

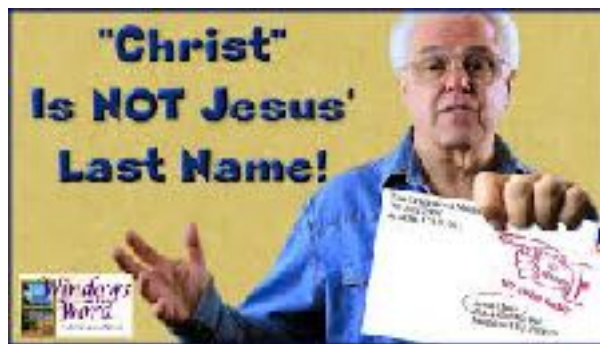
Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, January 5, 2020
Second Sunday after Christmas

“‘Christ’ Is Not Jesus’ Last Name”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Hebrew Scripture: Psalm 147:12-20

Christian Scripture: John 1:1-18



Last week, I began by sharing with you that I chose to interpret the far more difficult of the two scriptures offered by the lectionary calendar. I pray I did not make the wrong decision. Thus far, I have not heard any complaints.

This week, I continue to preach on the more difficult of the two scriptures.



The easier scripture to preach on is the magi visiting the Christ child, perhaps the last of the Christmas narratives. Yet, this morning, I will only mention the magi in passing.



The more difficult reading this morning is the opening words, or the overture, of the gospel of John. In fact, the United Church of Christ lectionary even suggests that this transcendent passage of John “is perhaps too immense for preaching”.



Yet, I believe our passage from John speaks to the table and to Christ’s presence with us this morning in the receiving of Holy Communion.



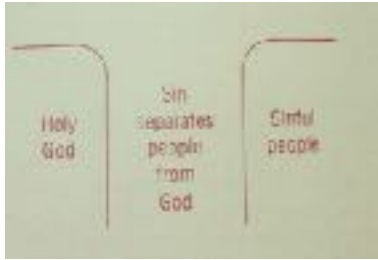
“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1-2).

The author of John is trying to bring us back to the start, Genesis chapter 1. In the beginning.



Yes, God existed and exists. Yes, God was there and is there. But God was viewed as distant, mysterious. Really quite ‘other’ than Adam and Eve.

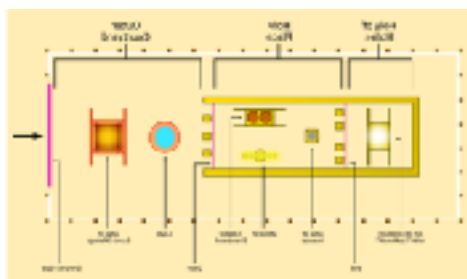
They were separate.



Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God was powerful. God was a protector. And, yes, sadly and unfortunately, God was wrongly perceived as a punisher. Whether, protector or punisher, God was always distinctly 'other'.



God could not even be seen without dying. God could not even be seen by Moses, the first and greatest prophet. God moved in a pillar of cloud by day or a pillar of fire at night. God could only be communed with at the top of a mountain. Few could enter into the tabernacle. When the temple was built, only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies.



All of this is to say, that God was there, but distant.

Then as we continue into the Hebrew Scriptures, God's people are described as constantly in an epic struggle to obey; then they disobeyed; then they tried to placate; then they obeyed; then they disobeyed; then they placated. It was a viscous cycle.



Then as we continue in the Hebrew Scriptures, the people were punished by God, then comforted, then punished, then comforted. We read much of this comforting in the psalm that was read this morning. To be honest, it all sounds very dysfunctional. The relationship was weak.

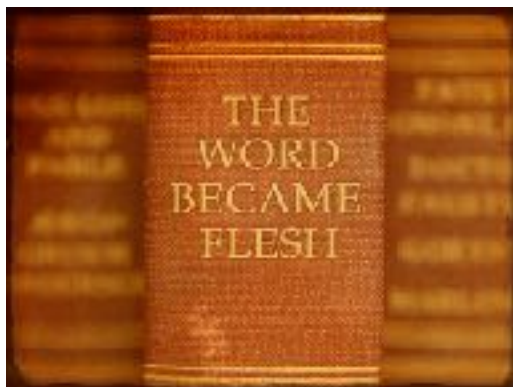


As we continue in the Hebrew Scriptures, both God and the people are injured by one another. Through the prophet Hosea, God agonizes over an adulterous people, personified by Gomer. Gomer, or the

people, are miserable. And Hosea, or God, is miserable. They both loved each other - but the distance was too great.



“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). And then, everything changed with these words.



God, through Emmanuel, became close to the people.

Not just close. The same. Intimate. Imbricated. Grafted. One. As Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus is Emmanuel or ‘God with Us’.



Jesus is the Word.

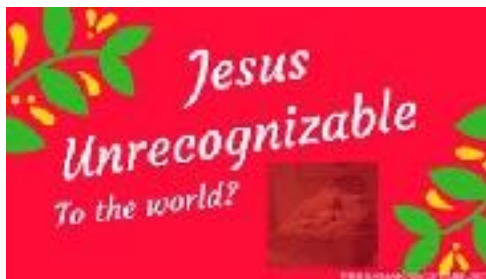
The Word is God, that is, Jesus embodies the wisdom of God.

God became human, hence God is close; God is no longer distant.

For the first time, God can be seen. God can be heard. God can be touched.



God can be fully experienced.



“But the world did not recognize him” (John 1:10). The Word was only understood by those who wished to be closer to God and who were not attached to the world.



The criteria to recognise the Word was not morality. The scribes and the Pharisees were the most moral of those in the day. In fact, it was the sinners who first recognized Jesus. It was not gender (in the Ancient Near East males were considered 'closer' to God). In fact, men least recognized the Word. Women were the first to recognize the Word and through the early church and until now remain the strength of the church. The criteria was not health (those in the Ancient Near East thought to be 'blessed' by God, all others were 'impure'). In fact, the sick and the diseased recognized Jesus before others. Citizenship was not a criteria for recognition of the Word, for it was those who were foreigners, refugees, aliens who best recognized the Word (Samaritans, the Syrophenician woman, the Magi were not Hebrews, they were foreigners, gentiles, considered unclean by birth, religion, and culture). It was not wealth. In fact, those who possessed wealth and comfort were the least likely to recognize the Word.



If we go down this list, I am in huge trouble. I am a cleric. I consider myself moral. I am male. I am able bodied. I carry a USA passport. I am of means and live a comfortable middle class lifestyle. Judging by who recognized the Word in Jesus' time, unfortunately I don't stand much of a chance of truly recognizing the Word.

Fortunately, those who recognize the Word are simply the ones who seek God's will and who desire to be close to God.



And it is through Jesus that we are able to know God's will most clearly and it is through Jesus that we are able to be close to God.



So close, that we can eat with God. At this table, to which Jesus invites us.

We are close. We are intimate. We are next to and with.

But more than that.



Through this bread and wine, we actually enter into God and God enters into us.

We are in God. God is in us. We are the same. Creator and Created are reunited.

All that which was distant becomes close. All that was remote, becomes known.

It is at the table that we become reconciled to God.



The term 'Christ', is actually a title, not a name. Certainly, it is not a last name. Christ, means 'Messiah', or 'The Anointed One'. It means, in another word, 'Deliverer'.

Jesus the human delivers God to us. Jesus delivers us to God.



This then, the table, is 'food delivery' on a cosmic scale.



This is the Word of God, and it was *delivered* to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.