

The theology of the incarnation, like all theology, didn't just arise all at once. In other words, the early Christians didn't have a fully fleshed out understanding that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine until several hundred years after Jesus' life. What the earliest Christians knew was that something had drawn them to this Jesus of Nazareth, that there was something special, maybe even transcendent about him. They also had some sort of experience where they believed they encountered Jesus when it should not have been possible – after his death. What is certain is that their lives were transformed forever by their encounter with Jesus of Nazareth. A group of former fishermen, a zealot, a tax collector, women of financial means and women of questionable reputations all gave up their old lives to not only follow this carpenter's son but to proclaim that he is the one others should follow. Their experience of Jesus was so profound, that they were even willing to suffer and at times die to follow him.

And even as their whole lives suddenly became centered around following Jesus, they still wrestled with the question, "Who exactly was Jesus? Was he more than just a profound rabbi? Was he more than just a miracle worker?" And the way that question was answered progressed over time and we can trace that development in the four gospels. Mark, the earliest gospel does not even attempt to answer the question where does Jesus come from? It begins with an adult Jesus coming to be baptized by John in the river. And it leaves the question of the resurrection a mystery as the women leave the empty tomb in terror and amazement while, in the original ending of Mark, they never see the resurrected Jesus. About 30-40 years after Mark, Matthew and Luke were written and they are the gospels that include the details of Jesus' birth. The shepherds and angels are in Luke. The wise men are in Matthew. And we can see the progression of the early Christians theology about who Jesus was – the birth narratives indicate that the early Christians had begun to believe that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah who had come to save the people – that he was more than just a prophet or a rabbi.

But then we have the gospel of John, the latest of the gospels, written around 120 years after Jesus' life. And John begins not with the details of Jesus' earthly life but with a philosophical declaration of Jesus' identity. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The Greek word that John uses is "logos," and while it is translated as "word," it means much more than that. It was a tenant of Greek Stoic philosophy that "refers to a universal divine reason, immanent in nature, yet transcending all oppositions and imperfections in the cosmos and humanity." Logos is the force that created and holds the cosmos together. And the author of the gospel of John wants to argue that Jesus is that very force...the divine "logos," the son of God with no beginning and no end.

In the span of a 150 years or so, the early Christian understanding of Jesus grew from a rabbi and miracle worker, to the Messiah, to the eternal Son of God ...the divine logos. Now none of these ideas were necessarily new to the early Christians. There had been plenty of rabbis and even miracle workers. They were other miraculous birth narratives. The concept of the coming Messiah had been a part of Jewish theology for hundreds of years. And the divine logos had been a part of Greek philosophy for at least 400 years before Jesus was born.

But what happens next is what I think is so important and profound about how the early Christians developed their theology of who Jesus is. In Greek philosophy, the logos is transcendent. But what strikes me so much about the proclamation of John's gospel is how utterly non-transcendent he proclaims Jesus to be. John begins right in line with Greek philosophy by equating Jesus with the logos, but then John's theology diverts from the contemporary philosophy in such an important way. Rather than the logos being transcendent and apart, the logos comes near. In fact the logos becomes en-fleshed.

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory." And even more than that, Jesus has made God known to us. "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,^[a] who is close to the Father's heart,^[b] who has made him known."

What I love about John's imagery is that he is able to hold together the tension of God being utterly beyond us – the divine logos – and yet known to us at the same time precisely because God choose to become known to us. God becomes flesh...skin and bones, blood and organs, muscles and ligaments. And what strikes me the most about John's work to describe both a very earthy God and at the same time a transcendent God is that John invites us to develop our theology around the question, "What is God like?"

For John, we know who God is because God is like Jesus. And that has such profound implications for us. Because if God is like Jesus then that means God is loving, God is kind, God is gentle. It means that any understanding of God or of God's will must be in line – at least for us Christians – with what we know about Jesus. One of my mentors would always ask his church to interpret God's will with a simple question, "Would Jesus say amen to this or not?"

It's amazing how much bad theology, how much harmful theology we can save ourselves from by that simple question. Any theology that wants to emphasize wrath and damnation and judgment suddenly falls apart because there is no conceivable way I can ever imagine Jesus saying "Amen" to that. Any theology that prioritizes the rich over the poor, the powerful over the weak falls apart because we know Jesus would never say "Amen" to that. Any theology that creates insiders and outsiders falls apart because Jesus would never say "Amen" to that...he included all.

What is God like? God is like Jesus.

For the writer of John, the importance of claiming Jesus as the divine logos is not because he wants to add to the great philosophical voices of the day. Rather, he wants his audience to understand that whatever they think about God, it must be consistent with who Jesus has shown God to be. Jesus has made God known to us.

But I would go a step further and to say that while we can make that statement that "God is like Jesus," we can also make that statement about other people who have followed in Jesus' footsteps so closely that we experience God's love and grace through them. This week, the

world lost one of our greatest examples of love, peacemaking, and forgiveness as Archbishop Desmond Tutu passed away.

Bishop Tutu had this amazing grace that allowed him to speak out against oppression, lead marches and organize boycotts while being arrested and suffering immensely for it, and yet he never turned bitter, he never dehumanized his oppressors. He clung relentlessly to love and kindness and forgiveness no matter what. Bishop Tutu said, “God’s dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion.” And Tutu’s understanding of family included everyone. That’s why he advocated for forgiveness instead of revenge because he saw even the upholders of apartheid as his family. That’s why he became an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ justice and inclusion because he believed that no matter who you loved, you were a part of God’s family. That’s why he consistently spoke out against war because he believed that all violence was family violence – that when one nation bombs another nation they are bombing their sisters and brothers. That’s why he was one of the world’s strongest advocates for addressing the HIV and AIDS epidemic throughout Africa because he saw it as his sisters and brothers who were dying. In short, for Bishop Tutu every single human is a child of God and that means that we are all members of the same family.

Desmond Tutu was one of those people who helped us see a little more clearly what God is like. God is like Desmond Tutu. We can all know who God is because we have experienced God’s attributes in people whose lives are guided by love and mercy and compassion. But that’s not all. Just as we know God through Jesus, just as we know God through people like Bishop Tutu, we also have the opportunity to live in such a way so that others might know God through us.

I love telling stories about people like Desmond Tutu but I think there’s a danger in that as well and that danger is that it can make us think that somehow Bishop Tutu is different than us. He’s famous after all. And he’s lived a life of courage and compassion that I’m not sure I have within me. So let me share with you one other quote from Bishop Tutu: “Do your little bit of good where you are. It’s your little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”

We don’t have to be a figure known all over the world in order to live a life of kindness and love that points to who God is. When I was in middle school, one of my school friends’ dad died by suicide. A few weeks later, my Mom went to visit his mom to just check on her, to see how she was doing. And she told my mom about how the longest serving minister in town – a man named Melvin Salter – had been to visit her. Everyone in the town knew Brother Melvin as he was called. And they knew two things about him – that he was extraordinarily kind and that he would be there for you when you were going through a hard time whether you were a member of his church or not. And this is what my friend’s mom said to my Mom about Brother Melvin’s visit, “I don’t have much faith in God, but I do have faith in Melvin Salter.”

We know who God is because God is like Jesus.

God is like Desmond Tutu.

God is like Melvin Salter.

God is like Jeff and Ann Johnson.

And we all have the opportunity to demonstrate to others who God is and what God is like when we live lives of kindness and compassion and grace.

The eternal logos has become en-fleshed and dwelt among us, making God known to us. And we too are invited to be conduits of the divine when we follow after the example of the one the gospel of John proclaims to be the light of the world.

May we see that light in all those whose example we look to. And may we be that light for others so that whoever sees us and this faith community will see that the God we claim to worship is a God of love and grace and peace because they see that in us.