels of Matthew and Luke, which describe the story of Christ's birth—the angels and shepherds and manger and wise men and all that. But the gospel of John doesn't start with the story of Christ's first coming—it starts with an extended description of the person who came. In other words, John doesn't describe what happened at that first Christmas, but he describes the person who is at the center of it. And that is what we are eager to be about this December: Who is this Jesus, this baby born in a manger? What is all of this about? This is where we are going to draw real meaning this Christmas: from knowing and loving and savoring the person who stands at the center of it.

Main Point

And we're going to start this week with just the first three verses of John, which tell us one critically important thing: **Jesus Christ of Nazareth is God Almighty, creator and supreme ruler of the heavens and the earth. Jesus is God.**

Now, this might seem incredibly simple for some of you. But simple as it may seem, we cannot let it pass us by unnoticed. Don't tune out. This is critical for a few reasons, let me just give you three quick ones (two practical, one theological).

1. We live in a county with several very visible congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter-day Saints (Mormons). If we are trying to be missional and bring the gospel to people we encounter in our community, that will include those two groups—both of which use a lot of similar language as we might in describing God and the gospel and the Bible, but, among other differences, do not believe that Jesus is God. If we are going to be rightfully missional in our county, we need to know why we believe that Jesus is God and totally worthy of our worship.
2. Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons are not the only people in our culture that have a high view of Jesus, but do not believe he is God. In addition to other religions, like Islam, I would argue that the default attitude toward the person of Jesus in our country is generally positive: He seems like he was a good guy, he had some great things to say about loving people and caring for the poor—but he is not God. He is not an object of their worship and devotion. He's not one we are obligated to obey. If we are going to be missional to the culture around us, we must understand why Jesus's identity as God of the universe matters—for us and for our neighbors.
3. Finally, the identity of Jesus as God is not merely the center of Christmas. It is the center of Christianity. J. Oswald Sanders, a writer and director of the China Inland Mission organization in the 50s, wrote this: **"The deity of Christ is the key doctrine of Scripture. Reject it, and the**

Bible becomes a confused jumble of words devoid of any unifying theme. Accept it, and the Bible becomes an intelligible and ordered revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is the center of Christianity, and the conception we form of Christianity is therefore the conception we have of Him.” How we think about Jesus has massive implications.

So, today, we’re going to explore the idea that John begins with: That Jesus is God. And we’re going to see three things: The “When” of Jesus, the “Who” of Jesus, and the “What” of Jesus.

1. When: Jesus has always existed.

One of the most fascinating decisions a writer can make is what to make his opening line.

My all-time favorite, I’m sure you can guess if you know me, is “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.”

Or, another favorite, from *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*: “There was a boy named Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.”

The opening line to a book tells you much about the person who wrote it, about the tone of the book, about what you’re getting into.

The first thing we see in John’s opening to his gospel is the “when” of Jesus: **“In the beginning was the Word…”**

Now, we know from just a little bit further along, in verses 14-18, that “the Word” John is talking about is Jesus Christ, the Word became flesh. But John starts his gospel with this profound statement: **“In the beginning was the Word.”**

And this statement is profoundly intentional. Because, of course, there is another book that famously begins with the words “In the beginning.” The book of Genesis, the very beginning of the entire Bible, starts off with: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The beginning that Genesis—and John—is talking about is the beginning of everything, of everything tangible and earthy, of everything heavenly and spiritual. The beginning of bugs and the beginning of angels. The beginning of all things except one thing: the God who began the rest.

And John is not hiding his intentions in the very first phrase of his Gospel: **In the beginning was the Word.** Not, “In the beginning the Word was created.” Not, “In the beginning the Word was spoken.” Not even, “In the beginning, the Word was doing something.” No, in the beginning, the Word simply was. He just “was.”

And here, too, John is taking inspiration from earlier in scripture. Not from Genesis, but from Exodus, when God revealed his name to Moses at the burning bush and said: “*I am who I am*. Say this to the people of Israel: *I am* has sent me to you.” “I am” of course, is what the Hebrew word “Yahweh” stands for. The name of God that he was distinguished by is simply “I Am.”

It’s the same name that Jesus would later ascribe to himself, when he said to the Pharisees: “before Abraham was, I am!”—and then the Pharisees grabbed rocks to stone him then and there, because they knew exactly what he was doing (John 8:58-59).

And John is taking that name and he’s applying it to the Word, to Jesus, at the beginning of time itself: When everything else *came into* existence, He was! He just was. He didn’t come into being. He didn’t change or grow. He just “bes”. He just is. In the beginning, he was. Right now, as the seasons change and we live and die, he simply is. For all eternity, he will be.

In the book of Revelation, at the end of the Bible, John starts out Revelation by quoting God as saying this: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:8). Alpha and Omega, many of you probably know, are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. There is no *before* the Alpha. There is no *after* the Omega.

What God is saying is that when it comes to reality, there is no before God and no after God. Nothing exists outside of God. He is always *there*, whether you go, as the Psalm says, to the heights of heaven, to the grave itself, or to the utter depths of the seas, he is *there*. No matter how far back in time or forward you go, he is *there*. As one pastor put it, he is “the absolute reality.”² This is a part of what distinguishes him as God. He simply is.

And at the end of Revelation, John cites Jesus using those same words: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 22:13). Jesus, the Son of God, the Word, simply is. He is God, and as God, he is the bedrock foundation of reality itself.

And that has massive implications. But, for now, I’ll just look at one. Theologian John Frame once asked, what I think is, a really provocative question: Since our universe contains both persons (you and me) and impersonal things (matter, motion, chance, time, space, etc.), which is fundamental? Is the impersonal aspect of the universe grounded in the personal, or did the persons of the universe, life itself, come from the impersonal?

Atheists believe that it is the impersonal, dead things that are the foundation of everything else. As one novelist put it, “In the beginning there was nothing, which exploded.”³ That is to say, if you are a naturalist, if you don’t believe in anything beyond what we can see, taste, touch, and feel, then things like conscience and reason and wisdom and love and virtue are just accidental byproducts of chance. They, and all the things we do, say, or believe, are of no consequence.

But, if, as Christians believe, the personal is foundational, then our lives are of enormous consequence. Frame puts it like this:

² John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*, p. 22.

³ Terry Pratchett, *Lords and Ladies*.

But if the personal is primary, then the world was made according to a rational plan that can be understood by rational minds. Friendship and love are not only profound human experiences, but fundamental ingredients of the whole world order. There is Someone who wants there to be friendship, who wants there to be love. All the wonderful things that we find in personality—intelligence, compassion, creativity, love, justice—are not ephemeral data, doomed to be snuffed out in cosmic calamity; rather, they are aspects of what is most permanent, most ultimate. They are what the universe is really all about. Moral goodness is part of the great design of the universe. If personality is absolute, there is One who cares about what we do.⁴

What John says here, to start this book, is that it's not vague "personal forces" at the center of the universe. It's a person. The person, you might say. And that is the person we're waiting for.

2. Who: Jesus Christ is the Son of God in all fullness of God.

So, we've unpacked the "when" of Jesus—he has always existed from eternity past until forever. But, now John continues to describe him, and we really get a sense of "who" he is. He is the Son of God, in whom exists all the fullness of God.

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.

The first thing I want to highlight here is the name that John is using for Jesus: The Word. What does that mean? Well, there's a whole host of directions that we could go here, I think there's actually quite a bit of depth here, but I think, at its core, what this means is that Jesus is the supreme revelation of who God is. He is the deepest, clearest, completely true to reality revelation of God's nature and character.

Think about it this way: It can be really difficult to ascertain motivations and meaning behind action if you don't talk to somebody. How often does our conflict in our life stem from the fact that we see someone acting, hear about somebody else's life or actions, and we make assumptions about what they're thinking, about what their motivations are, without asking them? Or, we just get frustrated: "I can't believe they'd do that!"—but we have no clue behind the why.

In the first year or two of our marriage, Ashley and I would have this weird tension and conflict that I could not figure out. I was serving as the leader of a middle school youth group, and Ashley was a volunteer. And we had youth group on Sunday nights, so we always had a long day on Sunday—good days, but long days capped off by working with 30 middle schoolers. And we would get in the car after a long day, and we'd start driving, and Ashley would just be totally silent, looking straight ahead or out the window. And, as a young married guy who just spent time directing his team on how to deal with 30 prepubescent teens, I would immediately get nervous—what's wrong? And I'd ask the question: "You okay?" And she'd just kind of grunt,

⁴ Accessed on Twitter.com: <https://twitter.com/DrJohnFrame/status/1638483037284384768>.

“yeah.” And my alarm bells are just going off. So, I’d ask again: “You sure?” Same response. So I’d keep prodding, until eventually, she’d explode: Yes, I’m okay! Stop asking! And this just kept happening—and finally, we sat down and had a conversation where she explained to me: When she’s tired, she kind of shuts down, withdraws. She’s perfectly content to just sit in quiet and relax. And this was mind-blowing to me, because in my house growing up, talking was the default state. If you weren’t talking, you were upset. So, I’d just been assuming that she was always upset when she’d withdraw like that, but she was just tired. She needed a break.

I can get clues about what my wife is thinking and feeling by her body language, by her actions, by the look on her face. But I can only get clues. I can’t get clarity unless she tells me.

And this is the role that Jesus plays regarding God. The Son of God is the speech of God. He is the outworking of God’s heart, God’s thoughts, God’s character, God’s wisdom—in fact, in 1 Corinthians, Paul describes Christ as “the power of God and wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24).

This is how Charles Spurgeon, a English pastor in the 1800s, put it: “God in nature has revealed himself, as it were, inarticulately and indistinctly (remember, we talked about that a few weeks ago in Romans 1, that God’s power and eternal nature are seen in nature); but, in his Son, he has revealed himself as a man declares his inmost thoughts, by distinct and intelligible speech. Jesus is to the Father what speech is to us; he is the unfolding of the Father’s thoughts, the revelation of the Father’s heart. He that hath seen Christ hath seen the Father.”⁵

And the reason this description makes any sense at all, of course, as John says, is because Jesus *is* God. He is not merely a god, as a polytheist might say—for there is only one God. He is not merely possess some quality of divinity, as a Jehovah’s Witness might say—he is God himself. And the thing is, even if this verse wasn’t in the Bible, all of the Scriptures would shout this reality from the rooftops!

We’ve already gone over how Jesus ascribed YHWH, the divine name, to himself in John 8 and how Jesus described himself in the same way God Almighty did in Revelation as the Alpha and the Omega. John says the same thing in one of his letters, in 1 John 5:20, he says Jesus is “the true God and eternal life.” Or think of another name that is given to him, in the Old Testament and cited in the gospel of Matthew: Immanuel, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). Or think of the characteristics that are ascribed to him: In 1 Timothy Paul says that Jesus is “the only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality” (1 Tim. 6:15-16). Colossians describes him as sustaining the universe at every moment—“in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17) and “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:19). In Hebrews 1, angels are described as worshiping him! Angels don’t worship men. They don’t worship other angels. Angels worship one being and one being only: God Almighty (Rev. 22:9).

We could go on and on, but the point is that the Word, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is God.

⁵ Charles Spurgeon, *Good Tidings of Great Joy* (1901. Reprint. Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2023), 66.

And at the same time, John says, there is some distinction to be made: For the Word was *with* God. This is the doctrine of the Trinity, peeking out in the midst of this glorious declaration of Christ's divinity: That God, even as one being, is made up of three persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God exists as one united God, but in three persons existing in loving, glorious relationship.⁶

Each of the persons is fully God—they have the same divine nature, same will, same eternity, same power, none is greater or lesser than the other. But the three persons are three real, different persons that can have relationship with one another.

Certainly, this can be confusing. I think this one quote from a medieval theologian sums it up nicely: 'It is rashness to search too far into it. It is piety to believe it. It is life eternal to know it. And we can never have a full comprehension of it, till we come to enjoy it.'⁷

So, to sum all this up: Jesus is the Son of God in whom is the fullness of God.

Now, the question, before we get to the final piece of our passage today, is why does this matter? Why does it matter that Jesus is the Son of God, that in him the fullness of God dwells?

For some of you, your relationship with God is a little bit forced. Jesus—the person of Jesus—that's easy. It's easy to think about having a relationship with him because he was a person, we can read his teaching and see the example of him reaching out and touching the blind man, kneeling down and forgiving the adulterous woman, we can imagine him carrying the cross to Calvary, we can picture scars in his hands—maybe we have an image from a picture or a TV show in our mind—and he just seems relatable.

But to come to God—that's a different story. And Jesus, in your mind, is the one who makes everything okay, he's the one who loves you, and God the Father is really just a cold, indifferent judge who has been appeased *just enough* to accept you.

Now, at Union Church, we are all about the reality that Jesus was our substitute who took our punishment from God that we deserved. And it's a true idea. It's the core mechanism of the gospel. We can be right with God because Christ has taken our place.

But sometimes, we can take that concept and twist it so that we view God the Father as kind of a reluctant father. As one who has taken us in, but just barely. Just by the skin of our teeth, thanks to Jesus. Jesus is the nice one. He's the one who loves us, the older brother who shields us from our father. The Father is just a distant ruler—he's one we know is in charge, but we hope we never actually have to have a conversation with him.

⁶ For more Biblical reflection on this, read Proverbs 8:27-31, where the "Wisdom of God" is personified and described as in relationship with God before creation begins.

⁷ Bernard of Clairveaux, cited by J.C. Ryle in his *Commentary on John*, Vol. I, p. 7.

We remain wary, day in and day out, that God's natural inclination toward us is wrath, is anger, is a father who is displeased with us. And many of you know what it is like to have a father or a mother who is constantly displeased with you.

Practically, I think what this looks like is that when you make a mistake, when you sin, you're paralyzed. Because you don't want to draw the attention of the Father. And when you need something, as you go through your day-to-day life, you're not asking God for help—because the last thing you want to do is bother him. If Jesus were here, you could talk to him, you could ask him—and one day you can't wait to see him—but for now, you're just going to keep your head down and make it through.

Brothers and sisters, don't you see how this misunderstands the nature of who Jesus is? Jesus is the very speech of the Father's thoughts! To know Jesus is to know the Father! The Jesus who healed the paralytic, and forgave the sins of the prostitute, and blessed the little children, and loved the outcast and preached truthfully but gently to the woman at the well—the one who died for his enemies—the heart of that Jesus is the heart of the Father. It's the heart of the Spirit. It's the very heart of God for you.

The Father isn't watching you, waiting for you to slip up so he can discipline you behind Jesus's back. He's cheering you on, watching and waiting to do good to you—which yes, sometimes occurs through discipline. Yes, the only way to get right with God is through Jesus, but the Father is the one who sent Jesus! The Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus! All of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is united in deep, rich love for his people.

So, if you see Jesus as lovely, if you see him as compassionate and full of love for you, if you love him because he's your Savior, you need to know the Father feels the same way toward you. So, come to Jesus, but don't stop there, let the character and heart of Jesus draw you further up and further in to God in all his fullness—Father and Holy Spirit too.

3. Jesus Christ created all that has been created.

We've seen the "when" and the "who" of Jesus, finally, we see the "what" of Jesus in this last verse. What does Jesus do? Well, he creates things. Another piece of Jesus being God is that he created everything that has ever been created.

I love how John words this because there is zero ambiguity in what he's saying:

All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

If you weren't already convinced that Jesus was God, this is as clear as you can get: Jesus Christ was not created, he is Creator.

There are two categories of existence that you can put everything in the universe—the physical universe, the spiritual realm, everything—two buckets and everything belongs in one of those buckets: Was this created or uncreated? Did it have a beginning—a beginning brought about by someone else—or was it uncreated, eternally self-existent?

This school? Made. This shirt? Made. This body? Made. Your soul? Made. Those trees? Made. An F-22 fighter jet? Made. The most powerful person on the planet? Made. The mountains that have stood for millennia? Made. The fish at the deepest parts of the ocean? Made. The very Sun itself? Made. The demons? Made. The Angels? Made. Satan, our great Adversary? Made.

Jesus Christ? Unmade. He, as God, with his Father and Spirit, is the only one in that category.

And he is not only unmade, but He's the maker. Through him God created all things. He is the Word of God, and at creation, God *spoke* and Christ was working to create all things. Every time God speaks—and in his speaking *acts*—Jesus Christ is present and working.

Through him all things that have been made, were made by him.

Why does this matter? There's a little book by an 19th century British pastor named Octavius Winslow titled *The Foot of the Cross*. And the 9th chapter is titled "Bearing the Cross," and it's a meditation on the fact that Jesus Christ carried his cross to Calvary. And as he does so, Winslow thinks about the soldiers lifting the cross upon the shoulders of Jesus, and he says this:

Little did they dream, as they bound the fatal wood upon His shoulder, by whose power that tree was made to grow, and from whom the beings who bore Him to the death drew their existence. So completely was Jesus bent upon saving sinners by the sacrifice of Himself, He created the tree upon which He was to die, and nurtured from infancy the men who were to nail Him to the accursed wood. Oh the depth of Jesus's love to sinners!⁸

"He created the tree upon which He was to die."

He created the manger in which he would lay. He created the Devil who would tempt him. He created the disciple who would betray him.

He created you and me whose sin would compel him to suffer hell on a cross.

If Jesus Christ is the Son of God, in whom all of God's fullness dwells, who has existed for all eternity and made all things that have been made—then nothing about what he did on earth was accidental or reactionary. It was planned. For eternity. Every drop of blood he spilled, every drought of wrath he drunk, every broken sinner saved—all part of a lovely, glorious plan.

⁸ Octavius Winslow, *The Foot of the Cross*, accessed here:
<https://www.gracegems.org/WINSLOW/THE%20FOOT%20OF%20THE%20CROSS.htm>.

Oh, brothers and sisters, remember, this Christmas, that the baby in the manger created the tree on which he was to die. And it is that person whom we are waiting to meet with bated breath.