

## I. Set Up

A. Welcome / Introduction

B. Let me start today by saying, “Happy New Year.” Now some of you are thinking, “Slow down chief. It’s not Happy New Year time just yet. You’re a bit early.” Well, that depends on what calendar you are looking at. I’m actually a bit late.

C. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century most of the world has operated on the Gregorian Calendar, which was an effort to fine-tune the Julian calendar and make everything sync up with the exact time it takes us to orbit the sun.

D. But since the fourth century, some churches have followed a Christian or Liturgical Calendar that revolved around various Old Testament Feasts (such as Passover, Pentecost, Yom Kippur) and that also retold the story of Christ every year.

E. This calendar starts on the Sunday closest to Nov. 30<sup>th</sup> with a celebration of the time when the angel told Mary that she had found favor with God and was pregnant with the Messiah. It then proceeds to have dates that correspond to: Christmas and then Epiphany and then times set up to commemorate: His mission, and then His Resurrection, and then Pentecost and finally His return.

F. Some churches – we are not one of them – have sermons that follow this calendar. Every week you have: an Old Testament reading; he reading of a Psalm; a New Testament Reading from one of the letters; and then a Gospel reading that corresponds to the church calendar. So, every year you are repeating the story.

G. According to that calendar, last week was the beginning of a new year. So, “Happy New Year and happy second week of Advent – the four weeks between the announcement to Mary and the birth of Jesus. A time when we prepare for his arrival.”

H. This year during Advent, we are focused on Christ’s claim to be the Light of the World, which is based out of John 1. Today Mike is going to be preaching from the first few verses of John 1. Let me read that for you. John 1:1-5:

1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Intro

II. Why are we here? I am not asking, “Why are we in a church right now?” I am asking a bigger question: “What are we doing here? Why are we alive? What is life all about? What’s the point? Is there a higher purpose, a higher calling? Is there something we are supposed to do beyond working and eating and wondering who’s going to make it into the college football playoffs?”

A. I am asking the George Bailey question: Does my life have meaning? We all have our favorite Christmas programs: *Frosty*, *The Grinch* or *The Christmas Story* with Ralphie Parker, who dreams of an “official Red Ryder, carbine action, 200-shot, range model air rifle, with a compass in the stock.”

B. My favorite is, *It's a Wonderful Life*, not because of its profound theology. With all due respect to Clarence, we do not go to heaven to become angels and set out to earn our wings." *It's a Wonderful Life* is not exactly theologically precise, but I love the way George wonders if he matters. Because our lives are supposed to matter. We long for purpose because God made us that way.

1. The idea that we have value and meaning flows from the fact that we were made in God's image.

2. It also follows from the incarnation – the fact that God became one of us. That he took on flesh (the Latin word is *carne*) and showed up. The author of the story became an actor in the play, and in doing so he showed that the play matters.

C. Today we bump into another reminder of our value. We are looking at a passage that directs us on our purpose.

D. As you heard, the theme for Advent this year is light emerging from the darkness. Last week Dr. Joel Willits got us started by focusing on darkness – it was a sermon calling us to lament. He challenged us to face just how dark things can be in this broken world. He invited us to grieve that – not to put a happy face on things, but to call bad things bad and to recognize grief as a gift from God so we can move forward.

E. This week I want to show how Jesus broke into this dark world to turn on the lights – and to point the direction towards meaning. This all emerges out of the opening to John's Gospel.

III. We've been in a multi-year study of Luke. The Gospel of John tells the story of Jesus from a different angle.

A. We start with an awareness that Jesus is the most significant and influential person who ever lived. If you asked historians for their short list of really important people – the top ten – you end up with four names on every list: Jesus, Buddha, Mohammad and Marx.

1. There are others who end up on various lists, but Jesus, Buddha, Mohammad and Marx make almost every list.

2. That's curious. After all, with the exception of Marx, none of them were public figures; only two of them wrote anything; none of them ruled or held political office. They were religious leaders and philosophers. But these are the big four.

B. Of these four, we can build a pretty compelling case that Jesus is the most influential. After all:

1. More books have been written about him than anyone else

2. More music and art has been inspired by him than anyone else

3. More schools, hospitals, orphanages and homeless shelters have been founded in his honor than for any other person or reason.

4. His birthday is the world's largest event.

5. He gives us the greatest ethical teaching that we have.

6. Millions have laid down their life for him, millions more stand ready to do so. His followers rank in the billions. I could go on.

C. So, we start by noting that Jesus is profoundly influential. But then it gets really interesting because we add to this the fact that Jesus also claims to be God. Do not miss this.

1. Jesus doesn't just claim to be the most influential person who ever lived.
2. He doesn't just claim to have great authority or to be a great example.
3. He does not simply suggest that He was important or that his death was important. Jesus claims to be God. Jesus claims to be God on a rescue mission to save us. He lives a perfect life in order to do what had not been done; He then dies for our sin. The fact that he is a person means he is our perfect representative. The fact that He is God means his death can extend to more than one person. His death can be for your sins and mine – for all.

D. So, Jesus claims to be God. And he is the only one on the list of profoundly influential people who makes this claim. Sure there are other people who have claimed to be God. But they end up being institutionalized. No other significant leader has claimed to be God.<sup>1</sup> If you make a Venn diagram of the most influential people who ever lived and those who claim to be God, the overlap is exactly one.

E. C.S Lewis states it this way:

1. The things Jesus says are very different from what any other teacher has said. Others say, 'This is the truth about the universe. This is the way you ought to go,' but He says, 'I am the Truth, and the Way, and the Life. No man can reach absolute reality, except through Me. Try to retain your own life and you will be inevitably ruined. Give yourself away and you will be saved.; He says, 'If you are ashamed of Me, if, when you hear this call, you turn the other way, I also will look the other way when I come again as God without disguise. If anything whatever is keeping you from God and from me, whatever it is, throw it away. If it is your eye, pull it out. If it is your hand, cut it off. If you put yourself first you will be last. Come to Me everyone who is carrying a heavy load, I will set that right. Your sins, all of them, are wiped out, I can do that. I am Re-birth, I am Life. Eat ME, drink Me, I am your Food. And finally, do not be afraid, I have overcome the whole Universe.' That is the issue.

F. So, I would argue that the most important question of all time is: who is Jesus? Is He God or not? You can't simply dismiss him.

G. John's Gospel is one of the four accounts of Christ's life written shortly after his death. As such it is designed to answer the question: who is Jesus? It's the same story told by Matthew, Mark and Luke. All four of these men say that they are writing so we can know that Jesus is God and we should follow him.

H. There are four because they tell the story in slightly different ways. John – who was an apostle, who also wrote I, 2 and 3 John and the Book of Revelation – is unique in a few ways:

1. He writes from a more philosophical perspective than the others because he was writing for the Greeks, who were more philosophical.
2. He was the youngest apostle - and the only one not to die as a martyr, he ends up living quite a bit longer than the others did. So he can reflect on what they wrote and add other things.

3. John's Gospel is unique in that it has a particularly profound opening that we are going to look at in just a moment.

I. But here is what I want to be sure you see today. John also writes from the perspective of being closest to Jesus. Let's drop down to John 1:18.

1. The NIV reads: **No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.**

2. The New American Standard Bible – which is more literal, more of a word for word translation of the Greek, translates it: **No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.**<sup>2</sup>

J. The key word here in Greek is *kolpon*, which the NASB translates *bosom*. That word has fallen out of use. It's occasionally used to refer to a woman's breasts and it also shows up in the term "bosom buddies." The NIV tries to convey the meaning by saying that Jesus is in "the closest relationship" with the father.

1. If we turn to John 13 we see the word again. Here we read that John, "the disciple that Jesus loved," laid down next to Jesus and placed his head on Christ's chest. The Greek term used here is *kolpon*.

2. In other words, the word being used to convey how close Jesus is with the Father is the same term being used to convey John's relationship with Jesus. John is a close friend of Jesus.

3. Think about what this says. John, who is younger than the other disciples, rests his head on Christ's chest. Who has that right with you? Who has the right to lay down next to you and place their head on your chest? Very few people. Some of you, no one. Some of you, a spouse or a young child.

K. John was among Jesus's closest friends. He appears to know Jesus as well as anyone. He is as close to Jesus as anyone. So, what does John have to say about Jesus? Who does John say Jesus is? God. God.

L. And some scholars would say John makes this claim more forcefully than others. In the early art that developed in the church, John is depicted as an eagle. We still see this in some stain glasses windows in churches today. Mark is a winged Lion, Matthew an angel and Luke an Ox. There are reasons for all of this.<sup>3</sup> Why is John an eagle? Because an eagle is supposedly the only bird that can fly directly into the sun. An eagle can gaze at the sun whereas other birds cannot. John helps us gaze at the sun.

M. Let me read the opening verses. John 1:1-5

#### **IV. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**

A. John 1:1 is enormously powerful. The words "in the beginning" make the point that Jesus is eternal. He is not part of creation. It doesn't say, "In the beginning was God the Father, and then came the Son." The Gospels – and consequently the creeds – are very clear that Jesus was not created. He was "begotten not made." There never was a moment before Jesus. He is eternal.<sup>4</sup>

B. John 1:1 also makes it clear that Jesus is God. The Jehovah Witnesses like to argue that Jesus was not God but was a god – small “g.” But the claim made by John here – and in multiple other places – is that Jesus is fully God.

C. There is much to see here. Today I want to note that John uses the word *logos* here to argue that Jesus provides meaning. The technical definition of *logos* is logic. But the kind of logic being spoken of is not what you get in a logic class. It’s not a bunch of syllogisms. *If A = B and B = C then A = C*. It was the logic for life.<sup>5</sup> It spoke about a person or a thing’s ultimate purpose, which is something the Greek philosophers were very concerned with.

D. Not long ago we bought a very nice coffee maker as part of the remodel for Highland Park. It’s a top end espresso machine we got used from Lovell’s restaurant. For those of you who pay attention to these things, it’s a Rancillo Ecco.

1. We are piloting a Thursday night service at the Highland Park campus, with a focus on targeting twenty and thirtysomethings. We did some remodeling of what used to be the offices and fireside room – and it’s now a very cool coffee shop. And the service we hold there is very different – the same sermon, but shorter. (Some of you are thinking, “Why haven’t I been invited to that! Shorter sermon. I’m there!”)

2. Not so fast. We are piloting the service. It’s not ready for prime time; it’s for 20 and 30 somethings – who are “cool.” My boys wonder why in the world they would even let me in to speak. And just so you know, the sermon is shorter but we then go into Q and A, so it’s really the same length.

3. But, all of that to say, we now have this really nice coffee maker there.

4. So imagine if you went over there and saw that we were using this really high-end espresso machine as a door stop. If we were, you’d realize that we didn’t understand what the machine was for. We didn’t understand it’s purpose.

5. Here is my iPhone. Imagine what would happen if I pointed it at our TV and tried to use it as a remote. (By the way, if there is an app for that, I do not have it). Or imagine what would happen if I used my iPhone as a hammer. It would break. Clearly, it is important to understand what something was designed for. What it’s purpose is.

E. Greek philosophers moved from a belief that things had a purpose to trying to ascertain what our purpose is. After all, if you didn’t want to get smashed to bits like an iPhone being used as a hammer, they reasoned that you needed to know what we are for.

F. Various people weighed in with their answers – Plato, Socrates and others. But over time it became clear that no one could agree on an answer, a pessimism settled in and people divided into three camps:

1. Epicureanism – which is a form of hedonism. It’s all about the pursuit of pleasure. “Eat, drink and be merry.”<sup>6</sup>

2. Skepticism: - a school of thought founded by Pyrrho of Ellis that said we are never going to know. We cannot trust our senses because they deceive us or rely on others because they often disagree with each other. All we have in the end are ideas that may or may not be true.<sup>7</sup>

3. Stoicism – which says we are going to live as if there is right or wrong even if we do not think there is. We are going to choose to be strong and moral and courageous, even though life doesn't appear to have any meaning.<sup>8</sup>

G. John takes their word – logos – and says, there is meaning. In the very beginning the Divine Word, the meaning provider, existed as God with his Father. And he created everything, including you. And at a certain point he broke into this world to bring light and clarity. We are not left to wonder what we are for. God sent an answer – not information or some big idea, but a person. And we can find our meaning in a relationship with him. John’s claim is that there is purpose and meaning – not in a dry, academic abstract sense. But in a person. There is someone to love and to know. John doesn’t suggest that God provided a philosophy but that He showed up to fill up your mind and heart. John says, you can know The One who is truth.<sup>9</sup>

H. In his own way John is doing what Matthew, Mark and Luke are doing – he is writing to a group of people and saying, “I know what you are looking for. It is Jesus.”

1. Matthew was writing to Jews, so he opens with a genealogy to show them that He is the Messiah who ties back to their Scriptures.
2. Luke is trying to explain everything to Gentiles.
3. John is writing to philosophers and so he explains it that way, making a huge claim about Jesus. He is the one who provides meaning.

V. Please note, these remain our modern options. We do not call them Epicureanism, Skepticism and Stoicism, but we see these views in play.

A. There are people out there who believe that life is about the pursuit of pleasure. Few call themselves hedonists, though some do. And they focus on sleeping around, food and drink, and anything that brings pleasure.

B. There are some who say, “We can’t know truth. There are no absolutes, no metanarrative. But if you find something that works for you, go for it.

C. There are people who are strict materialists. Who say, “what you see is all there is. If science cannot measure it, it doesn’t exist.” This is a religious view – a faith claim. It’s the one advanced by Carl Sagan when he said – based on his beliefs not on science, “The cosmos is all there is or was or ever will be.” It’s not a scientific claim it’s a faith claim.<sup>10</sup> Those in this camp are forced to admit that life has no transcendent meaning.

1. Jacques Monod, the 20<sup>th</sup> century Nobel Laureate and author of *Chance and Necessity*, argued that we now know at last that we are alone in the universe. He wrote: “The ancient covenant is in pieces; man knows at last that he is alone in the universe's unfeeling immensity, out of which we emerged only by chance. Our destiny is nowhere spelled out, nor is our duty. The kingdom above or the darkness below: it is for us to choose.” “The universe was not pregnant with life nor the biosphere with man. Our number came up in the Monte Carlo game. Is it surprising that, like the person who has just made a million at the casino, we should feel strange and a little unreal?”<sup>11</sup>

D. There are some in this last camp, like Woody Allen, who say, “Life has no meaning but I am going to act like it does.” At the end of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Allen advances his take on life. Which is basically, there is no meaning, but take a boat ride and hug a child and act like there is. Create your own meaning.

E. John 1 is claiming something very different. It says that there is meaning. You might think your life doesn’t matter but it matters to God. And that changes everything.

F. And by the way, it is saying something else very important. It is saying that meaning happens with Jesus.

1. It's not just that this life matters. It's that Jesus brings hope and light and eternal life. Jesus is God breaking into this world, redeeming it, giving it all meaning and saying, "The way forward is in me and through me. Follow me. It's a dark world but I am bringing light."

VI. Let me pause for a moment and note that today many people stay so busy that they hardly think about this. Perhaps that is true of you. It is very easy today to be so distracted that we do not ask the big questions. Let's not miss the big idea. Jesus brings light and hope and definition into life. And in him we have meaning and purpose.

VII. Jesus brings light. In the book of Revelation we are told that in heaven there is no sun because Jesus – unveiled – fills every inch of it with Light.

A. Turn to Him.

B. You have control offer this. Repent for your lack of love to him, when you do that, love starts. When you confess your lack of faith, faith starts.

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<sup>1</sup> They occasionally claim to be sent by God, but not to be god. Lewis continues on in his essay, *God in the Dock*, to highlight that. "There is no halfway house and there is no parallel in other religions. If you had gone to Buddha and asked him: 'Are you the son of Brahma?' he would have said, 'My son, you are still in the vale of illusion.' If you had gone to Socrates and asked, 'Are you Zeus?' he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, 'Are you Allah?' he would first have rent his clothes and then cut your head off. If you had asked Confucius, 'Are you Heaven?' I think he would have probably replied, 'Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste.' The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out of the question. In my opinion, the only person who can say that sort of thing is either God or a complete lunatic suffering from that form of delusion, which undermines the whole mind of man. If you think you are a poached egg, when you are not looking for a piece of toast to suit you, you may be sane, but if you think you are God, there is no chance for you. We may note in passing that He was never regarded as a mere moral teacher. He did not produce that effect on any of the people who actually met him. He produced mainly three effects — Hatred — Terror — Adoration. There was no trace of people expressing mild approval.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the King James reads: No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

<sup>3</sup> An article in Wikipedia explains it this way: Matthew the Evangelist, the author of the first gospel account, is symbolized by a winged man, or angel. Mark the Evangelist, the author of the second gospel account, is symbolized by a winged lion – a figure of courage and monarchy. Luke the Evangelist, the author of the third gospel account (and the Acts of the Apostles), is symbolized by a winged ox or bull – a figure of sacrifice, service and strength. The ox signifies that Christians should be prepared to sacrifice themselves in following Christ. John the Evangelist, the author of the fourth gospel account, is symbolized by an eagle – a figure of the sky, and believed by Christian scholars to be able to look straight into the sun. John starts with an eternal overview of Jesus the Logos and goes on to describe many things with a "higher" Christology than the other three (synoptic) gospels; it represents Jesus' Ascension, and Christ's divine nature. This symbolizes that Christians should look on eternity without flinching as they journey towards their goal of union with God.

<sup>4</sup> This is why the Nicene Creed goes on about this point. At one point it states, "And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the *only-begotten* Son of God, begotten of the Father *before all worlds (æons)*, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." In the earliest version it also states, [But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or

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'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable' — they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.]

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to three different sermons by Tim Keller for the insight about the various philosophies. All of the Keller sermons noted are based on John 1.

<sup>6</sup> In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Aristippus, a philosopher living in Cyrene, suggested that best approach to life was to “eat, drink and be merry.” His ethical system advanced the idea that feelings of pleasure and happiness are the highest and final aim of man. Consequently, anything we can do to increase the sum of pleasure is considered good and, conversely, anything that increases pain is considered bad. By pleasure he meant not merely sensual gratification but also the higher forms of enjoyment (mental pleasure, domestic love, friendship and moral contentment). However his followers have largely reduced his system to the justification of self-indulgence. Hedonism remains popular today but famously fails because of the pleasure paradox. Most have determined that pleasure is the by-product of something good but not an end in itself. Those who make it an end in themselves find that pleasure loses its pleasure. Also please note that Positioned between the Stoic views of Zeno and the Hedonistic views of Aristippus are the beliefs of Epicurus (340 – 270). Epicurus believed that the good life consisted in avoiding pain. Like Aristippus he greatly appreciated pleasure, but unlike Aristippus – who felt that immediate gratification more important than long term gain -- Epicurus was more focused on minimizing pain than maximizing pleasure. Drinking a lot, for instance, can bring pleasure but often then brings a hangover.

<sup>7</sup> The first full-fledged skeptic was Pyrrho of Ellis who taught that there was nothing we could be sure of. Leaving everyone who has passed a course in Introduction to Philosophy to ask, “Is he sure about that?”

<sup>8</sup> Popular among both Romans and Spartans are the views of a third century Athenian teacher named Zeno. Believing that the world was ruled by its own soul and governed through natural law – and that nothing a person did could influence the events of their lives – the Stoics adopted a fatalistic attitude towards life - whatever was going to happen was going to happen whether you embraced it or not, so all that mattered was your virtuous response. Happiness, health and possessions were not important. For the Stoic, the goal of life was to learn how to want what one gets rather than to hope to get what one wants.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Keller argues that the fact that John says that Jesus is the logos, the word that means word, means that Jesus is the truth. “He is the guide and the goal.”

<sup>10</sup> We might also call this scientism. I am not saying a view that endorses science. Science is the use of observation and experimentation to study the structure and behavior of the physical world. Scientism is the claim that the physical world is all there is – that everything is made of matter. There are facts but no morality. This is a faith claim. It is not based on science.

<sup>11</sup> And it ultimately argues that there is no ultimate meaning. Bertrand Russell, the 20<sup>th</sup> century British philosopher, famously describes it saying: That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul’s habitation be safely built. Bertrand Russell (from *A Free Man's Worship*, 1903)