

The True Temple

John 1:1-18

If this year is anything like last, then later this week over 100 million people in the U.S. will take a journey of 50 miles or more,¹ what is for many an *annual pilgrimage*, to celebrate the holidays with family and friends. We did this every year growing up. Load up our sky-blue Pontiac LeMans station wagon and set out for the Sandhills of Nebraska on a five-Sesame-Street journey to see Grandma and Grandpa. (That was our parents' way of explaining how long the trip would be—the same amount of time as watching five episodes of Sesame Street. Of course there were no DVD players or tablets to actually *watch* Sesame Street, but you get the point.)

And we made this journey every year, religiously. Just like we now make a journey from Boston to Nebraska almost every year.

And it's kind of fitting, as Christmas is known for its great pilgrimages. The journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, to be registered for the census (Lk. 2:1-7). The journey of the magi from the east to worship the newborn king (Matt. 2:1-12).

Of course not all pilgrimages happen at Christmas. And not all journeys can be described as a pilgrimage. Technically speaking, a pilgrimage is not just a vacation or a sightseeing tour; it is a pursuit, a quest, a journey driven by the heart's longing for something. As one author puts it, "the difference between a tourist and a pilgrim lies in the thing the heart seeks—the intended destination."² There is something we seek, that we believe will fill us, enlighten us, or satisfy us in some way.

And this act of pilgrimage is a surprisingly common to the human experience. Of course there are religious pilgrimages—Muslims travel to Mecca, Hindus to the Ganges; Jews or Christians might travel to Jerusalem. Mystics seek out gurus in search of enlightenment.

But there are also destinations that we wouldn't necessarily describe as religious, but when they become the object of someone's quest, with all of the expectations and longings that drive that quest, do in fact take on religious flavor for the pilgrim. Country music fans seek out the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. Academics set their sights on Harvard. Families journey to Disney World with hopes of making all their dreams come true. Those in health crisis travel to Boston in search of the most advanced medical care. Lovers dream of Paris. The self-indulgent sneak off to Vegas. And each destination becomes a kind of secular temple, inviting us into worship. We

¹ Julie Hall, "AAA: Number of Holiday Travelers Expected to Top 100 Million for the First Time," Dec. 15, 2015. Available at: <http://newsroom.aaa.com/2015/12/aaa-number-of-holiday-travelers-expected-to-top-100-million-for-the-first-time/>.

² A. J. Swoboda, "A Journey as Old as Humanity Itself," *Christianity Today*, Dec. 5, 2016. Available at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/december-web-only/journey-as-old-as-humanity-itself.html>.

perform the liturgy, we make our offerings, in hopes of finding the answers or satisfaction or fulfillment we came looking for.³

The point is, whether we realize it, whether we act on it, we're all searching for something. We all have, deep within us, a sense that this daily life—the grind, the routine, the disappointment, darkness, fear, failure, and frustration—this can't be all there is to life. There has to be something more. And the answer is out there somewhere, if we can just find it.

That drive stands behind so much of what happens in life. And it's a drive that many eventually realize is pointing them to God. Saint Augustine said it this way, speaking of God: "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."⁴ The apostle Paul said it like this in Acts 17: "And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, *that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. . . .*" (Acts 17:26-27).

The question is, where do we find him? How do we get to him? Is there a special place we need to go? A kind of temple where we might appear before him? Are there certain requirements we need to fulfill—quests we need to accomplish along the way? Am I supposed to work my way up to God? That's what many believe today, that finding God is something that we must do. Something we must achieve. In fact, almost every world religion frames it this way—that the great pilgrimage we must take is to make our way up to God.

But what if Christmas tells us something different? What if Christmas tells us that we are able to find God not by working our way up to him, but because *he has come down to us*. That the pilgrimage that matters is not one that we take, but one God's eternal Son took two thousand years ago. That the temple we seek is not somewhere out there, or even up there, but again, quoting Paul, is "not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27). That Jesus is in fact the true temple.

This is the point that John makes at the beginning of his Gospel, John 1. That Jesus, because of who he is—the Word-made-flesh—is uniquely qualified to make the Father known to us. He is the true temple we seek. And this is what I want to explore together this morning, as we celebrate the birth of one called Immanuel, *God with us*.

There are four things I want us to see this morning in John 1:1-18, that show us how Jesus is uniquely qualified to make the Father known, and what difference that therefore makes for us this Christmas:

1. Jesus is God
2. Jesus became human, *which means that . . .*
3. Jesus is the true temple. *And therefore . . .*
4. If you want to find God, go to Jesus, who came down to us

We'll start with the first thing John wants us to know—that Jesus is God.

³ See James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions* (Book 1).

1. Jesus is God

If you didn't notice during the scripture reading earlier, John is apt to speak in poetic terms. He doesn't just come out and tell us that he's talking about Jesus until v. 17. Instead he introduces him as "the Word." Verse 1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God" (1:1-2).

People have debated for years what he means by calling Jesus "the Word" here, or in Greek, the *logos*. But if we look at the Old Testament background to this idea, it's pretty clear that he's talking about God's own self-disclosure. The way that God reveals himself by *speaking*, in both creation and salvation.⁵ You can hear an echo of Genesis right there in v. 1—"in the beginning."

But what's remarkable here is that God's speech is personified here. He's not just talking about an action; he's talking about a *person*. "The Word was with God, and the Word was God. *He* was in the beginning with God." And this person, John includes in the divine identity. *The Word was God*. John is telling us that Jesus is God.

So much of what makes God unique is ascribed to the Word here. The Word is *eternal*—he was there in the beginning, before creation. Like God, he has no beginning and no end. The Word is *personal*—he's not a force or an idea, but a person. And the Word is *divine*—he is not just *a* god, he is the God. The Word, Jesus, is included in God's unique identity.

Moreover, the Word is involved in God's unique activity of creation. If you look at how the one God is presented to us in the Old Testament, we see that there are two things he shares with no creature—his work in creation, and his throne.⁶ We see Jesus occupying both of these things, with the emphasis here on his role in creation: "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (1:3-4). Jesus shares in God's unique identity, and participates in God's unique activity. In other words, *Jesus is God*. This is part of the mystery of the Trinity—one God in three persons.

But second, John also wants to show us that . . .

2. Jesus became human

Look ahead to v. 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."

John's language here is rather stunning. It's not just that God *appeared to* flesh, or appeared *like* human flesh. The Word *became* flesh. The eternal son of God, who shares his Father's divine identity, who was active in creating this world, stepped into that world himself and became part of it. "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (John 1:9). That's amazing.

But that's the consistent testimony of Scripture. When the angel appeared to Joseph in Matthew, he explained to him that his fiancée Mary was pregnant not from another man, but that what "is

⁵ See D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Pillar; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 114-116.

⁶ See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 9, 23.

conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. . . . All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God *with us*)’” (Matt. 1:20-23). The Word who was with God and was God, became flesh. He didn’t cease to be God. Nor was he part-God and part-human, like some demigod. He is, as the old creeds put it, true God and true man. Fully God and fully human at the very same time. Or as Colossians puts it, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). As the Word-made-flesh, Jesus is uniquely qualified to make the Father known.

And if that’s the case, then third . . .

3. Jesus is the True Temple

The past few weeks we’ve been talking about this idea of God’s temple throughout the Scriptures. How God’s desire to dwell with his people is not something that all of a sudden jumps onto the page at Christmas, but is central to his plan for creation. We saw how the first temple was the Garden of Eden, where God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. We looked at the old temple in Israel—the tabernacle and then the temple Solomon built, where God dwelt with his people in a special way. And we talked about how Israel forfeited God’s presence, how God actually abandoned his temple because of Israel’s sin, in the vision of Ezekiel.

But the idea of a temple is twofold: it expresses God’s desire to dwell with his people, and it’s where people on earth go to meet with the God who is in heaven. It is the pilgrim’s destination. This is the pilgrimage ancient Israel used to take every year—to go up to the temple in Jerusalem to worship God. It’s a pilgrimage many of us long to take, whether we realize it or not.

But if Jesus is God in the flesh, then the presence of God on earth is no longer fixed to a building, but a person. Jesus is the true temple—God with us. And John wants us to make this connection. Look again at v. 14 and notice how he described Jesus’ incarnation with the imagery of Israel’s temple.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt [or more rigidly, *tabernacled*] among us . . .” John describes the incarnation of Jesus as God’s tabernacling presence. He continues, “and we have seen his glory”—remember how when God took up residence in his temple, the Old Testament described it as the glory filling the temple (Exod. 40:34; 1 Kgs. 8:10-11). The glory of God was visibly present. Now in Jesus we see God’s glory, “glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

In John ch. 2, Jesus, standing in the temple court, says to the people who had turned God’s temple into a street market, “‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking about the temple of his body.” (Jn. 2:19-21; cf. 7:37-39). Now that Jesus is here, he is replacing the building in Jerusalem. As one author puts it, “The special revelatory presence of God, formerly contained in the holy of holies of the tabernacle and temple, has now burst forth into the world in the form of the incarnate God, Jesus Christ.”⁷ Jesus is the true temple.

⁷ G.K. Beale, G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission* (NSBT 17; Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 195.

And so that brings us to our fourth and final point . . .

4. If you want to find God, go to Jesus, who came down to us

Having a relationship with God is not about completing a series of quests, or improving yourself, or jumping through a bunch of religious hoops. It's not about making your way up to God. Relationship with God is possible not because he has come down to us.

Do not miss this point. In your pilgrim pursuit of truth and light and knowledge and fulfillment, in your pursuit of God, do not miss that the way to know God is to go to Jesus. John 1:9-11 says, "The true light, which enlightens 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" (1:9-11). The people of Israel who had been longing and waiting for God to return and redeem them, because Jesus didn't fit their categories, so many of them missed who he really was.

But as the Word-made-flesh, Jesus is uniquely qualified to make the Father known. This is what John 1:18 tells us: "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." More than that, Jesus himself supplies the grace needed in order to find and know the Father. "And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:16-17).

It's possible to have relationship with God, because God has come down to us in Jesus. It's possible by *grace*. Grace is when God gives us something incredible, wonderful—a relationship with him—even though we actually deserve something quite terrible—his wrath and judgment for our sin.

And by God's grace we are able to become children of God through faith in Jesus. Not all received him. But, v. 12, "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" (1:12-13). If you want to find God, go to Jesus. Trust in Jesus, who died for your sins and rose again. Relationship with God is possible not by working your way up to God, but because he has come down to us.

And so finding God, worshiping God, is not about your hard work or effort. Your morality, your social conscience, your religious practice. It's no longer about going to Jerusalem or any other holy site (even less some secular temple; cf. Jn. 4:21-24). It's about going to Jesus. "The purpose of pilgrimage is to find Jesus where he is—which happens to be right where we are."⁸ Trust him, by his Spirit, and enjoy the light of his presence this Christmas.

⁸ Swoboda, "A Journey as Old as Humanity Itself."