

## Between 'Before and After'

### **John 1:1-14**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and 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. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Americans love a good 'before and after' story. Turn on your TV almost any time of day, and there's sure to be a show highlighting some kind of dramatic transformation. Maybe it's weight loss, or home improvement, or even behavioral changes. And of course, everyone's favorite part is the pictures. Put the 'before' picture right next to the 'after' picture, and there's a visual representation of the fact that things change – sometimes drastically. I don't know if we're drawn to that contrast because we want to see change in our own lives, or because we can resonate with it. But if all we see is 'before' and 'after,' we miss 'during.' And as it turns out, there's almost always a compelling story that happens between the before and after pictures.

It raises the question: before and after what, exactly? If there isn't a specific moment in time that separates before and after, if there is instead a compelling story between the before and after, when do 'before' and 'after' begin and end? It's specific to each person, each story, each transformation. So we might as well get down to specifics this morning, because we are all living a before and after story.

Before we talk about your personal story, we have to talk about how your life is one part of a metanarrative, an overarching story that encompasses all our lives. And as you may have guessed, that is the story of the Bible. The Bible is so big and sometimes cumbersome, it can be

easy to read it and miss the fact that there is a plot that ties the whole thing together, from Genesis to Revelation. The plot, basically, is God trying to reunite with his people.

In the 'before' part of this story, God pursues his people by focusing on one community – the Israelites. He starts by making a personal connection with Abraham, a righteous man. He sees to it that against all odds, Abraham's family tree spreads and flourishes. God works to protect and establish the nation of Israel, all while they sin and rebel against him. God spends time with his people as they journey out of slavery in Egypt. He establishes written laws at Mt. Sinai. He develops a temple system of worship and sacrifice to atone for sin. But the people continually choose to worship idols and false gods.

In the 'after' part of this story, those who follow God are inspired to share their faith with others. They came together on the day of Pentecost and received the Holy Spirit. They established churches across the known world. They stood firm in their faith, even when threatened. No longer held accountable to the law and its system of temple sacrifice, the people were free to accept God's grace and forgiveness.

When you think about it, that's really a pretty dramatic change. There must be a powerful story that happens in-between to bring about such a difference. That story begins today. It's the story of a baby, born in a manger, who grows up to share God's love in a whole new way. Jesus could share God's message differently because he was not a prophet. He was God himself, born into the world to make direct contact with the people. And the real deal is always better than a copy or a message.

The story of God and his people, when told on a grand scale like the Bible, is a pretty dramatic before and after story. But what about you? When you tell the story of your life with God, where is the before? Where is the after? How much drama is there?

For some of you, that's an easy question to answer. There is a 'before' in your life, a time when you didn't really know God at all. Maybe you didn't come to church. Maybe you did, but you were just going through the motions of something you didn't believe. And then maybe in a flash of brilliance, or more likely over the course of time, you came to realize that there was power in the message Jesus brought. It wasn't just something you understood anymore, it was something you took to heart. And now you live in your 'after,' a time when your faith is important to you.

That basic outline is the story for many people. But you still all have your own details. You have your own compelling story of how you got from 'before' to 'after.' But looking back over your life, you can clearly see the transformation you have made. You can see how your beliefs and values have changed.

Some of you, however, may be feeling a bit left out right now. Looking back at your life, at least as far as faith is concerned, you don't have a 'before.' You grew up in the church. You can't imagine a time when you didn't know about God and pray to Jesus. And let's face it. None of us have read a magazine article prominently featuring pictures of 'after' and 'later after.' Oh sure, you may have had moments where your faith deepened, or changed, but those are relatively minor changes. Without a drastic change, you may feel like you don't have a compelling story either.

But today, Christmas Day, the day we celebrate that God decided to come take a stroll and live among us, we come face to face with the reality that all Christian transformation is drastic! All of our stories are compelling! Because with your faith and with your life, you are retelling the greatest, most compelling story ever told. You are a witness to the greatest change the world has ever seen.

Starting today, with the birth of the Messiah, we recognize that the time of ‘before’ has come to an end. Everything has changed, and what was is no more. The saying was never more true – having a baby changes everything. And yet, as we look around, it’s reasonably obvious that we aren’t living in a perfect ‘after’ either. The world around us doesn’t look like the Garden of Eden. And so God’s story continues. He continues to reach out with his message of love, and peace, and hope, and grace, and transformation.

We are living during that time of transformation. Someday, when Christ comes again, we will recognize the end of the compelling story and the beginning of a new ‘after.’ But for now, we are partners with God in sharing the story. And in the next year, in the normal course of living, you will be called on countless times to witness to this truth. Amen? I said amen? Amen! And let us begin our witness this very moment. Stand with me! Let us sing hymn 246, praising our God and witnessing to the savior.