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Sermon 31 October 2021

Title: Meet the Gospels 4 (John)

- Good morning church—we are so glad you’ve joined us today on this day of celebration—some folks are celebrating Halloween today, and I’m sure there will be some trick-or-treaters running around tonight, guisin’ I hear it’s called in this part of the world—if you’re going out trick-or-treating tonight we hope you’ll do it before or after our Second Helping Bible study—we’ll be meeting at the church at 6:00 and there will be some treats provided, so you could just forget about Trick or Treat and come study the Bible with us—it’s sure to be a good time—we’re going to be playing a game tonight called “Better Know Your Gospels” – that’ll be fun and you won’t want to miss out on your chance to demonstrate your knowledge and you just might learn something new as well.
- Halloween isn’t all folks are celebrating today, because it’s also, in addition to being Halloween, it’s also Reformation Day—the day that in the Protestant church we celebrate the beginning of the Reformation. It was allegedly on October 31st in 1517 that a German monk named Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 theses to the door of that chapel at Wittenberg—basically saying to the church, “I got 95 problems with the way you’re doing things, and y’all need to take care of them.” The Catholic church also recognizes Reformation Day—I’m not sure whether they celebrate it or not, but today is Reformation Day

- I'm also celebrating a little bit because the Atlanta Braves made it to the World Series—at the time of this recording the Braves were ahead 2 games to 1—I hope the Astros haven't tied it up when you're watching this—that's baseball, by the way, and I've noticed that when I've listened to the BBC news over the last few days, they report the news from the world of football and cricket and rugby and boxing and cycling but they haven't said one word about the scores from the World Series or even mentioned that it was happening—they completely ignore baseball, and I don't quite know what to think about that
- But it's also worth celebrating that we got an extra hour of sleep last night—or we could have—I hope you took advantage of that—or maybe it's news to you that the clocks went back last night—now that's only in the UK—if you're watching from the US that happens NEXT Sunday—and because we'll be in the US next Sunday Pastor Tasha and I got to turn our clocks back today and we'll get to do it again next Sunday, so that's something for us to look forward to. We are surely going to miss this beautiful seaside town and our wonderful church family, but we know that the church is in good hands while we're gone.
- And we're not gone yet, we have one Sunday left, and that's today, and we are here to worship and to hear what God has to say to each of us this morning—to join together our life with the life of the church, and our story with the gospel story -- and that's reason enough to celebrate right there
- Now today is the last Sunday of our sermon series called "Meet the Gospels," and we have been for the last 4 weeks looking at the synoptic gospels—those 3 gospels that share a similar perspective, a similar way of seeing the story of

Jesus' life and ministry and death and resurrection, of his teachings and his example to his followers. And the synoptic gospels all make the point that Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and died and rose again, who performed miracles and deeds of power in the area around Galilee 2,000 years ago, was the Messiah, the Saviour of the World, and his appearance meant that the Kingdom of God had arrived and that we were called to enter into it. And while that same story is told by all three of the synoptics gospels, and even though they are similar, there are differences between them, differences in the way they are told and the specific aspects of the gospel story that they emphasize.

- And we have seen how Mark's is an urgent, apocalyptic gospel. The way that it is abbreviated and no-nonsense, because it has big news to communicate and so it gets to the point without meandering about too much—and the big news it communicated was apocalyptic—it had to do with the apocalypse—the revelation –of Jesus as Messiah and the arrival of the Kingdom of God—and so Mark's *arche* of the *euangelion*, the beginning of the good news, probably the earliest gospel written, was an urgent, apocalyptic gospel.
- And then we looked at Matthew's prophetic, Hebraic gospel, and we saw how Matthew retold almost all that Mark had written, and added more detail, like the story of Mary and Joseph and of Jesus' birth—all of those parts that we hear during Advent and Christmas—and we saw how Matthew makes the case that Jesus is the Messiah that the Jewish people have been awaiting, and how Jesus fulfills the Hebrew scriptures, while at the same time Jesus prophetically

reprimands the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocritical ways. Matthew's is a prophetic, Hebraic gospel.

- And then last week we saw how Luke is a two-fold, global gospel, and how Luke, the artist and physician, paints a picture of Jesus not only as the Jewish Messiah, but as the Saviour of all of creation—all flesh—and so Luke traces Jesus' genealogy not just back to Abraham as Matthew does, but all the way back to Adam, and Luke's gospel highlights the way that the gospel is good news for all people, from lowly shepherds, to Gentiles, to women, to slaves and Samaritans and sinners—and by continuing the story of Jesus' ministry into the book of Acts Luke shows us how the gospel starts in Jerusalem but doesn't stay there—it is carried out into all the world—Luke's is a two-fold, global gospel.
- And today we have arrived at the last of the canonical gospels, the gospel of John, the non-synoptic gospel—and when you think about it, John's gospel is the reason we call the other three gospels the “synoptic” gospels, the reason that we say they have a similar perspective and can be grouped—we can say that about the other three because John doesn't—John is different. And yes, there are differences as we have seen between the synoptic gospels, but John is on a whole 'nother level of different—he not only tells us things that no other gospel tells us—in fact about 90% of John's gospel is unique, you don't find it anywhere else—compare that to the gospel of Mark, 90% of which you do find in the other gospels—but John also tells his gospel in a different way—his style is different, the way he writes, the language that he uses, his timing is different, the order in which events happen and the duration of what happens, and John introduces a

unique theological perspective—a different way of understanding and talking about who Jesus is—because John wants us to know that Jesus is the divine Word made flesh, and that to know Jesus is to know God Himself, and that what has happened in the arrival of Jesus in history, that what takes place in the life and ministry of this historical person Jesus of Nazareth, is nothing short of the stepping into time and space of the one who created it, who created the entire cosmos, and this event has implications that reverberate across the universe—John has big, mind-blowing, heavy philosophical and theological things to say—and he does so by setting up a stark contrast between the realm of the natural and the realm of the spiritual, between earth and heaven—a contrast that John describes using highly symbolic language—John uses symbols more fully than any other gospel—and metaphors like dark and light, and above and below, spirit and flesh, of this world and not of this world--and so I want to suggest to you this morning that John's gospel can be understood as a metaphorical, cosmic gospel—and we'll come to understand what those two terms mean as we go along.

- But first, a little context--now the gospel itself doesn't tell us who wrote it—but tradition has understood that the author was the disciple named John, the son of Zebedee, and that he wrote the gospel while in Ephesus, and that he also wrote the three Epistles of John and the book of Revelation. Some Bible scholars have supposed that there was a community of believers, which they call the Johannine School, or the Johannine Community, who were taught by an unidentified follower of Jesus and wrote down his accounts, so if you do any study you may

come across that term, and that's what it means. The gospel itself, in chapter 21, identifies "the disciple that Jesus loved" as "the one who is testifying"—and lots of folks think that this "beloved disciple" was John—the beloved disciple is the one that John's gospel tells us won the race to Jesus' tomb when he and Peter ran to it—that's in chapter 20. The gospel was probably written around the year 100 or so—certainly later than the synoptics, probably by 50 years or so—and that makes sense because when you read the gospel of John, you get a sense that the content of the other gospels is pretty well-established, whereas Mark was telling a brand new story, John is expanding on and explaining what that story means in a larger sense.

- So that's some thoughts about who wrote it and where and when, but even more important than these is the WHY—and John's gospel gives us a clear WHY, a clear reason that it was written, and John gives us that in chapter 20, where we read beginning with verse 30: Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.
- John could not be more clear—the purpose of his gospel is not to chronicle everything that Jesus ever said or did, because there are plenty of things, John tells us, that he didn't mention, that he didn't include, but what he DOES include is there to accomplish something—and what it is there to accomplish is not to provide a complete and accurate historical record, nor to entertain us, nor to convince us of the veracity of some theological argument—it's not to lead us to

the point where we say, well that's reasonable, I certainly agree with that—although John's gospel may do all these things, its purpose is to bring life to the one who reads it and believes that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God—because through believing you can have life—John's purpose is not informational or recreational or intellectual, it is evangelical—the words are written, this story is told, that we might be changed, transformed from death to life—John tells it so that something might happen to the one who reads it and believes—and that is what a gospel is—that is what the good news does—it changes things—it brings life to the one who has ears to hear it and that is why John has written these words.

- Now when I think about the content of John's gospel—about what's IN IT—the first thing I think of is how much of it is not found elsewhere—about all the things that we would not know about if John hadn't told us--
- Imagine what we would be without were it not for John's gospel—we would not know about Jesus' miracle at the wedding at Cana, of the way he turned the water into wine—we probably wouldn't have the expression “save the best for last” without John's telling us how the steward at the wedding says to the host—folks usually serve the good wine first, then give their guests the swill after they're good and drunk—but you have kept the good wine until now, you have saved the best for last—and we wouldn't get that additional insight into the personality of Jesus' mother Mary and Jesus' relationship with her without John's account of the way she calls on Jesus for assistance because she knows that He can change the situation—you'll remember that last week we mentioned that

Mary doesn't speak in the synoptics except in Luke—but John also gives Mary a voice—and without John we would only have what Luke tells us of her words

- Without John's gospel we would not know about Nicodemus, whose story reminds us not to paint all the scribes and Pharisees with the same brush, because even though Nicodemus was a Pharisee, he was not completely Pharisaical, and it's John who tells us how he came to Jesus seeking, under cover of darkness of course, and Jesus lets him know that he must be born again--and John also tells us how Nicodemus reminds the Sanhedrin not to judge too quickly and later shows up with an offering fit for a King to help prepare Jesus' body for burial—John shows us how an encounter with Jesus can transform some of those very same folks that in Matthew's gospel Jesus calls hypocrites and children of Hell—and that's some additional information that's worth knowing
- Without John's gospel we would not know of another person who is changed through an encounter with Jesus—radically changed, from death to life, and that's Lazarus, nor would we know how Jesus wept before calling him forth from the tomb—incidentally, it's John who gives us the shortest verse in most English translations of the Bible when he tells us that Jesus wept—and while “Jesus wept” is the shortest verse in English, it isn't the shortest verse in Greek—the shortest Greek verse was written, if you can believe this because it's completely out of character, by Luke in chapter 20 of his gospel—but between you and me Luke 20 verse 30 shouldn't really be an individual verse because it's just a tiny piece of a much longer sentence—but that's just my opinion, and the Biblical editors didn't ask me.

- There are of course, other things that we wouldn't know about except for John's gospel, but one more worth mentioning is the story of the way Thomas doubted Jesus' resurrection and said he needed to see and even touch Jesus wounds or he wouldn't believe it—Jesus, of course, lets him, and tells him that blessed are those who have believed without requiring that kind of evidence—and that's the reason John wrote his gospel, so that folks might hear what he had to say and could come to believe that Jesus is who John says he is. That's what John's gospel challenges each of us to do.
- But we said that John's is a metaphorical gospel, and I want to let you know why I think that's a good way to remember the way that John's gospel is written, and the reason is this—more than any other gospel writer, John, from the very beginning, uses language that is symbolic—he uses metaphors and images that mean much more than the literal definitions of the words he uses.
- For instance, many of you will have heard of the seven “I am” sayings of Jesus that we find in the gospel of John—now beyond the fact that Jesus is identifying Himself with the divine “I am,” which he does even more explicitly in John's 8th chapter-- each of the “I am” statements is a metaphor—a statement that points beyond itself to a much deeper meaning—in fact, in John's gospel, things are pretty much always deeper than they appear on the surface—
- You'll no doubt have heard these before—Jesus says “I am” the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the gate for the sheep, I am the good shepherd—and of course Jesus isn't saying that he's literally a really proficient handler of livestock, or that he's actual bread or light or a gate—these are metaphors—

figures of speech, as are the other I am statements, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the way, the truth and the life, and I am the true vine—and we find these kinds of metaphors used more fully in John than in any of the other gospels—we even find the disciples expressing a kind of relief when Jesus stops speaking in figures of speech for a moment in chapter 16—they tell Him “Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech!”

- and it’s not just through individual words that John communicates deeper meanings, but through events as well, so that when Jesus performs a miracle, it’s not just miraculous but also meaningful, because it is a sign that points beyond itself to the God who is revealed in Jesus—these signs demonstrate Jesus’ divinity—they point beyond the natural world to the spiritual realm—they proclaim the truth that John is talking about when he says that believing in Jesus can bring life to the believer—there are seven of these signs in the first half of John’s gospel, which is sometimes called “the Book of Signs.”
- As we look at our key passage, we’ll see this metaphorical language at work, but we’ll also understand why John’s gospel can be called a cosmic gospel as well.
- Our key passage this week is from the beginning of John’s gospel—starting with the first verse of the first chapter—and you know, you can tell a lot about what a writer thinks is important, a lot about what a writer is trying to accomplish, by looking at the way they start their story—by thinking about where they think the story begins
- And sometimes if the place that the writer thinks the story should begin is not where the reader thinks the story should begin, then that can be problematic. I

remember some time ago I was about to bake some banana bread and I realized that we were out of self-raising flour, and you have to have self-raising flour to make banana bread—but I also knew that all self-raising flour is plain flour with some baking powder or baking soda, in it-- I couldn't remember which and I couldn't remember how much you needed to add, so I figured I'd just look up the recipe real quick on the internet, and it would probably say start with one cup of plain flour and add a couple of teaspoons of baking powder to it or something like that—so I Googled it, and I went to one recipe that I thought looked reliable, and I opened up the page and it started like this: “My great-grandfather arrived at Ellis Island in 1917, with a nickel in his pocket and a dream in his heart”—oh no, I thought—I don't want to hear all this, I just want to know how to make self-raising flour—so I scrolled down—next paragraph, “He met my grandmother at a speak-easy on 52nd Street—” no thank—you—keep scrolling—next paragraph—“Their shop was called simply Delvecchio's Bakery, and it wasn't much, but it was theirs”—nope, keep scrolling –and then finally, after about 18 paragraphs about her great-grandparents' stick-to-itiveness and good old American moxy, finally, the recipe: add 2 teaspoons of baking powder to a cup of flour—which was what I thought it was going to say in the first place—before I spent all that time scrolling through her family's history—but where I thought her story should begin—with a cup of flour—was not where she thought it should begin—because her point was not to tell me about self-raising flour, it was to tell me about her ancestry.

- And in the same way, when we look at where each of the gospel writers begin their stories, we can tell something about what they are trying to communicate.
- And so Mark begins with Jesus' baptism because his is a gospel about the fact that Jesus ministered and taught and worked miracles and was then crucified and resurrected, so He is the Messiah and His Kingdom is at hand. Matthew on the other hand starts with Jesus' genealogy, the fact that he is descended from Abraham and David—because that is where the story needs to begin because it is a gospel about the Jewish Messiah, a Hebraic gospel. Now Luke includes Jesus' genealogy, but he doesn't start there—and he doesn't start with Jesus baptism by John the Baptist, or with the foretelling of Jesus' birth to Mary or Joseph, no he goes back even further and begins with the foretelling of Elizabeth's pregnancy, and John the Baptist's birth—he is a careful historian and wants to make sure we have the whole story from the very beginning, and he thinks that starts with the way God is working in the lives of the barren Zechariah and Elizabeth. And then for good measure he goes back further than Matthew in Jesus' genealogy-- all the way to Adam—to the very beginning of creation. And you might think, well that's as far back as he could go, because he's making a point about the way that Jesus is the saviour of all of creation--And compared to Mark's beginning, Luke's going back to Adam is pretty impressive.
- But along comes John—and John thinks, now where do I begin? What is the back story I need to provide in order to communicate fully who Jesus is and what he did and what he taught and how he died and rose again?

- And if we were having a competition to see who could go back the farthest, then John would win hands down because we read in the first verse of his first chapter, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God.”
- And so Luke begins the story of Jesus’ life and ministry as far back as we can possibly imagine—and he begins it with that metaphorical language, that symbolism, that deeper meaning that we talked about—in the beginning was the Word—and we have to take a step back and ask, well what does that mean? The word? Because it doesn’t just mean A word like you might say or might be printed on a page—no, what John is talking about is the Logos, the divine Word of God, to the Jew, the divine Word is the way that God creates, the way He enacts His will—to the Greek it is divine reason, the order that exists in and through all the structure of the universe, the Logos is the word that God speaks that brings cosmos from chaos, the voice of the one who says “Let there be light,” and so it’s not surprising that John writes of the Word as the one who is the true light—and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it
- And what John is saying here is not simply metaphorical, it is not all philosophical and theoretical, because the Word, the Logos, the second person of the Trinity, who is both with God and is God, the light of the world, became flesh and lived among us—as Eugene Peterson says, the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood, we saw the glory with our own eyes—what John is saying here is that Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and died and rose again is not just the apocalyptic Messiah, not just the Hebraic Messiah, not just the global

Messiah, but is also the cosmic Messiah—the Logos who created and pervades the ordered universe—the cosmos

- The English word “cosmos” comes from the Greek word “kosmos”—and it’s that word that is translated as “world” here in the first chapter when John tells us that the world was made through Jesus, and the world didn’t know him, that He is the light of the world—and that word *kosmos*—it literally means an ordered system—the orderly creation—the world, the universe and everything—all that there is from beginning to end—is also the word that is used in John 3:16—for God so loved the *kosmos*, that He gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.
- But John is not the only gospel writer to use that word, *kosmos*, Matthew uses it, and Mark uses it, and so does Luke—and that’s a good reminder that the idea of a cosmic gospel, of a gospel that proclaims that Jesus is the eternal Logos, is not just John’s idea, but it’s a truth that can be found in one way or another in all the gospels—just as Mark’s apocalypticism can be found in all the gospels, and Matthew’s Hebraicism, and Luke’s globalism, because even though the four gospels have characteristics that make them unique, they’re all proclaiming the same gospel—but they’re doing it in their own voices, in their own words, in their own ways they are telling others “this is who Jesus is, and this is what he did, and this is what I’ve seen and heard,” and all of the gospel writers tell the gospel story for the same reason that John does—to bring life to those who believe—they are evangelists—they bring the good news

- And we are called to do the same—we are also called to evangelise—to tell others, “this is who Jesus is, and this is what Jesus did—this is what I’ve seen and heard and you can have life everlasting if you have ears to hear—if you believe.”
- We are called, every one of us, to join our story to the gospel story and to join our life to the life of Jesus, and to follow his example and to live out the gospel, proclaiming the good news with our very lives
- One of the ways that we proclaim the good news as a church is through the celebration of Holy Communion—we started off today talking about celebrations, and sometimes we may think of communion as a kind of somber and reverent and very serious thing—but we celebrate communion—and the fact that we are all welcome to come to the table, to participate in Jesus’ death and resurrection and look forward to the coming Kingdom, that is cause for celebration—take the next few moments to gather the elements and to prepare your heart and mind as we celebrate together