

This morning continues our journey through The Story, a chronological walk through the Bible. We've spent 22 Sundays in the Old Testament, following along from Creation to the birth of the nation of Israel, to its division and downfall, and the restoration of the southern Kingdom, Judah, and the rebuilding of its walls. That happened around 430 B.C. Chronologically speaking, the last thing written that is in our Old Testaments was the words of the prophet Malachi, who prophesied at the time of Nehemiah, who we looked at last week.

This morning's passage, of course, depicts for us things that happened 430 years after that. **These 430 years are often called the Silent Years, but they really were anything but silent.** Lots happened. Even though the exiles returned to Judah as we looked at the last couple weeks, they were still under Persian rule, until Alexander the Great conquered Persia over the course of 10 years, starting in 334 B.C. This is where Greek language, architecture, clothing, and more came into the lives of the Jewish people and lasted with them into Jesus' time. In the 160's B.C. there then came the Maccabean revolt, which freed Jerusalem from foreign control, but 100 years later the Romans took over, **(Map Here)** as they conquered the entire Mediterranean region and a significant portion of Europe by 117 A.D.



All of this actually ends up playing a significant role in the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church after Jesus' death and resurrection, because Greek was the common language throughout the Roman Empire – including in Jerusalem. It allowed the message to be taken out much further than it would have if they had only known Hebrew. Quite frankly, Hebrew wasn't going to get them very far. But Greek did, and it was the language not only of the Greeks who ruled over them starting in the mid 300's B.C., but it was also the language of the Romans because of the influence of Greek literature. Also, it is during this time that the Jewish Bible was translated into Greek, which laid the groundwork for the Jewish faith to gain a bit of a foothold in Greek culture.

It is also in this time that the Sadducees and Pharisees are established and grow so that by the time we get to Jesus' birth, they are well-established groups with differing ideologies and approaches to the secular culture around them and the Jewish faith. We see them mentioned all the time in the New Testament, but not once in the Old. Where did they come from? Well, the dividing line between them revolved around the question of how do they live as Jews in light of foreign religion and culture being a part of their own? Do they adopt the foreign stuff into their faith, or do they reject it and hold fast to their Judaism without influence? People had different responses to that, and slowly developed into two schools of thought, and people tended to align with one or the other. The Sadducees thought the culture and religion of the Greeks and Romans should be meshed with their faith, while the Pharisees thought they should be rejected.

Lastly, like the books of the Bible written in the centuries before: **There were other Jewish books written in this time that record their history and their relationship with God, collectively called the Apocrypha.** But the Jews themselves never considered them to be inspired by God and never included them as a part of their Bible, what we call the Old Testament.ⁱⁱ They are never once quoted in the New Testament, and Jesus even defines the Jewish Bible as Genesis through Zechariah.ⁱⁱⁱ So the Apocrypha was never really affirmed even by the faith community in Jesus' day, though it was seen as useful and educational. Many of you are aware that these books are included in Catholic Bibles, but that was not universally so until 1546. Until then, they were included as Scripture in some regions of the Christian church, but not in others. They've never been a part of Bibles in the protestant branch of Christianity.

And so that's what happened in the 400+ years of "silence." It was actually quite a bit. **And it all sets the stage for the birth of Jesus, which we come to today.** So, Merry Christmas! ☺ It seems a little odd to read about the birth of Jesus here at the end of February, doesn't it? We're so used to the pomp and circumstance of Christmas...the lights, Santa, flying reindeer, Christmas parties, the gifts...all that Christmas has been turned in to...and we're kind of used to reading the Christmas story in *that* context. So it seems odd to read it without all of that. And in a few weeks we'll get to Easter, which doesn't

have quite as much secular punch to it as Christmas does. For instance, I couldn't begin to tell you what the Easter equivalent to "Jingle Bells" is. I guess that's what happens when one holiday celebrates the birth of a baby, something we can all relate to, and the other celebrates the resurrection from the dead of that same person, something we might all long for but seems almost too good to be true. So the world hasn't really embraced Easter in quite the same way (and I'm glad for that, quite frankly). But for us Christians, Easter is the other high point of the church year and of our faith, along with Christmas.

But we're not really in either place here in late February. We're 12 days into Lent, which sounds like we're concerned about our washers and dryers or our belly buttons. But it's Lent...with an "e"...and it's not noted by anyone outside of the Church, and not noted by an awful lot of people inside the Church. So here we are, in just a regular, typical, every day kind of place as we read about the birth of Jesus. And that's fitting, because by-and-large, they were in the midst of pretty regular, typical every day kind of living at that time, too. There was no Christmas pomp and circumstance. (Save for what the gospels tell us about angelic visits, etc., but these were personal things, not cultural phenomena.)

Of course, the passage I chose for us today does *not* give us the birth of Jesus in regular, everyday kind of language. It's much more philosophical. But nonetheless, the birth of Jesus was in the middle of regular, everyday kind of living, just as we are in right now.

And yet the birth of Jesus is about God doing something that is anything but ordinary. Jesus is anything but ordinary. And perhaps, out of the four gospel writers' accounts of the life of Jesus...perhaps John's is the one who grabs our attention most firmly because he communicates this in such a profound and deep way. A birth is a normal event, but John gives us this birth in very abnormal language. No parent puts at the beginning of their photo album for their child, "And the Word became flesh..." Can you imagine? Maybe you have some friends over for dinner...they see the baby photo album on the coffee table, open it up, start reading these words about your kid, "In the beginning when the Word became little Jimmy." They'd put the

thing down and politely excuse themselves to go home. But that's how John begins his account of the life of Jesus.

It starts with the very first words, where we learn that God loves...baseball. And opening day is only a few weeks away, so this is entirely appropriate. "In the big inning..." ☺ Oh, wait..."In the beginning..." The words are so simple...and yet so profound, because it doesn't say what it's the beginning of. It's not: "In the beginning of the universe..." or "In the beginning of the Milky Way" as though it's about a candy bar...or "In the beginning of this one particular solar system" or "In the beginning of the earth" or "In the beginning of the nation of..." It's not even "In the beginning of time..." Like the opening words of Genesis, it's just "in the beginning..." That's as big and grandiose as it gets. It leaves things wide open...leaves you wondering where this is going. And then the very next words narrow our focus down to "...was the Word." And then a handful of verses later, **"And the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14.** What John means by this is that this word, who is God – and yet was somehow different so as to also say that this word was "with" God – this God became flesh.

And with this opening of "In the beginning..." John is without a doubt connecting Jesus to the opening words of Scripture, where Genesis 1:1, in the Greek translation of the Hebrew begins with the exact same words, "En Archay..." In the beginning. It's as if he's rewinding the clock and tying in all of Biblical history to this event of which he writes. It's as if he's saying, "Everything that is recorded in Scripture since the first 'In the beginning...' is connected to and a part of this 'in the beginning.'" Creation, the forging of the nation Israel, their rise, their division, their demise, their return to Judah...all the people who stepped out in faith such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, All the prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Amos, Nahum, Malachi, Zechariah, David, Solomon, all the other kings both good and bad, and so forth...everything that follows "in the beginning": It's as if John, in just two Greek words, "en archay," is linking everything in the Old Testament to this one event, this one birth, the arrival of The Word made flesh. The promise of God in the Old Testament was that a king in the lineage of David would come who would establish a Kingdom that would last forever – and in fact, his earthly dad, Joseph, was a

descendant of David. But with “en archay” John is pointing us to more than just Jesus’ kingly lineage.

In fact, Jesus himself says he came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17). We might summarize that by saying he came to fulfill the Old Testament. Because of the breadth and depth of what that means, the New Testament gives an abundance of names and titles for Jesus to encapsulate all that his life meant: Savior (Luke 2:11); Son of Man (Luke 19:10); Supreme Creator Over All (1 Corinthians 1:16-17); Son of the Most High (Luke 1:32); Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14); Prophet (Mark 6:4); Lamb of God (John 1:29); Messiah (John 1:41); Risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:3-4); and so many more.

And 2,000 years later, our immediate response might be, “So?” Why is this important to me now? Why does this matter? What is important about God (if he even exists, as some people would put it) becoming one of us? What’s the big deal? I want to play for you a video clip from a sermon that Max Lucado gave a couple years ago that I think helps to answer that question, and he does it better than I could. Watch what he has to say about why it’s a big deal that the Word became flesh...**(Video clip here, not available online.)** *If you’re reading this online or in print: Essentially, it’s a story that Max Lucado tells of taking his daughter to school for the first day of school, as a first grader. Teacher came out to the playground said it was time for parents to go, and took the students in. But, he walked down the hallway to the class and looked in. Saw his daughter, she saw him, chin started to quiver.... Then the teacher stepped in between them and pointed for him to leave. So he did. He then started thinking “I wish I could become like a 1st grader and sit next to my daughter. When she started having trouble or concerns, I’d tap her on the shoulder and say, ‘Jenna, it’s me, dad! I’m here in disguise to help you.’” He’d be “the dad in the next desk.” And this is analogous to what God has done and, why: he’s become like one of us to help us...to be “the dad in the next desk” for us.*

In other words: **The Word became like one of us, but with all the character and characteristics of God, to help us.** The great irony of this is that the Greek word here is “Logos.” It translates as “word” but we get from

it our word, “logic.” And the irony is that in some ways, there’s nothing logical about God becoming flesh and coming alongside us. From our perspective, it just doesn’t make sense. It’s illogical.

But that’s what the Bible tells us is exactly what happened. And this word made flesh...this Jesus is saying to you and to me, “Jim...Barb...Dan...Judy...Linda...John...Brian...It’s me, God. Don’t be afraid. I’m here in disguise. I’m here to help you.” It’s a continuation of, and an extension of, the help that God gave throughout the Old Testament. And it continues today. I pray you would know God’s help in your life, that you would know Jesus in your life. That this king of kings and Lord of Lords...this word made flesh, would be a part of your life through a relationship with Him. It’s illogical...it takes a step of faith. But helping you, to the point of even doing for you what you cannot do yourself, is exactly why the word became flesh. It’s all part of God’s story, and I pray it would be a part of your story as well. Let’s Pray...Amen.

ⁱ Today’s sermon correlates to Chapter 22 in “The Story.” We took orders for copies of the book, “The Story” at church, but now you can get a copy of the book on your own online through many websites (Amazon.com, cbd.com, etc.). In fact, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors) has them for \$5, hardback. Just search for “NIV The Story Bible” at their website.

ⁱⁱ For a pretty good article on the Apocrypha, go to: <https://carm.org/reasons-why-apocrypha-does-not-belong-bible>

ⁱⁱⁱ See Matthew 23:35. Zechariah, who is one of the minor prophets and has a book in the Old Testament/Jewish Bible, is mentioned in the last book in the Hebrew Bible, Chronicles. (1st and 2nd Chronicles are combined together in the Hebrew Bible.) Our OT ends with the minor prophets, and specifically with Malachi; So the Hebrew Bible and our Old Testament have the same books, just a different ordering of a few of them. See here for more: <https://carm.org/what-did-jesus-teach-about-old-testament>. I got some of this mixed up (specifically about what is the last book of the Bible) in the moment of preaching, and I apologize for any confusion I caused!