"The Scandal of the Particular vs the Inevitability of the Incarnation"
John 1:14-18
March 10, 2019
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pr. Nicoletti

Our Scripture reading this morning is from the Gospel of John, chapter one, verses fourteen through eighteen. Please listen carefully, for this is God's Word for us this morning.

"**14** And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. **15** (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") **16** For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. **17** For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. **18** No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."

This is God's word. Surely, we are all like grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. [Isa 40:7b-8]

Let's pray …

Father, as we come to your Word, we pray with the psalmist:
Lord, how can we keep our way pure?
By guarding it according to your Word.
Help us now to seek you with our whole hearts.
Keep us from wandering from your instruction.
Let us store up your word in our hearts,
so that we might never turn from you.
We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:8-11]

On October 21, 2008 atheist scientist Richard Dawkins and Christian scientist John Lennox had a debate at the Oxford Museum of Natural History on the question "Has Science Buried God?"

And Dawkins got to speak first, more or less introducing the question, and he began by pointing out that there are many different things people mean by the word "God" – but that for the purpose of the debate they were having that day, they could narrow their definition down to the God that John Lennox (Dawkins's debate partner) believes in: the Christian God.

And Dawkins said this – he said: "John Lennox is a scientist who believes that Jesus turned water into wine – a scientist who believes that Jesus somehow influenced all those molecules of H_2O and introduced proteins and carbohydrates and tannins and alcohol and turned it into wine. He believes that Jesus walked on water. I have been accustomed," he goes on, "to debating with sophisticated theologians, and I come across John Lennox, who is a scientist, who believes in all those things. *In particular*," Dawkins continues, "he believes that the Creator of the universe, the God who devised the laws of physics, the laws of mathematics, the physical constants – who devised the parsecs of space, billions of light-years of space, billions of years of time – that this paradigm of physical science, this genius of mathematics, couldn't think of a better way to rid the world of sin than to come to this little spec of cosmic dust and have himself tortured and executed so that he could forgive himself. That is profoundly unscientific. Not only is it

unscientific, it doesn't do justice to the grandeur of the universe. It's petty, and small-minded. And that's the God John Lennox believes in."
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVEuQg_Mglw, 6:43-8:22]

Dawkins' commitment to naturalism and materialism – his incredulity at the miracles of Jesus, these are not particularly surprising. If you are familiar with Dawkins, you know he is a fierce critic of supernaturalism.

But what I found especially interesting was that what seemed to upset him even more in his opening remarks, was what he describes as the "pettiness" of the Christian concept of God. He seems most irritated by the fact that Lennox believes that the God who made the universe in all its grandeur would also come incarnate to earth – to, as he puts it, "this little spec of cosmic dust." The very idea that the being who designed the universe would come in the flesh to earth and enter into human history and events, he says emphatically "doesn't do justice to the grandeur of the universe." "It's petty, and small-minded. And that's the God John Lennox believes in."

Dawkins does not think there is good reason to believe in any kind of personal God. But he *especially* rejects the idea that if such a Creator God did exist, that he would take on human form (that he would become flesh) and that he would step foot on earth at all, let alone enter into the particulars of human life in first-century Palestine. This is the idea that is especially offensive to Richard Dawkins.

Now, Dawkins is hostile to religions belief in general, and open in his rejection of this point … but he's not alone in our day in his rejection of the idea that the Creator of this universe would enter into the particulars of time and place in human history.

Another perspective that has come to prominence in our culture as a way to view religion is religious pluralism, especially as developed by twentieth-century philosopher of religion John Hick. In one significant work, titled *Philosophy of Religion*, Hick examines the history of the development of different religions. He encourages us to see each religion and its development as the response of a particular culture to an experience of the divine.

As he puts it, in certain cultures, at certain moments, "divine grace, divine initiative, and divine truth" have intersected with "human faith, human response, and human enlightenment." "They have made their impact upon the stream of human life so as to affect the development of cultures; and what we call Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, are among the resulting historical-cultural phenomena." [111]

According to Hick, these different so-called "religions," are better described as "distinguishable religiocultural streams within human history" which are not "true" or "false" so much as they are "expressions of the diversities of human types and temperaments and thought forms" responding to the divine. [112]

In other words, these human intersections with the divine were expressed in different ways depending on the cultural context of the people who experienced them, and then they took on different institutional and dogmatic elements depending on the culture in which they took root and developed. [109-119]

What does that mean, really? Well many people in our culture, whether they identify as religious or spiritual or something else – they tend to share John Hick's philosophy of religion whether they realize it or not.

The implication of Hick's view is that there is a God, or at least some sort of divine being. And that every human religion contains real truth about that divine being, but that mixed in with that truth are also a number of cultural elements from the particular time and place that that encounter with the divine occurred.

The implication is that to get at the truth of who God is, or what the divine is, you need to sift out all those historic particulars of different religions – or at least see them as more cosmetic than substantive – and try to get at the pure spiritual content of the religions, which would often be elements they all shared. Differences between various religions, or between older religion's perspectives and more modern sensibilities can be discarded as petty cultural elements that got mixed in with the true spiritual content about God.

This kind of perspective is, I think, often an underlying assumption for an increasing number of people in our culture who identify as "spiritual but not religious." It's not that they'd say other religions are false. But they assume each has a mix of good spiritual truths, along with additional elements that were accidentally mixed in from the particulars of when and where the religion developed.

What I think is interesting is that though these two camps – the outspoken atheist and the religious pluralist – Richard Dawkins and John Hick – though they would disagree in many ways, they both agree that if there is a God, he would not be the kind of God who would enter into and inextricably tie himself to the particulars of one specific part of the world or one specific moment of human history. That would be, as Dawkins put it, petty and small-minded. A real God would be above that.

This view of God as necessarily distant from the particulars of time and location and culture is all around us in our world, and so it should not surprise us that we find it in the church as well.

We can see it in a few ways – one of them is the way we think about God. I read this quote to you back in July, and I'm sorry to be repetitive … but apparently not sorry enough to not use it again this morning. It just seems especially relevant.

In a critique of *how* we think about God, and how we therefore do theology, theologian Peter Leithart writes: "Theology [as we tend to practice it] is a specialized, professional language, often employing obscure (Latin and Greek) terms that are never used by anyone but theologians, as if theologians live in and talk about a different world from the one mortals inhabit. […] Whereas the Bible talks about trees and stars, about donkeys and barren women, about kings and queens and carpenters."
He goes on:
"Theology is a 'Victorian' enterprise, neoclassically bright and neat and clean, nothing out of place.
"Whereas the Bible talks about hair, blood, sweat, entrails, menstruation and […] emissions.
[…]
"Here's an experiment you can do at any theological library." he continues, "You even have my permission to try this at home.
"Step 1: Check the indexes of any theologian you choose for any of the words [just mentioned] [That would be "hair, blood, sweat, entrails," and so on.] […]
"Step 2: Check the Bible concordance for the same words.
"Step 3: Ponder these questions: Do theologians talk about the world the same way the Bible does? Do theologians talk about the same world the Bible does?" [51]

Now – I like systematic and philosophical theology. So does Leithart. His point is not that those things are bad.

His point is that we – you and I (forget the professional theologians) – *we* have a tendency to abstract God farther from the particulars of this world than the Bible does. When we think of God, the first things we think about are not particularities of God in this world, but something more detached – something more abstract.

How do *you* think about God?

And if someone told you that they wanted to talk to you about God and then they started discussing the nitty-gritty of this world in terms like the Bible does … would you be tempted to think of them as unspiritual and … well, kind of petty?

Among the atheists, among the pluralists, even among Christians, *we find that we tend to be put-off at best, and scandalized at worst, by the idea that God would enter into, and inextricably tie himself to, the particulars of the physical world or human history.*

While the modern versions of it incorporate their own unique nuances and perspectives, the underlying rejection of God being tied to particular details of human life is not new.

Both the Greeks and the Jews whom John was writing to in the first century shared that judgement.

For the Greeks, particularly in the philosophical schools, there might be a belief in a supreme God, but such a God remained distant from the particulars of human life. Their hope was to ascend to God. But that God was far too lofty to get tied up in this human world we live in. [Brown, 31]

And for the first-century Jew, God's holiness did not keep him from interacting with the human world, but there were limits to how close that God would come and whom he would come close to. Some distance was to be expected.

Whether then or now, the fact that emerges is that we are put-off at best, and scandalized at worst, by the idea that God would enter into, and inextricably tie himself to, the particulars of the physical world or human history.

Modern atheists dismiss the whole idea as petty. Modern people who see themselves as spiritual, see the details of human life in various religions as impurities to be sifted out to get the true spiritual content. We Christians tend to separate the spiritual from the ordinary in our own lives, and when it comes to how we understand God, we often approach so many details of the Bible as if they were part of the husk that we could discard as we pull out the more spiritual kernel. The first-century Greeks rejected the idea of God's engagement with the particulars of the physical world, and the first-century Jews believed their God had to keep some distance from the sin and brokenness of this world.

And to all those perspectives – to our world and to the world of the first century, to all who would be put-off or scandalized by the idea that God would connect himself too closely with one particular time and place in this world, John writes in verse 14: "And the Word became flesh."

In defiance, John tells us that the Creator of the Universe came to this spec of cosmic dust, became flesh and blood, took on a particular body, at a particular time, in a particular place, lived in a particular community in a particular culture and did particular things … and he says that it is in knowing this particular God as he came and acted then and there that we can know the God who made all things.

John tells us that these particular details were not cosmetic flourishes, but central to who God is.

More specifically, as we look closer, we see that John tells us that the nature of God and of his gospel requires incarnation into the particulars of this world.

In other words, John tells his readers that the incarnation, the coming of God in flesh, was inevitable because of who God is. *And* he adds that they had good reason to expect that – or at least not be repulsed by it.

Let's look at that in detail.

Our text this morning is filled with allusions. And one of the things that I think John intends to communicate to his first-century audience is that all of them – both the first-century Greeks and the first-century Jews – should have on some level almost expected the incarnation.

I think he is implying here that if they had followed the trajectory of what they already knew of God, the incarnation would neither have put them off nor scandalized them.

The message to the Greeks is a bit more subtle, but let's start there.

As many of you know, John's use of the term "the Word" here, the word *logos* in Greek, would have been pregnant with meaning for many Greek readers.

Now, while some have argued that John is actually drawing primarily from Greek philosophical concepts associated with the term *logos*, what seems much more likely is that John is drawing his concepts from the Hebrew Scriptures but using a word that would also have meaning for Greeks – for the Hellenistic readers John had in mind. [Brown, 519, 520, 524]

In Greek philosophy, in Stoic philosophy, and in Hellenistic Jewish philosophy, the *logos* was the thing that bridged the gap between God and the world – and the thing that communicated something of God's order and nature to creation. And so many who heard John refer to the *logos* would have thought of that Greek concept. [Brown, 519-520]

Augustine says something of this in book seven of his *Confessions*, where he speaks about being introduced to the books of the Platonists. In those works of Greek philosophy Augustine says he learned many true things about the *logos*, about the "Word". He lists all the *true* things that he learned about the *logos* from the Greek philosophers, and then adds "*but* that the [logos] was made flesh and dwelt among us, [… that] I did not read there." [Augustine, *Conf.* VII.9.14; Brown, 520]

Raymond Brown explains, writing: "The Greek who admired the *logos* as formulating the orderliness of the world aspired to be joined with God in His universe. The suggestion that the ultimate encounter with the *logos* of God would be when the *logos* became flesh would have been unthinkable. The Prologue does not say that the Word entered into flesh or abided in flesh but that the Word *became* flesh. Therefore, instead of supplying the liberation from the material

world that the Greek mind yearned for, the Word of God was now inextricably bound to human history." [31]

Instead of removing them from the particulars of this world, John was claiming that the *logos* was uniting himself to those particulars and revealing himself in them.

But then, Brown points out that by its very nature, the Greek thinker who knew the concept of the *logos* of God, the "Word" of God, should not have been that surprised by the incarnation.

He writes "The title, 'the Word,'" implies that "the divine being described […] was destined to speak to men." And so, it makes sense that, according to John, "this divine being has taken on human form and has thus found the most effective way in which to express himself to men. Thus, in becoming flesh the Word does not cease to be the Word but exercises his function as Word to the full." [32]

In other words, the Greeks rejected the idea of the Word becoming flesh … but by its very nature as revealing God and enacting his rule, it is consistent with its nature, not opposed to it, that the Word would become flesh.

That said, if the Greeks should have seen that the incarnation was a natural fulfillment of the *logos*, then first-century Jews should have seen the rightness of the incarnation of God even more, and that is what John really focuses on in our text.

It's probably best to just go through the passage to note some of John's allusions, and how they set a trajectory towards the incarnation.

We've seen how loaded the term "the Word" was for first century Greeks, but we need to acknowledge how loaded it was for first-century Jews as well, in couple of ways.

First, when John said, back in the first verse of this chapter "In the beginning was the Word," those who would have known the Hebrew Scriptures would immediately have thought of Genesis 1. In Genesis 1 the Lord speaks, and things are made. It is by his Word that God makes all things, and even as it is by his words, God seems intimately involved. God's spirit hovers over the face of the waters in Genesis 1:2. The Lord forms the man from the dust, and then he breathes into his nostrils in Genesis 2:7. The creative word of God is intimately involved with his world and with the making of Adam. If God is so hands-on with creation in Genesis 1 and 2, is the incarnation really such a foreign concept? [Brown, 520]

Second, "the Word" would have brought to mind the spoken word of God that came to the prophets and was recorded in the Jewish Scriptures. And God's word always pursued his people. God's word was sent out to his prophet, who then sought out God's people and spoke it to them. With every revelation of his Word, God showed that he was a God who pursued his people to reveal himself to them. [Brown, 520-521] As we heard from Raymond Brown earlier, if the goal of the Word of God was always to reach humanity, then is not the fullness of that work his coming in flesh in the incarnation?

Those two allusions are just in the first phrase. But then we read on.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." That word, "dwelt" gives us a third allusion. The word for "dwell" that John uses here is the same as "tabernacle." D.A. Carson explains that

"more literally translated, the Greek verb *skenoo* means that the Word pitched his tabernacle, or lived in his tent, among us." [127; Cf. Brown 13, 32-35]

John here is alluding to the Tabernacle that was God's dwelling place in the Hebrew Scriptures. Constructed under Moses, it was the place where God drew close to his people.

And with that allusion we again might ask – if this is the God who draws close to his people, who even lives among them in an actual tent in the Hebrew Scriptures, why would we be surprised by that God drawing close by the incarnation – by coming tented in flesh? *Shouldn't God's dwelling in the midst of his people in a tent lead us to expect that that is exactly the kind of thing he might do one day?*

After saying that the Word has "tabernacled" or "tented" among us, John goes on: "and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

That phrase "grace and truth" would also have struck a first century Jew. Commentators note that "grace and truth" here seem to be John's Greek translation of the words "love and faithfulness" – the same words that we read this morning from Exodus 34:6 in our assurance of pardon. [Carson, 129; Brown, 14] In Exodus 33:18 Moses asked God to show him his glory. God said he would pass before Moses, but that Moses would only be able to see his back – not his face. And as the Lord passed before Moses, and as Moses catches some glimpse of his glory, the Lord declares: "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" or, as John translates it "full of grace and truth."

John brings this scene to the minds of his readers, as if to say "This is the God who wants to show his glory to his people, as he did to Moses. Why wouldn't he draw close to them in human form?"

Then, down in verses 16 and 17 John writes "For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

Christians often read verse 17 as if John is contrasting the law given through Moses with the grace and truth that came through Christ, but I think that is a misreading – not least because as we just saw, that phrase "grace and truth" came first from God's revelation to Moses.

Origin, Cyril of Alexandria, and Chrysostom all interpreted that phrase translated "grace upon grace" as "love in place of love." [Brown, 16] The idea that emerges then is that verse 16 and 17 are saying the same thing in different ways. God has shown love to Moses in the giving of the law. And now in addition to that love, over and above that love, he has now given Jesus Christ in the flesh. As Brown says, "There is no suggestion in John that when the Law was given through Moses, it was not a magnificent act of God's love." [16] That's not what John is saying, but he *is* saying that the same God who drew close in the giving of the Law through Moses now also draws close even more in the coming of Jesus Christ. And again, he seems to press us with the question: Would not the God who drew close to his people in the giving of the Law also draw close in flesh?

So, John piles up these references: to God's work of creation, of verbal revelation, of dwelling with his people in the Temple and Tabernacle, of showing his glory to Moses, of giving his Law of love. And it seems that John does this to say that if you follow the trajectory of all of these actions, it leads, ultimately, to the incarnation: *This is a God who makes people from clay and breathes into their nostrils, this is a God who pursues his people and draws close to them by his*

Word and Spirit, this is a God who dwelled with his people in a tent, who revealed some of his glory to Moses, who gave his loving Law – All of this intimacy, all of this drawing close points to the fullness of God's drawing close to his people, when God the Son became flesh and dwelt among them.

Both the Greeks and the Jews in the first century were scandalized by the idea that God became man – that he came in the flesh and drew close to his people in a particular time and a particular place. But if they had followed the trajectory of what they knew of God they would not have been surprised, because we have a God who delights to draw close to his people, and *intimacy always requires particularity.*

The nature of God and of his gospel requires incarnation into the particulars of this world.

That is the point John is making to his audience. The incarnation is not an odd quirk or cosmetic add-on to the Christian God. The nature of the Christian God and of his gospel requires incarnation into the particulars of this world.

What does that mean for us then?

Let me identify two things.

First, briefly: What makes John's prologue so profound is its insistence on both the transcendence of God as the Eternal One, the Maker of all things … *and* the imminence of God, as the one who draws close to his people in Christ. The transcendence of God and the imminence of God.

To have a Biblical view of God, you need both.

Most of us are better at one or the other. Which are you better at? When you think of God do you tend to think of an abstract and distant being, but not one who comes close to you and your life? Or do you tend to think of Jesus as your buddy, but not your transcendent Lord?

It's important in our theology to hold these two things together, but it's also important in our own spiritual thinking, in our spiritual imagination, to hold those two realities together.

Which of those elements do you need to work more on emphasizing? His holy transcendence, or his intimate imminence in our life?

So first, John helps us think about God's imminent transcendence.

But second, John's prologue also has much to say about our rightly thinking of God's identity.

And in terms of God's identity, it tells us that we must embrace the particulars and specifics of our God, and not be ashamed of them.

We can be ashamed of the particulars of the Christian God, I think. Sometimes you see this when we prefer to focus on spiritual laws or abstract theology over the nitty-gritty details of Jesus of Nazareth. Sometimes it comes out when we focus on doctrine and commandments and avoid the historically particular stories of the Bible – especially the Old Testament.

But the implication of the incarnation is that for us, our God cannot be separated out from the particulars of human life and human history that he has entered into. And we should embrace that.

John, in our text this morning, says that our God, the one true God, is inextricably linked to both the Old Testament history of Israel, and to the particular man Jesus Christ – he says that we must have a concept of God that puts his incarnation and these historical particularities at the center, not the periphery.

What does doing that look like?

Well, N.T. Wright might help us think about that. This is kind of a long quote, but I think it's worth reading in its entirety. Wright says this – he writes:

"A couple of years ago I was part of a panel discussion in the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford. The interviewer tossed me the question: 'Was Jesus God?' That's one of those trick questions that you can't answer straight on. It assumes that we all know what 'God' means, and we're simply asking if Jesus is somehow identified with this 'God'. What we should say, instead, is: 'It all depends what you mean by "God".' Well, what *do* people mean?

"When people say 'God' today (apart from using the word as a casual expletive) they are usually referring to a hypothetical Being who lives at some distance from the world, detached from normal life. This Being may occasionally intervene, but for the most part stays aloof, watchful, vaguely disapproving.

"Now if *that's* the sort of 'God' you hold – and in my experience it's pretty common – then of course to ask, 'Is Jesus God?' is laughable. Jesus was a full-blooded human being. As Wilson is fond of pointing out, Jesus had a reputation for being a party-goer, a drinker. The sort of company he kept made reputable people – including his own family – look down their noses with disapproval. It's ridiculous to think of Jesus as being 'God' in that high-and-dry sense, detached and disapproving. (If you want to see what such a Jesus might look like, the B-grade biblical movies of a few years ago will provide plenty of examples, with their dreary, dreamy Jesus-figures, who made lofty pronouncements and stared into the middle distance as though scanning the skies for angels.)

"But supposing we started out with a different view of 'God'? We could perfectly easily run through the options. What about a Hindu God – a figure like Krishna, say? No that doesn't look like Jesus either. What about a Muslim view of God, the stern Allah who demands total and blind obedience? No, that won't fit. But what about the Old Testament view of God?

"In the Old Testament we find a God who yearns over the plight of his people, and indeed of the whole world. He hates the human wickedness which has defaced his world, and which destroys other humans, and its own perpetrators, as it goes along. Not to hate such wickedness would be, to say the least, morally culpable. But this Old Testament God is also one who, when people are in misery and at their wits' end, comes in person to deal with the problem. He rolls up his sleeves to get on with the job. […] Isaiah […] speaks of Israel's God sharing the distress and affliction of his people and rescuing them personally.

"Now: let us suppose that *this* God were to become human. What would such a God look like? Very much, I submit, like Jesus of Nazareth. This is the really scary thing that [some] writers […] never come to grips with; not that Jesus might be identified with a remote, lofty, imaginary

being (any fool could see the flaw in that idea), but that God, the real God, the one true God, might actually look like Jesus. And not a droopy, pre-Raphaelite Jesus, either, but a shrewd Palestinian Jewish villager who drank wine with his friends, agonized over the plight of his people, taught in strange stories and pungent aphorisms, and was executed by the occupying forces. What does that do to Christian belief?

"The Christian doctrine of the incarnation was never intended to be about the elevation of a human being to divine status. That's what, according to some Romans, happened to the emperors after they died, or even before. The Christian doctrine is all about *a different sort of God* – A God who was so different to normal expectations that he could, completely appropriately, become human in, and as, the man Jesus of Nazareth. To say that Jesus is in some sense God is of course to make a startling statement about Jesus. It is also to make a stupendous claim about God." [Wright, 51-52]

What is Wright saying here?

First, that Jesus was a particular man. A real man with a particular life in a particular culture with particular opinions.

And second, that the man he was was an expression of a very specific God. The God of Israel. Not the vague God of the mathematicians that Dawkins has more respect for. Not the God of the pluralists, who's had all the particularities of time and space and history polished off of him. Not the abstract God of the theologians who are unable to speak as the Bible does. Not the God who lives in a separate sphere from ordinary human life.

He is the God who looks like Jesus of Nazareth. The Word, the Son of God, has become flesh, and dwelt among us. And we have seen his glory.

When you think of God, what comes to mind? John reminds us that what should first come to mind are the particularities of Jesus of Nazareth. He is the Word and the true revelation of God to us. *Our calling is not to project our abstract ideas about God onto Jesus, but to look to Jesus to understand God.*

That is the final claim for us to consider from our text. As Wright says: "To say that Jesus is in some sense God is of course to make a startling statement about Jesus. It is also to make a stupendous claim about God."

Let us be people who live their lives based on the stupendous claim of the incarnation.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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