

First Sunday After Christmas
Sunday, December 27, 2015
Sermon by Evan D. Garner
presented by Andrew Staley, Lay Reader

St. John the Evangelist

Which of the four gospel accounts is your favorite? The social activists among us often pick Luke. I don't know that many people who prefer Matthew's strict Jewishness or Mark's relative historical purity. But I know a lot of people who love John. We read John's prologue in church on Christmas Day, and, as always, hearing those magic words hanging in the air calls my entire being to attention. If you're a John-lover, today is your day. Well, more specifically, today is [John's day](#), but we all get to celebrate it.

John the Evangelist has lots of different identities: John the brother of James, John the author of Revelation, John the author of the pastoral epistles that bear his name, John the beloved disciple, and John the author of the fourth gospel account. Church tradition holds that that all of those are the same John even though we are now pretty sure that none of them is the same. The good news for those who love "In the beginning was the Word..." is that today is a celebration primarily of the author of John, so that much we get to keep.

But my favorite lesson for John's feast day is the Old Testament lesson (Exodus 33:18-23). Every so often, the authors of the lectionary really get it right, and this is most definitely one of those moments. The connections with John's love of light and darkness, glory and shame, revelation and hiddenness is powerful. I don't know if John the Evangelist had a favorite passage from the Hebrew scriptures, but I hope this was among his favorites.

Although I don't really know a lot about this passage, it might be among my top 5 in the whole bible. Moses, who has been speaking with God directly, finally asks to see God's face. Permission denied. But God makes it possible for Moses to see his hind parts—his backside. God seals Moses up in the cleft of a rock, and, while he passes by, he covers Moses' face so he can't see God (anyone who sees God's face dies) but then allows him to see his back. Gregory of Nyssa wrote a treatise on this entitled "The Life of Moses," and it is one of the most powerful and confusing books I've ever attempted to read. Maybe that's why I both love Exodus 33 and still don't understand it. What in the world is happening here? What does this tell us about God?

We can't see God's face. But God wants to reveal himself to us. He wants us to know him. He wants us to see him, so he gives us a glimpse of his identity—a sideways, rear-view glance. We are mortal and simply cannot fit a true understanding of God's nature into our puny little brains. But we can hold onto an impression. Maybe this passage suggests that theology is an exercise in Impressionist art. We see a pond of lily pads, travel back home, and the paint what that experience did to our hearts. We cannot know God, but we can be changed by him. We can encounter him and then walk away with a greater sense of who he is even if we didn't get a snapshot to capture the moment.

John the Evangelist toys with this notion all through his gospel account. God is here with us. God came among us in the incarnation of his son—the Word. Yet that glory only shines through in brief moments (e.g., the Transfiguration) and is, instead, usually contained within Christ's human nature. Even in Jesus, we only get to see the hind parts of God. But that is enough to change our lives.

I live in a world that makes me want to know things right away. I pull out my cell phone to look up the slightest question that passes in my mind—"What are the traditional toppings on a banana split?" or "How far is it from Nazareth to Bethlehem?" I expect to be able to know everything as soon as I want to know it, and I expect to know it fully—or at least as fully as I want to. Not only do I want to learn how far it is from Nazareth to Bethlehem, but want to know the three most likely routes that the Holy Family took on their journey and the number of gas stations they would have passed if they took that trip today. But that's silly. And it's silly to think that my knowledge of God is a product of my study and hard work. God is revelation.

John the Evangelist knew that God was revealing himself to the world. God was making himself known through the gift of his son. That was an incredible disclosure—a lot like Moses being allowed to look at God's back. But there

are still limits to what the world can know about God. We wait eagerly for the day when we can be with God and know him more fully. Despite all that we know, there is still much for us to learn. That's what makes our faith lively and worth having. It's not a text book. One cannot be the world's leading authority on God. It doesn't work that way. God is showing himself to us in powerful ways, but there is still much that we cannot see...yet.