

December 27, 2009

The World Did Not Know Him  
His Own People Did Not Accept Him

a sermon on John 1.1-18  
by David C. Mauldin  
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

I don't know why I do this to myself. How can anyone preach a sermon from this passage? John wrote so elegantly and powerfully. Anything I say will sound clunky and dull after it. Preaching this passage is like having a gifted actor recite one of Shakespeare's best sonnets, then listening to a donkey bray.

On the other hand, this passage has so much meat in it! It is so rich! Here you have God's love, God's glory, the mystery of the Incarnation – you have the Trinity, you have light and life, and God coming to us because we were lost and helpless. You have creation and redemption. You have that wonderful promise in verse 12: "As many as received him ... to them he gave the power to become children of God." On and on it goes. If you can't preach this passage, you shouldn't disgrace a pulpit by braying from it.

This morning I want John to have his say, but I also want to ask him a question. When I read this passage with all its eloquence and forceful imagery, I fall down right in the middle. There in the middle sits a contradiction, a conundrum; and it trips me up every time. Most Christians do not notice it because they have grown familiar with the passage and the story of Jesus. I expect an adult just learning about Jesus and coming to this passage for the first time would find it baffling. A reader with fresh eyes would want to ask, "Why?"

Do you see the embarrassing point in this passage? It celebrates Jesus as the eternal Word of God. He was not only with God in the beginning, he was God. He is God. To see him is to see God's glory. All things were created by him. In him was life and light. The darkness did not overcome his light. The passage could not possibly praise Jesus in any higher terms. Three sentences in and we're hooked. We want to meet this guy. His story promises to be exciting, even life-transforming. Through him we have received grace and truth. And that promise again, that beautiful promise: You can be a child of God. ... *But ... but*, there in the middle of the passage, like a terrible scar on a lovely face, lurks the contradiction: "The world came into being through him; *yet the world did not know him*. He came to what was his own, *and his own people did not accept him*." How can this be? How can Jesus be God incarnate, full of grace and truth, light

and life, and yet his own creation did not recognize him and his own people did not accept him?

This is the question I want to ask John. He has an answer, but to find the answer we will look not only to John but to all of scripture. Scripture tells a tale, and if we pay attention from the beginning, we will not be surprised when, at the critical moment, humankind rejects God's ultimate expression of love.

Does this amaze you too? Have you ever thought about it? God came to us in the flesh, in person, and we failed to recognize him. Do you think you would recognize God if you met him face-to-face? I wonder.

I realize that we human beings are capable of amazing feats of stupidity. People prove it every day. I love to read true stories of dumb criminals. A guy robs a store then runs out of gas two blocks away. Another guy robs a bank and demands \$100 million dollars. The clerk tells him they don't have that much cash. Will he take a check? He does! Then he comes back later to deposit the check into *his own* account! That really happened. Stupidity is not limited to the mentally deficient, though. Often the smartest people do the dumbest things. I know that. I know that even brilliant people make colossal blunders. In fact, it takes a brilliant mind to make a truly colossal mess. Anyone can ruin life or a family, but to ruin a nation, a continent, or a century takes a team of gifted, intelligent individuals who make incredibly poor choices. History is full of them. Dumb or smart, we human beings are prone to bone-headedness the way fish are prone to get wet. But still ... I mean, come on ... God himself ... in the flesh ... the light, the life, the glory ... and we didn't just overlook him. Even that would have been inexcusable. But Jesus didn't give us that option. He was and remains impossible to overlook. He got into our faces with his bizarre claims. Then he backed them up with amazing signs. He told us who he was, and he showed us, but did we recognize him? No! We rejected him and put him on a cross! Of all the fantastic, colossal feats of boneheaded stupidity and downright culpable ignorance, this one takes the prize. Even given our propensity to error, the disproportion between who Jesus was and our response to him astonishes me. This travesty was not caused by simple stupidity; something else was going on. What do you think? Would you have made this mistake? If you had lived in Galilee or Jerusalem around A.D. 30, would you have been so blind, so full of hate? I wonder.

I said scripture offers an answer to this mystery. Let me walk you through it. Simply stated, it is this: Humanity is in a state of rebellion against God, and has been for a very long time. Since Adam and Eve first broke faith with God, their children have been doing the same. So God speaks, and we turn our back. John signals us to pay attention to the whole story of God when he begins his gospel, "In the beginning ..." Where have we heard that before? Genesis 1:1, the first verse in the Bible. John tells us up front that

the story of Jesus is cosmic. It is nothing less than the story of God. In fact, it is the climax of all history.

So John takes us back to the beginning, and from the beginning people have been rejecting God. What started in Eden continued through the ages. Just as I marvel that people could meet Jesus face-to-face and reject him, I marvel that the children of Israel could cross the Red Sea on dry ground, and almost immediately start complaining. Over and over they witnessed the mighty acts of God. Over and over they grumbled. At one point they wanted to get rid of Moses and elect leaders to take them back to Egypt. And don't forget ol' Pharaoh. How many plagues would it take before you wised up? I sincerely hope I wouldn't need ten.

The historical books of the Old Testament show us a cycle of rebellion and repentance. God's people would start ignoring his laws and living however they wanted to. Then either the natural consequences of their sin or God's punishment would make them miserable. They would repent. God would deliver them. They would be grateful and good for a while. Then they would be back to their old ways again. Over and over. Under the judges, the kings, the prophets, it was always the same cycle. Ignore God until you get into trouble. Cry to God for help. God saves you. Then you ignore God again.

Stephen, a deacon in the early church, made this very argument. Stephen was an effective evangelist and defender of the gospel. His preaching got him into trouble with the authorities in Jerusalem. Listen to this excerpt from his defense. Keep in mind he never read *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He told the High Council: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it" [Acts 7.51-53].

John says Jesus came to his own people and they did not accept him. Stephen says this rejection was not a new experience for God. I do not want to appear to pick on the Jews for rejecting Jesus. John also says Jesus made the world, but the world did not know him. Scripture is very balanced when it lays blame for Jesus' rejection. It was not just his own people; the Gentiles rejected him too. Everyone is equally guilty. Luke, for example, explicitly blames not only Herod and the people of Israel, but also Pontius Pilate and the Gentiles, for the death of Jesus [Acts 4.27]. Paul also, in Romans 1, claims that all people are without excuse before God because deep down we all know what we ought to do, but we do not do it. Israel should have known better, but the pagans should have known better too! It was not just his own people who rejected Jesus, the whole world did.

And yet ... this dark cloud of human ignorance and guilt has not one but two silver linings. First, God, in his unfathomable wisdom and grace, used our very worst evil as the means to rescue us from sin and death. Hate sent Jesus to the cross from a human perspective, but love sent him to the cross from the divine perspective. By his death he atoned for human sin. He reconciled us to God.

Second, not everyone rejected Jesus. They did not then, and they do not now. In our scripture reading, right after he says that the world did not recognize Jesus and his own people did not accept him, John says, "BUT ..." You know the old joke, don't you? Whenever anyone says the word "but" ignore everything they just said. That's a joke, but when John throws that word in, we ought to see that he is about to mitigate what he just said. Yes, Jesus was rejected ... BUT ... not by everyone. In fact, right after that *but* here comes my favorite verse: "But to all who received him, who believed on his name, he gave power to become the children of God."

John also speaks for his Christian friends when he writes, "We have seen his glory" and "From him we have all received, grace upon grace." So, although Jesus went unrecognized and met with rejection – because when has God's love ever met with any other response from our race? – and even his own friends denied and abandoned him in his hour of need, though again not all of them – the women were at the cross – nevertheless, some did recognize him. Some did see his glory. Some did worship him. Some did become children of God.

Throughout this sermon so far I've been planting seeds for reflection. If you had been in Galilee or Jerusalem during the days of Jesus' ministry, would you have recognized him or not? Would I have? I suppose one answer might be, it depends on who you would be. If you were one of the chief priests, probably not. If you were a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, maybe so. But I don't like that answer. The gospels describe wide diversity among Jesus' followers. Yes, a handful of fisherman believed in him. Presumably many more did not. Yes, the High Council rejected him, but not all of them. Joseph of Arimathea was a respected member of the Council, and he did not consent to Jesus' death. The Pharisees oppose Jesus throughout the gospels, but Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a believer. So it's not so simple as social location, as if all the powerful people rejected Jesus while the poor and oppressed believed in him. The crowds in the gospels, like all crowds, were terribly fickle. One minute they flock to Jesus; the next they turn away.

Would you have looked at Jesus and seen God's glory? Would I? You may think these questions are impossible to answer, but I say we can make a reasonable estimation. How? Simple: What is your response to Jesus now? If you read the gospels and consider him nothing more than a mere man, a wandering teacher or prophet, why think you would have seen more back then? If you hear his story and decide it could not possibly be true – it must be myth created by the overactive imaginations of the

gospel writers themselves – why suppose you would have thought any differently about the rumors of his miraculous power circulating in Galilee back then? On the other hand, if you do believe in him now, if you have received grace upon grace, if you have experienced his life-changing power, why not count yourself among those who received him back then? Surely seeing and hearing him firsthand would not make faith harder. The world is full of Doubting Thomases who would believe if only they could see with their eyes and touch with their hands. Or so they tell themselves.

What does it take to believe? Maybe John is right, children of God are born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God. Does this mean God has to open our eyes before we can see what's right in front of our faces? Are our hearts so hard, our minds so closed, that they cannot accept the truth unless God pries them open with a crowbar and stuffs truth in? That would explain a lot. I do know this, if you want faith, you can ask for it. If you want God, you can seek him. If you want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, he will not turn you away. Jesus said, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" [Matt 7.7]. What you would have done back then is a moot question. What you actually do today makes all the difference, in this world and the next.

This passage and the mystery of how Jesus met with rejection are relevant for Christians today. We live in a culture of unbelief. Although many Americans are Christian, most people in America today reject Jesus. Our culture assumes atheism. That's ironic, because Christian or not, the vast majority of Americans believe in God. And yet, our public life treats God as irrelevant. The shows and movies that entertain us assume God isn't there. Public policy nearly always assumes God is not there. Religion is OK, as long as it is kept private, because religion is something people do that makes them feel good – that's how our culture looks at it. But God is ignored. Most people believe in some kind of god, but many of them do not believe in Jesus Christ.

We live in a culture of unbelief. Sociologists and theologians might argue for a long time about why this is so. I think one big reason is prejudice, pure and simple. Many people, especially those who shape our culture, are prejudiced against God. In a culture of unbelief even Christians absorb some of this prejudice. It makes us think of Christianity as one part among many in our life, as if worship is just one more thing we do, like fishing or watching football. In reality, our relationship with Christ makes us who we are. It is the controlling center of everything.

It is important, as we live in a context of unbelief, not to let our faith be overwhelmed by prejudice. So what if most people reject Jesus? That does not mean your faith in him is misplaced. The majority of people have always rejected Jesus, unless claiming to be Christian promised social advantages. Human beings are herd animals. We tend to follow the crowd. In a culture of belief, most people are going to claim to believe. In a

culture of unbelief, we feel pressure not to believe, or not to take our faith seriously. We must resist that pressure.

One way we do this is by knowing what we believe and why. Christianity offers a rational, comprehensive worldview that makes the best sense of the life. Plus, we have good historical reasons for believing Jesus claimed to be God, and that on the third day after his crucifixion, he rose from the dead. When you come to faith in Christ, you do not leave your mind at the door. Your faith will open your mind in exciting new ways. Meanwhile, many people reject Jesus for no better reason than they have inherited a cultural prejudice against God. They have closed minds. Once in a while, God will use his crowbar to pry a mind like that open, and it can be beautiful to behold. Alister McGrath is an example. He grew up an atheist, and he embraced atheism because ... well, everyone with half a brain knew it was right. As he studied in university and his mind grew and opened up a bit, and he came to faith in Christ.

We ought to know what we believe and why. We also ought to trust our experience. John had a faith that would not fold if the whole world had stood against him. Why? Because he knew. He had seen with his eyes and heard with his ears. He recognized God's glory in Jesus. He had received grace upon grace. You and I have not seen with our eyes. Our ears have heard the witness of the apostles recorded in scripture. We have known Jesus' love and power. We have experienced his grace. I have felt his presence. I know. You know. He is alive. Our faith is solid, because we have put our faith in Christ. He will not let us down. The whole world might reject him – or at least it might *feel* that way sometimes; that is never actually the case. Even if the whole world did, we would stand confidently in our faith.

Finally, because our faith is solid and true, we ought to be bold about it. The prejudice against God that pervades our culture tells us to keep our faith to ourselves. If survey results about how often Presbyterians share the Good News are accurate, we are listening to and obeying that prejudice. Whom should we hear and obey?

I close by going back once again to that beautiful verse. The world he made rejected Jesus. His own people rejected him. But ... but ... to all who received him, who believed on his name, he gave power to become the children of God." ... What about you? ...

rev\_mauldin@yahoo.com