

## **Making Sense of the New Testament**

*A sermon preached on John 1:1-18 by Emily Hull McGee  
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on June 17, 2018*

### I.

*Ubi caritas et amor, deus ibi est. Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor.*

Standing in the hollowed out ruins of a once glorious cathedral, our voices spontaneously joined together in unison to sing these words. *Ubi caritas et amor, deus ibi est.* Where charity and love are, God is there. Christ's love has gathered us into one. Let us rejoice and be pleased in God. Let us fear, and let us love the living God. And may we love each other with a sincere heart.

The ancient song seemed to emerge from within us and around us, beside us and below us, above us and below us like Christ himself. Where we saw war, we sang of peace. Where we saw violence and division, we sang of charity and love. Where we saw evil and the effects of the very worst of our human proclivities, we sang of a God with us. Our words were of the Word, and like the Word, they seemed to emerge from the very beginning of all things.

From our unison a chorus grew. From one part, we became eight: each distinct in tone and tenor, but joined together as with our hands and our very lives to proclaim good news into that darkness. Resting upon one melody unfolded our chorus of voices; their sounds hollowing out and filling in, accentuating and coloring the melody upon which they are built. In so doing, the chorus leaves the listener sure that he has heard the voice of God. There, we responded to the Word set before us: Love of God through hope and

forgiveness, Love of neighbor through reconciliation and unity. And in the mystery of those sacred grounds and haunting melodies, it seemed somehow that the Holy Spirit was the one who carried that melody through it all.

## II.

That transcendent voice upon which the others build is one that has remained as important to me a half a life away from when I experienced it firsthand in college. Not only does that experience model for me unity in love, but it is an image that often helps me make sense of the New Testament.

That's where we turn today in our June worship focus on the Bible, today orienting our worship on the witness of the New Testament and the harmonies that ring from these pages into the living of these days. But like that melody that anchors the chorus, the Old Testament is the foundation for the New, allowing the stories of Jesus, the unfolding of the early church, the letters of Paul, and the prophecies of the end of the age stake their tent posts firmly within.<sup>1</sup> For the New Testament is a veritable chorus of voices who join together to tell the Jesus story of God, wholly informed by God's activity throughout human history as told in the words of scripture, a story where Word became flesh and 'moved into the neighborhood.'<sup>2</sup>

So what voices do we hear in these twenty-seven books written over a span of about seventy years?

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of *subsession* instead of *supersession* is explored by Matthew Myer Boulton in the essay, "Supersession or Subsession? Exodus Typology, the Christian Eucharist and the Jewish Passover Meal," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 66, issue 1, February 2013, p18-29.

<sup>2</sup> *The Message* translation of John 1:14.

There are the voices that fashioned ‘the gospels’, or, quite literally, the ‘good news.’ The writer Mark was the earliest to capture this good news in writing – stark and breathless, where Jesus ‘immediately’ moves from this to that without much by way of narration along the way, preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God to characters and crowds and exhorting them to keep quiet about what they have seen and heard. Then followed Matthew, serious and apocalyptic, clear about Jesus’s call to repentance and committed to connecting the writings and prophecies of the Old Testament with Jesus’s teachings and actions in the New. Next came Luke, a physician who saw the last, the least, and the lost with his own eyes and thus understood intimately why the women and the outcasts, the foreigners and the poor were central for Jesus’s message of inclusion and grace. The core of Jesus’s message through the eyes of Matthew, Mark, and Luke was this: “the kingdom of God has come near! Repent, return to who and whose you are, and believe.”

John was the last to write the Jesus story, and his account bears the marks of difference. Where Matthew, Mark, and Luke focused on telling their readers what Jesus said and did, John’s energies were directed towards clarifying who Jesus is and what his life means.<sup>3</sup> Thus, John’s account is more spiritual and theological, ethereal in its imagery of that Word who became flesh and abundant in Jesus’s claims of who he is (“I am the bread of life,” “I am the vine”). Through the witness of John, we who claim Jesus as savior understand more fully his significance for our lives.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible*, p104.

<sup>4</sup> My schooling on gospel distinctives came at the capable hands of Dr. Diane Lipsett in Introduction to the New Testament at Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

Together, these four gospels pull together a quartet of their own recollections and those of others, singing the songs of Jesus to their own particular communities decades after his life here on earth drew to a close. It is a song rooted in the melodies of God – God’s dream for this world, God’s abundant mercy and forgiveness, God’s passion for justice, and ultimately God’s triumph over all the forces of death and evil and sin in this world through Jesus’s work on the cross.

Following the voices of the gospels were the voices of the earliest Christians in the book we call Acts of the Apostles. Before these first disciples began to sing, they drew in the breath of the Holy Spirit, exhaled upon them to commission them for God’s work of Love in the world. From Jerusalem, they took the good news into uncharted territories, their testimony to the resurrecting boldness of Jesus catching fire among eunuchs and Gentiles, in Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the earth. Then they began to make sense of all they’d seen and heard by organizing, participating collectively in tangible reminders of the One they worshiped and followed. They broke bread and opened scripture, shared what they had and prayed for each other, all the while practicing the resurrecting boldness of Jesus Christ that enabled the good news to spread and grow.

One with such resurrecting boldness was the Pharisee Saul turned apostle Paul, once a zealot breathing murderous threats against the Christians who was transformed by God on a road to Damascus and became Christianity’s greatest evangelist. With fellow disciples by his side, Paul traveled as a missionary and started churches all around the region, proclaiming Christ crucified and resurrected, calling forth leaders, and giving

sound advice to each particular community with its own peculiar needs. Soon Paul's voices came in the form of letters written later to these churches he founded — at Rome and Galatia, in Corinth and Philippi — all written for the purpose of helping groups of followers live into their new life in Christ. In them to churches and individuals, he answered questions, offered correction, lent instruction, and shared encouragement.

These letters became so helpful, they were quickly copied and adapted by other writers honoring Paul by affixing his name and mimicking his style in their own writings. Letters we now call Ephesians and Colossians, 2nd Thessalonians, 1st and 2nd Timothy, and Titus all were among those which sought to further Pauline interpretation of the gospel for new churches, new locations, new generations.<sup>5</sup>

The final voice of the New Testament comes like the final voices of the Old, through the lens of prophecy called Revelation. It is prophecy that paints a picture of the last days, when the kingdom of God triumphs over the kingdoms of this world, where all things are made new, where we return back to the garden from whence we began, drinking deeply of Christ's water of life.

From Matthew to Revelation, these stories and letters and exhortations and prophecies proclaim the gospel — the good news — of a God whose fullest expression was to come into creation in human form, wrapped in the everyday skin of creaturely form, to be with us, to dwell with us, to model for us what life in God's kingdom might look like, and to save us from all that keeps that vision of the kingdom a mirage. Together this gospel proclamation

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<sup>5</sup> Hamilton, "Who Really Wrote Paul's Letters," chapter 10 of *Making Sense of the Bible*, p85-89.

sounds like a resplendent choir whose chorus of God's love for this world revealed finally and fully in Jesus Christ resounds from alpha to omega, beginning to end, through every age and color, life stage and worldview, ability and capacity, need and neighbor. And underneath it all, the melody we hear is the One full of grace and truth.

### III.

There are times in our lives when this gospel chorus relieves us and calms us, bringing to our very spirit the peace Christ promised to leave with us. And other times, the good news agitates us, demanding that we take a closer look at spaces in our lives or places in our convictions that we just rather not. Even though we are millennia removed, we run with the father back to welcome the Prodigal child; we fret with the woman who's lost her coin; we writhe with the Geresene whose demons seem to overwhelm; we weep with Jairus at the deathbed of our beloved; we leave it all behind with Nathaniel and Andrew to follow the One who calls us to fish for people. Somehow we too hum the tune of denial and betrayal of our Lord when seeing Jesus's face in those we struggle to love; we too shout with the crowds to crucify the Christ who threatens the way things are; we too are silent in horror at the Messiah on a cross, wondering what we've done to put him there.

For within these voices we hear our own voice, within this testament we voice our own testimonies, within this good news we hear the truth that sets us free. And so the question we must answer for ourselves is this: will we let the gospel of God in Christ become the song of our lives and join in the mighty chorus?

#### IV.

That scene I shared with you a few moments ago of my college choir singing in the ruins happened to be in the shadow of the Coventry Cathedral in Coventry, England. You remember how the Nazi army had bombed to oblivion one church after another in their quest for power. The Coventry Cathedral where we stood bore the markings of post-war construction, as the floor-to-ceiling stained glass and spire rising higher than any point in the city could indicate the church's defiant triumph of life over death, good over evil. That is, until you stepped into the charred and broken open air, just outside the sanctuary walls where we stood.

For two fallen roof timbers had been fashioned into a cross and marked with the words "Father Forgive" atop an altar of rubble by the old sanctuary wall. The decision to rebuild happened the morning after the bombing, indicating not bitterness and hatred, but rather faith, trust, and hope for the future. By marrying the frame of the old immediately alongside the new, the Coventry congregation acknowledged that the song they sing is of a God who dwells with us in all things, a God who knows suffering from the cross, a God who reconciles all things to Godself for the sake of the world, a God who became the very good news we now proclaim.

Brothers and sisters, where will your voice find its way into the gospel chorus? How will you take the teachings of Jesus, the lessons of Paul, the stories of the apostles, and the vision of the way things will be, and let them become for you that melody around which you will let your life sing?

I think if we get quiet and listen carefully, we might just hear that song,  
that good news already resounding in our midst, ready for us to sing along.  
Amen!