

Advent 3: “A Lesson in Knowing the Mysteries of God with Faith”: Obviously the theme running all through these messages is faith, the centrality of faith. Faith is something living inside of us, not just a body of doctrine. Sometimes the scriptures use the term that way. *“The faith that was once for all delivered...”* is how Jude speaks of faith, a body of doctrines. But faith as it relates to us as God’s children is the action of the heart and the mind in laying hold of God’s Word and receiving God’s presence, walking in it, believing in it. This Advent season is looking for how each of the Gospels introduce the story about Jesus Christ. As mentioned already, Luke began with a lesson in praying with faith. Matthew begins with giving a lesson in knowing God’s promises by faith. It is important for us to be conscious of the fact that it is possible to pray without faith and it is possible to read the Word of God without faith. You can say it is true, it is true, it is true; I know it is all true, and you can go right outside and act as if you never read it. Everybody in this room knows that. It is part of the struggle that we have in being faith full. That is the point; we are to be faith full. This means that I submit my will to the truth and live by it.

Today we are going to look at John’s Gospel. I encourage you to open your scriptures to John I and I am going to read verses 1-5.

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”*

[These are] powerful statements if they are true. There is more, of course, but I want to pause for a moment and consider a couple of easily overlooked things about these statements. Who wrote them? They were written by a man who knew Jesus personally. This is highly significant. John was one of the disciples closest to Jesus. We are told that at the last supper in the night of His betrayal, the night before His crucifixion, John was next to Jesus. If you recall the way they would feast they didn’t sit in chairs such as we sit on but they laid on couches. They were all next to each other. We are told that at one point John actually leans back against Jesus’ chest. John was not unaware or insensible as to the significance of the relationship that he had with the Lord. In fact he makes a point of it, he drives it home if you turn to I John 1:1-4. Listen to what John says about his experience with Jesus tangibly as a friend.

*“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”*

So as John writes, he writes about someone that he is not just been friends with, but that he has been physically close with; he has touched him. I think if you read those verses correctly you can hear the note of excitement in John. When John writes that eternal life was made manifest to us he is referring to a revelation of a mystery of God. It is as if right now we were to all turn and look to Ken and were suddenly to realize, “Oh my goodness, that man is the incarnate God!”

Difficulties arise. If you read the Gospel of John, which I strongly recommend that you do in this Christmas season, you know that not only did John personally know Jesus but John alone of the twelve disciples was with Jesus when He endured the mock trials after his arrest. Now what you want to do is to think of your best friend, whoever that person is. Think of your best friend, someone you delight in, that you love to be with, that you remember on all kinds of occasions you have shared many conversations and you enjoy an intimate relationship with that person. Now I want you to imagine that person going through what Jesus went through and which John watched. He saw his beloved friend with the crown of thorns jammed upon His head, His body bleeding from

being lashed with a whip and then his body pinned to a cross with nails driven through His hands and feet. In other words, John sees Jesus in the extremity of His nakedness and shame. You have to know [that whereas we have] become very relaxed about the human body and its being seen, the Jews were not relaxed about seeing the human body. For any Jew to be exposed in nakedness was profoundly shaming; and there He is. He is hanging in full view. There was nothing on Him. Further, it was into John's care that Jesus from the cross entrusted His mother Mary. We all think, “Cool; great!” But there is another aspect to that compelling scene: here is an oldest son who cannot take care of his mother. In Jewish culture this was mandatory. It was his job. It was his job to take care of his mother. If his father died he was in charge. He is supposed to make sure that all is well. He is doing that; we all understand that. But as John watches this hero, this beloved One, another drop away from sufficiency. So you might wonder: surely this abused, broken body, nailed to a cross was the epitome of failure. Remember all the time we are saying, “This is the man who writes, *“In the beginning...”*”

There is more: in John I:5-14, going on to the next section, we read,

*“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. 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.”*

John never explicitly states that he personally met John the Baptist, but it is beyond doubt that he was personally present when Jesus went to John the Baptist to be baptized, and so he had surely met him. Consequently John the Baptist was not a mythical figure come out of the wilderness dressed in strange garb and eating a strange diet. He was the image of the Old Testament prophet. But John knew John the Baptist. He would know both his voice and had seen him with his eyes just as with Jesus. John had seen and been with Jesus after the resurrection from the grave. That is why John could write what he did in the opening statement of his gospel. Now we return to John the Baptist. John could write what he did in the opening statement in his gospel was the result of his having been at the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and seen Jesus Christ in his presence.

So John the apostle knows John the Baptist, knows the sound of his voice and saw with eyes what he wore and surely felt within himself the intensity of John's faith and dedication to God. Jesus Himself said this about John the Baptist: *“Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.”* John the Baptist however rightly understood the relationship between himself and Jesus. It was John the Baptist who said *“He must increase, but I must decrease.”* John [the apostle] himself has the same kind of humility. When you read the Gospel of John there is one name you will never read. Do you know what that name is? It is the name of John; he never identifies himself in the entirety of the Gospel. The only desire that as he had, as the other men also only had one desire, and that desire is that the reader of the gospel would come to know the man who was their personal friend and who thereafter would become their savior.

Let me take us back to the beginning again: John I:14. This is what John writes, *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen His glory, glory as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* Again John writes these words regarding a man he knew exceedingly well. Remember that John and Jesus have walked together over dusty roads, through winter's cold, summer's heat. John had been with Jesus on the dusty streets of Jerusalem, seen him preaching in the temple, watch him touching paralytics and lepers and others with all manner of diseases. They had eaten countless meals together, sailed through stormy seas together, served food to the thousands who had come to hear Jesus preach on the hillside. John knew Jesus' mothers and brothers. Though we

are not told, it is still a certainty that John knew the house and the neighborhood where Jesus grew up for he had become a follower of Jesus before Jesus moved away from Nazareth.

So John knows all these things about this man. What I am saying is that John knew Jesus intimately. But as Jesus said, a prophet is not without honor except in his own hometown which agrees with the adage, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” Yet of this man whom he knew exceedingly well John writes, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God”* What does it take for a man to say that about his friend?

Think about it: does familiarity breed contempt? I find this happening in marriages. A couple gets married and all of a sudden, not terribly long after that happy occasion, they become intimately acquainted: sharp words, short memories, willful. The closer you get the harder it is to hide your flaws, of course! So now you think about John not just in the drama of the crucifixion but in the daily drama of walking and working closely side by side [with Jesus]. What must it have taken? There was nothing wrong with the way Jesus lived. There would be nothing wrong with how he treated his followers, nothing! There would be nothing amiss in how he treated the crowds. How many have tried to handle thirty to forty people, or fifty to sixty people, or as Jesus did as many as five to ten thousand? Or how about his handling of his own disciples who were often about as dense as a piece of wood? In all of those years nothing was amiss. Jesus was good enough to be God. Beyond the challenge of daily living and the added stress of serving the constantly increasing crowds of people who sought out Jesus – and if you read the Gospels you know that Jesus knew and the disciples knew soon thereafter that the crowds were not seeking Jesus because they believe in him but because they thought he would give them good stuff. In their case it was food for it was a world of famine. But beyond all that John has seen his good friend grossly humiliated, publicly abused and exposed to ridiculed and utterly degraded in the eyes of all who were there to see. Again of this man he could say or write, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”* John had listened and watched as Jesus passively accepted all that was done to him. [He] watched and listened as Jesus stood silently and made no protest against the scribes or the Roman governor or the priests or the Roman soldiers or Herod, the grandson of Herod the great who had slaughtered all the children in Bethlehem in an effort to kill Jesus himself. I want to stop and think about what that means. We are experiencing a storm right now. America’s absorption with super-heroes would expect Captain America to fly through the air, land on the ground and do something magnificent to stop the wind. That is somebody to believe in. But if we want to draw the analogy, Jesus is going to fly through the air, stand on the ground and let the trees fall on him. And we are supposed to say, “That’s my man!”

We are obsessed with power, but we don’t understand what power is. John did. *“All things were made through him, all things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and the life was the life of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”* Him on the cross, his body broken, his blood flowing in utter shame: this is the Son of God. This is the One who created everything that sustains him on that cross. This is what it requires for John to be able to write these kinds of words.

What must have gone through John’s mind for him to see and believe what he came to understand, that his good friend Jesus was God incarnate? You must know that in addition to the difficulties that I have tried to magnify so that you and I can get ahold of them, John had an additional difficulty that you and I don’t have. You need to know that for a Jew to call anything created divine or “God” was blasphemy. In fact, to casually just speak the name of God was punishable by death. We are so casual we say, “O god” this and “O god” that! We have forgotten the meaning of reverence. We simply have. So we just bounce around and feel good about ourselves because we are able to express ourselves openly. In the world in which John lived and grew it was the pagans who talked about their gods this way. It was the pagans who spoke about incarnate gods, whose gods were a mocker.

Often they were immoral in their actions, the idols of the world and the enemies of the people of God. In other words, for John to write what he wrote about Jesus required the deepest and most profound and shattering alteration imaginable to his way of thinking. It required a complete internal revolution of his comprehension and understanding of the nature of God and how God functioned. So I suspect that at some point John knew with excruciating force the truth of his own words: *“The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own [meaning John], and his own did not receive him.”* For you know unless you believe in magic, and I do not, there is no way John could come to this [change of mind] without an internal struggle and an overcoming of inner doubt and resistances. So at some point he must have been saying inside himself, “This cannot be true; this cannot be the case; this does not make any sense; this offends all my deepest convictions and principles; there is no way that a man can be God, it does not fit the whole of God’s revelation!” What he is doing is he is saying to Jesus his friend essentially, “You are my friend, but you are not my God!” He had to do that.

How did he make the change? The Jews anticipated that God would send the messiah, the anointed One to be the savior of the nation. But they did not expect the messiah would be anything other or more than a Spirit filled and great man on the order of Moses or David or Elijah, the great heroes of the faith. Even Peter, you remember he gives that magnificent confession in Matthew 16, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God”, but I simply do not think that he knew what he was talking about. In other words I do not think that he understands that he is confessing that Jesus is God. The reason I say that is that the Bible tells us [the disciples] didn’t get the story straight until after the resurrection occurred, and then finally it begins to dawn on them exactly what has been happening. So again, when and by what process did John as well as the others come to the realization that Jesus was God? I am asking this question over and over again is because somebody in this room is asking this question over and over again. When we say Jesus died for you, what we are saying is that God Almighty, through His Son incarnate has died for you. That is exceedingly difficult to believe, isn’t it? That is why we need the power of the Holy Spirit. What I am saying to you is that if this is a question for you, if you wrestle with this question, what you need to do is don’t try and make some mental gymnastics inwardly; just ask God to please send His Spirit to give you a heart of faith to believe this stuff.

After Jesus rose from the grave and met with His disciples in the upper room where they gathered in great fear is, of course, where this all came together. All of them had run away: we know this. John and Peter were the only ones to hang around. John was known by the family of the high priest and was able to bring Peter and himself in to watch the trial. We are told that John brings his friend Peter in and then the two of them watch. They watch what happens. John had faith in Jesus as his friend. John had faith in Jesus as a healer and a prophet. John undoubtedly by this time believed that Jesus was the long awaited anointed one of God, but not yet could he believe that He was God incarnate.

Reflecting on John’s Gospel this stands out: John tells us that he and the other disciples lived for three years with the incarnate Son of God, and for most of that time – virtually all of it – they simply did not know Him. They were blind. That is what would begin to hammer home to them even in the night in which Jesus was crucified and in the grave. They would be going, “Whoa, what exactly have we encountered?” Then when [Jesus] actually meets them... We all think that Jesus’ appearance in the upper room was party time. I do not think it was party time. I think they were saying, “Oh!” and that “Oh” was painful with the realization of their deliberate blindness to what was now overwhelmingly obvious.

There are two startling facts which stand forward when we reflect upon [John’s] Gospel. The first is the opening [chapter] of the Gospel. We find it in verses 10 and 11. *“He was in the world and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to His own and His own people did not receive Him.”* I am sure

that all eleven of those [disciples] were [in shock and regret] and when John wrote these words I am certain that he was remembering [the same]. As deeply sobering as those statements are the next is even more so. After witnessing three years of countless miracles – we don't have all of them [recorded] by any means – a life of flawless goodness, and of overwhelming courage and nobility of spirit, Judas never had faith in Jesus as Savior. It never happened. He saw all that the others had seen and heard all that the others had heard, but the truth of it never penetrated his heart, never shifted the thinking of his mind. Later in his Gospel John tells us that Judas was a thief. He was embezzling funds out of the pot of common monies that the disciples had to meet their needs. Perhaps he was a petty thief, misdemeanors and not felonies: perhaps. But whether the amount is large or small, the thief puts himself before all others, privileges himself for special treatment. Judas could only see Jesus in terms of personal advantage to Judas. He could only see advantage in terms of satisfying his material desires. So when the opportunity came he figured it was to his advantage to sell this remarkable man to his enemies for thirty pieces of silver. He knew that Jesus did not deserve to die and later he tried to return the money. It was too late. Judas could not receive Jesus as the anointed one from God who came to save his soul. He knew the enormity of what he had done. He goes and commits suicide.

Isaiah the prophet more than seven hundred years before Christ came into the world wrote, (**Isaiah 55:6-7**), *“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”* Judas did it too late. Even in the end I suspect he still couldn't get his thoughts off himself and so he decided he would punish himself.

Paul wrote a letter to a small poor church which had planted in Macedonia. He opened his letter to that church with a compliment. He said, (**I Thessalonians 1:2-3**), *“We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”* In that little paragraph we have a definition of what it means to know Jesus Christ. To know Jesus truly there must be more than just words in our mouths. There must in fact be the experience of the power of the Holy Spirit and full conviction. Has to be. Furthermore, this presence of the Holy Spirit manifests itself in those three qualities that Paul listed: faith, love and hope joined with knowledge. Hebrews 11:1 reminds us what faith is: *“...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* This is what had to have happen in the disciples and in John's heart in order for them to have come to a true knowledge of Jesus, to know Jesus truly. To know Jesus is to have faith in Him as the Lord who calls you. To know Jesus is to receive Him with love, receiving love from Him and directing your love to Him. Lastly it is to place your hope in Him as the Savior who brings you to the eternal Father. John's Gospel asks us to believe in the mysteries of God. Do you believe? Have you received God's love? Have you heard God's call? Have you experienced the power of the Holy Spirit? This is what it means to know Him.

Let us pray: Father in heaven we give You thanks on this morning in this glorious season when we remember our Lord, His birth. We thank You our Father that that is not just a distant reality but rather it is a present reality, for it is not wrong to say that Jesus Christ is born afresh in the heart of each person who comes to faith in Him as Lord and Savior. We thank You our Father that because Jesus has come and laid down His life and paid for our sin and removed the offense of our rebellion against You that now, Father, the Holy Spirit is free to come and to indwell us, transforming us. O Father teach us the beauty of humility, the power of patience, the goodness of forbearance, gentleness and self-control that we might in our selves manifest the indwelling presence of the Spirit, the character of the Lord who loves us and whom we love. It is in Jesus' name. Amen.