

Cosmic Jesus
John 1:1-18
Colebrook Congregational Church
Epiphany Sunday - January 4, 2015

This Sunday is the closest to the observance of Epiphany. Usually, the holiday is associated with with story of the Magi visiting Jesus shortly after his birth, or with Jesus' baptism, or with Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. So I was curious why the lectionary assigned these verses from the Gospel of John. I read up on Epiphany, and I learned that it means “the manifestation of Christ to the world.” Now, it makes sense. It's how Jesus became known to the wider world as the Messiah. One gospel has foreign dignitaries delivering gifts, another has it happen at a public baptism, and another with his first miracle before a huge gathering. John's manifestation starts before the human Jesus is even born! John is saying that the Messiah, the Word, has always been here. But there was no sign like the other gospels, that Jesus is special! But to John, we should have known this.

The Gospel of John is very different from the other three gospels. While the others are biographical, John is more theological and spiritual, with more emphasis on the divine aspects of Jesus. It is the youngest of the four gospels. The other gospels are filled with short sayings and lessons, John is filled with long discourses. The other gospels were written not only for the believers, but also to help convert people. John was written solely for those who already believed, to help fortify their belief, and was written by a community in pain. Scholars believe that this community was made up of second-century Jewish Christians, probably in Ephesus, was in competition with the followers of John the Baptists, and was recently expelled from the local synagogue.

The tone of John's Gospel is filled with this pain. Jewish Christians would stand in the synagogues and would state their cases for Jesus being the Messiah, and they would get into arguments. Many times, this results in them being kicked out of the synagogues and the community. There are also hints of disciplinary actions against the community in John. This hurt them. And you can see a hostility toward Jewish authorities for failing to recognize and understand Jesus for who he is in the tone of Jesus' interactions and discourses. People either understand or do not. Some scholars think that this

gospel is a bit gnostic, like the gospel that the Da Vinci Code movie is about, because of the separating people who understand or do not understand, however, I feel that is a mistake. Because of the conflict between the Jewish Christians and the synagogue authorities, which was based on their arguments and debates, I feel that this comes from their failure to convince their fellow Jews of what they knew and believed.

Our selection today is thought to have originally meant to be a poem, with a couple interjections about John the Baptist, but of course, through translation, we lose the poetic. It begins with the cosmic, the Word active in Creation, retelling the Genesis story. There is the first interjection into the poem, John the Baptist's first testimony about Jesus, that he himself is not the Messiah, but points to the Messiah. Then the poem continues about how the Messiah is among us in Creation, but we did not recognize him at first. The saved are not a nationality or tribe, but those who come to believe the Messiah. Then there is the second interjection, with John the Baptist saying the same thing as before, but in a different way. The poem ends with a reiteration of the theme that while the people of Moses follow God's Law, they cannot know God without accepting the Son, the Word, the Messiah.

That middle part, about not recognizing the Messiah when the Messiah is among us unless you believe in the Messiah has stuck with me. Jesus also tells us that we must recognize him in others. In our neighbors, in the people around us, and especially in those in need that you encounter and help. He's told us that there is a bit of him in all of us.

I used to live in New Haven and Worcester, and I enjoy visiting and walking around bigger cities like New York and Boston. One thing all those places have is street people, presenting themselves as those in need. They beg for money, saying they are hungry, but if you give them money you don't know what they will do with that money. Some certainly are hungry and will go buy food, but some are not so honest. So the thing that I have struggled over with this concept is how to recognize that bit of Jesus in others when I am harboring doubts about helping others with money.

During my first tour in AmeriCorps, we were all in Boston for the Opening

Day. All AmeriCorps in country, no matter which division we served in, gathered in the state capitals. So I was in Faneuil Hall with SeniorCorps from Cape Cod, Civilian Conservation Corps from the Pioneer Valley, Vistas from the universities, and state teams like me from the cities; participating in a national service rally that officially started our service year. Afterwards, they fed us pre-prepared cold cut sandwiches, slathered in mayonnaise. I dislike mayo so I went off to get something else, and rejoined my team. There was a lot of these sandwiches left over, and something made me fill my pack with them. I received some odd looks from my teammates, but I still did it, and I could not explain why at the time. Our team director then led us on a hike across Boston to the capitol building, and we encountered many people on the street begging for money for food. When you serve in AmeriCorps you do not have a disposable income, so my teammates just hurried past them, not having anything to give them, but I did. Many times I had to run to catch up or my friends waited for me, because instead of money, I was handing out food across Boston. Then I understood why I filled my pack with food.

Jesus can help us to overcome any doubts we may have, showing us a way, whether we recognize it at the time or not. And if we believe and trust in Jesus, Jesus can help us find a way to recognize that cosmic bit of him in each of us. And through the recognition, we can help manifest the Word of God amongst us.

Amen