

G.O.A.T.: 1. Light in the Darkness

John 1:1-18

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Is it Hank Aaron or Babe Ruth, Ali or Sugar Ray, LeBron James or Michael Jordan, Montana or Brady, Serena or Martina, Tiger or Jack Nicholson. We usually associate this debate with performance, muscle, speed, hustle, or wealth. What if one life could redefine what greatness means? That the last are first. That if you want to be great, you must be the servant of all. When Jesus came into the world, he changed everything the world valued as greatness. In this series, we will discover three words – three words that changed the world and how we understand true greatness. Those three words: Jesus is Lord. For the next seven weeks, we will look at why we can call Jesus the true Greatest Of All Time. And if you will lean in and pay attention to what we will hear from the Gospel of John, you will hear a timeless message about what it means to find life and to truly live.

Let's begin with a few things about the Gospel of John. Although it is called the Gospel of John, we don't know who wrote it. The writer never identifies himself by name but refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." What we have is someone who witnessed Jesus. He saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched him, and walked with him in his ministry. By the second century A.D., the church said this was the disciple named John. It was the last of four gospels to be written, somewhere around 90 A.D. by the last living disciple. The rest of Jesus' disciples had been put to death. It is as if John knew his life was coming to an end and after reading the other gospels, he wanted to share his recollections of the life of Jesus and what his life means. As he says, **These things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.**

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called synoptic gospels "syn" is the Greek word for "together" and "optic" the Greek word for "seen". In other words, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are "seen together." They contain many of the same stories, are focused primarily in the region of Galilee, and compact the three years of Jesus' ministry into one year. But John includes different stories. It's like he was saying, "there's more to who Jesus really is and here's why that matters." In the synoptics, Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God. John speaks of Eternal Life. The synoptics use parables. John uses metaphors that point to deeper meaning. His stories always have two levels. There is a surface level of the story, but here is also a deeper level that points us toward Jesus as the source of life. I grew up learning about Jesus, but I don't ever remember thinking or hearing about a personal relationship with Jesus. I suspect that's because the emphasis was on the synoptics. Matthew, Mark, and Luke emphasize following Jesus, taking on his way and living by his ethics. But John tells us we find life by believing in and having a relationship with Jesus.

The Gospel of John begins with a prologue, which is one of the most beautifully written passages of the Bible. It gives us in summary what the rest of the gospel will describe. I was reminded of the road that we took to get to my grandparent's house. Let me provide you with a picture of where they lived. It was out in the country, ten miles from a small town in southeastern Oklahoma. When we turned off the main road, we still had a mile and half on a gravel road. We would drive over a creek bed and up a hill, and if you had never been there, before you ever got to the house, you knew what you were to come to by what you saw along the way. You could tell that the people who lived along the way were far from affluent. Their homes looked like they were barely getting by – and yet you could tell they were hardworking by the cattle grazing in the pastures. You could tell the importance of water by the cattle ponds. In fact, one of the

ponds provided the brown, dirty water that flowed from the faucets inside my grandparent's house. Drinking water had to be carried in. But we took our baths in the brown, dirty water. Along the front of every house, there was a large porch filled with rocking chairs, and in the evening every rocking chair was filled by a person who would be waving to whomever drove past. And just before reaching their house, there was a small southern Baptist Church. In the midst of everything else in a rough, hardworking life, faith mattered. By the end of that mile and half trip, you had a good idea of who you would meet when you stepped into my grandparent's house. And that's what we find with the first chapter of John. These first eighteen verses introduce us to the full meaning of everything Jesus was and is and did, and once we step into the rest of the gospel we understand what a great introduction it is.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Those words should remind us of the opening words from the Old Testament book of Genesis: "In the beginning, God created..." John wants us to see that as more than the story of one person in one time and place. This is the story of God and all of creation. The Greek for "Word" is Logos, which means logic or logical. God is the reason and logic behind everything that exists. Whenever I speak a word, I am speaking part of me. The breath from inside me makes noise as it passes through my larynx and mouth. And we are held responsible for whatever comes out of our mouth – right? Even if you didn't intend to say it, once it's out of your mouth, it lives and bring forth a response. Some of you remind me of things I said in a sermon years ago that I have forgotten long ago, but somehow the words live on. Genesis tells us: God said, "let there be light and it was so." God acts by Word and that Word is a person, and person is Jesus.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. This is the central claim of the Gospel: God took on human flesh to walk among us and show us what God is. This is what sets Christianity apart from every other religion. Other religions provide moral teachings and a way to live. Only Christianity says that God love us so much and wanted us to know the heart and character of God so much that God became flesh, one of us. The invisible God became visible in Jesus Christ. In John 10:30, Jesus says, "**I and the Father are one.**" In John 14:7, he says **If you have really known me, you will also know the Father.** When we pray to God, we picture Jesus, and it is in relationship with Jesus that we know who God really is.

Who is Jesus? **In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.** John uses the metaphor of light. Jesus came as the light to dispel the darkness. On Christmas Eve, we extinguish all of the lights, and we sit in the dark with just one candle. Whenever we find ourselves in utter and complete darkness, it is a scary place. It feels threatening. Sometimes we stumble and fall. Every Christmas Eve, I'm afraid that in that dark moment as I'm walking across the Chancel, I'm going to stumble and fall down these steps. But it is only when we experience the dark that we understand the power of light.

When the bombs began falling in Ukraine and we saw images of artillery striking schools and playgrounds and apartment buildings with person huddled in subway tunnels and basement, we felt something. It's not necessary to know anyone in Ukraine or to have visited the country to know there is darkness and I think what we feel is the light that came into the world, the light that lives within us, wanting to push back the darkness. I want to share with you parts of an interview from a few days ago between Fred Vanderwerf, one of the United Methodist district

superintendent in Minnesota who was a missionary to Ukraine until 2008, and a pastor who is serving a United Methodist church in the eastern part of Ukraine.

With so many Ukrainians fleeing the country, he was asked, “Why are you staying?” [video #1] “People are shaking all the time.” That’s darkness. That’s attempting to live in the darkness. But into the darkness comes the Light, and he was asked, “Where are you seeing God?” [video#2] There is no darkness where the Light of Christ is not present. It may only be a glimmer or flicker, like a match in a darkened room, but the Gospel of John exists to declare the light cannot and will not be extinguished by the darkness. We don’t know how this war will end, but however it ends, it will not be because the light has gone out of the world. So, Pastor Prokip was asked, “What can we do to help?” [video#3] He also described there have been reports from the front line of fighting that the prayers have been almost like a shield protecting Ukrainians and preventing opposing forces from moving forward. Make no mistake, there is power in prayer. [video#4]

The greatest movements of Christianity have come in times of adversity. When others run from the darkness, Christians run toward the darkness – literally and figuratively. This is a time for the movement of Christians around the world to show the Light shines. We don’t need to go to Ukraine or to Poland or Germany to assist with refugees, but we can put our Christian witness to work. That’s why I am inviting us to offer humanitarian support through our mission partners on the ground – through person like Pastor Prokip and his congregation. If you can make a special above and beyond gift, mark you gift “for Ukraine.” And if you go online, to our website and click on Give, one of the giving options is “Ukraine.” 100% of what you give will reach people in need. We can also pray. I’ve witnessed the power of prayer in my own family in recent weeks, so I know firsthand that prayer has power. And let’s not complain about gas prices. I don’t like increasing prices, but it seems a small price to pay at this time to push back the darkness in this world.

A few days ago, I leaned over the hospital bed of my youngest sister who lay dying, and after making the sign of the cross on her forehead, I said, “You are never alone. God will never let go of you.” We don’t have to be afraid of the dark, because God is light – and the darkness will never overcome it.

In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. How do we access this life? Have any of you ever given your car keys to a 16-year-old? I think the most terrifying car ride of my life was during rush hour on 494 through Bloomington as our daughter who a week earlier had gotten her driver’s license was driving me to the airport. There was a moment when it felt like my life flashed before my eyes, and I thought this would be my last car trip. And I remember closing my eyes and thinking, “Lord, help us.” In that moment, I surrendered. I gave up control. And there’s a word for that – TRUST. It’s the same thing I did 44 years ago this spring, I heard the verse from John 3:16: For God so loved the world that God gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. And I realized there is nothing that God would not do for me – and all that God asks of me is to surrender control – Trust. And my life changed. My purpose changed. My priorities changed. And the rest of my life has been about bring life, pushing back the darkness, and let the light shine in me and through me. Jesus doesn’t want to get into your life, he wants you to step into his. Today, I invite you to take that step as well.

In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Amen.