

John 1:1-18 is the Fourth Gospel's origin story. Unlike Matthew and Luke, John does not give us a birth narrative to help us understand who Jesus is and why he's important. Instead, he creates a dense theological mashup of the first Genesis creation story, Stoic philosophy, and personification of Torah. With John the risk for a preacher is that you start exploring every phrase, because they're so rich, and then five hours later you've made it through the first paragraph and the whole congregation is in a glassy-eyed stupor. So here's what we're going to do: we're going to stipulate that John has given us a giant comprehensive theory of the universe, and then we're going to focus on one teeny part of it.

John wants us to understand that the man Jesus is simultaneously human and an aspect of the eternal God. He is life-giving light, and no darkness can extinguish that light. BUT it is possible for us human beings to fail to recognize him and miss the whole key to the universe. "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." This vulnerability on God's part is what the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard focused on when he wrote his short story, "The King and the Maiden."<sup>i</sup>

The king in the story knew that it was next to impossible for him to marry the girl. But he was so powerful that he knew he could marry the girl and get away with it. But another thought occurred to him. If he married the peasant girl and stayed king, there would always be something missing in their relationship. The girl would always admire the king, but she could never really love him. She would always be conscious of the fact that he was royalty and she was merely a lowly peasant. So the king decided on another plan. He decided that he would resign his kingship and become a lowly peasant himself. Then he would offer his love to her as one peasant to another. The king realized, of course, that if he did this, the situation could

backfire. She might reject him, especially if she thought him foolish for doing what he did. The king finally decided that he loved the peasant girl so much that he would risk everything to make true love between them possible. Kierkegaard never told how the story ended, because of course, human beings are the girl, and we decide the ending.

Kierkegaard's story is about *God's* love for humanity and God's vulnerability—in the incarnation, God loses all privilege and power in order to have the possibility of relationship with a party who may not accept that relationship. The potential for God's heartbreak makes me think of the toll of family separations at the border, when children were taken from their parents and, months or years later, could not recognize those parents. The online magazine *Remezcla* tells this story:

In a video the ACLU shared, a woman embraces her toddler, as she repeatedly tells him she is his mother. . . . The 3-year-old boy squirms in his mom's arms and attempts to push her away, as the woman says, "I'm your mommy, sweetheart. I'm your mommy." She cries and chases after the boy, who doesn't want his mother to hold him.<sup>ii</sup>

Mostly I think about the heartbreak of that mother, but I think also of how damaged the child is, that he's unable to recognize and cling to exactly the person who could help him heal. Because although he doesn't know it, she is exactly who he needs.

John's introduction raises the question of recognition. How does it happen that God's own people fail to recognize God among them? Well, how might it happen that the peasant girl would fail to recognize the king when he showed up looking like a laborer? We have ideas of what is divine and what is not, and those ideas are pretty firm—so firm that we are no longer conscious of them, and simply filter out what doesn't fit without thinking about it. I read a

Twitter thread recently by a woman who'd grown up in conservative evangelical culture, and she'd just found a list she'd made when she was 15 of 85 qualities that her future husband would have. Apparently the youth group leader wanted the girls to get very specific about what their husbands should be like *so that they would be sure to recognize them when they met them!* The problem with this strategy is that when you're 15 the qualities you prize are things like "Likes Mexican food" and "likes to hold hands." One of the qualities was "cool," and she writes, "where was this when I met [her current husband]?" Apparently the actual flesh-and-blood love of her life is not cool. Fifteen year-old her had failed to imagine the qualities that she would fall in love with at twenty-something.

And this is our concern: if we want to recognize God among us, we have to be prepared for the possibility that God will look quite a bit different than we might project. That's why the best Christmas stories always contain an element of surprise—someone's identity shifts, or someone behaves in a way that is uncharacteristic of them—because the essence of Christmas is that things are way different than we thought they were. In John's portrayal of Jesus, he is telling us that God was always like Jesus, but we never realized that until Jesus came and *some* of us recognized him.

I heard an interview with Sarah Chayes, who used to work for National Public Radio and who now lives in Afghanistan. She talked about the challenges of building schools and other institutions in a place that has suffered so many years of trauma. One of those challenges is that people who have survived are survivors—that is, they have internalized ways of coping that are not necessarily always constructive for the community. For instance, she said, when her agency provided classroom materials, the teachers wouldn't give them to the students but

would instead try to sell them for a profit. That's how they've survived while others have gone under, but it's counterproductive in a community sense.

I would be tempted—no, I'd be pretty sure to—throw up my hands and call them corrupt, unworthy of my help. And certainly simply to enable their little black market enterprise is not ultimately helpful to anybody. But Sarah Chayes made me realize that what I see as corruption is born of trauma; it's a symptom as well as a cause of prolonged unreasonable deprivation. Those erstwhile teachers are also made in the image of God, and in some way they are the broken, incarnate Christ among us. We need to learn to see that.

The conservative evangelical girl, as she grew up, learned some things that made her look past the uncoolness of the man she would eventually marry. Part of our spiritual project together is also to widen our perceptions so that we are able to see what we don't expect to see—the eyes of Christ in the face of our neighbors, even the broken ones.

How can we respond to God's grace? How do we receive the Christ Child? The way we receive our own children, the way the Samaritan received the wounded man at the side of the road. May we find, through Christ, ways to love the unlovely. May we exercise patience and discernment as we look for Jesus in the face of every child—young and old—who comes to us in need of love, comfort, or care. And in so doing, may we might experience the abundance of God's grace all the more fully in the community of God's children into which the Word of God continues to shine an unquenchable light of hope.

Dear God, Father and Mother of us all, we come before you with the smell of life fresh upon us. We thank you for what we know in Christ Jesus our Lord, and we celebrate the sense of security we feel when we remember that when we see Jesus, we have seen you. Grant that your light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen*

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<sup>i</sup> <https://stories4homilies.blogspot.com/2018/11/christ-king-34th-sunday-b.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://remezcla.com/culture/government-separated-months-3-year-old-boy-doesnt-recognize-mom/>