

“Rejected and Received”

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Second in a series on John’s Prologue

John 1.9-13

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The true Light that shines on all people was coming into the World

He was in the World,
and the World came into being through Him,
but the World didn’t recognize Him.

He came to His own people,
and His own people didn’t receive Him.

But those who did receive Him, those who believed in His name,
He authorized to become God’s children,
born not from blood
nor from natural desire
nor from a man’s will
but born of God.

John 1.9-13 (CEB; alt)

John’s Gospel tells us about Jesus. So it starts back at the beginning. Back before baby Jesus lay in a manger in Bethlehem. Back before baby Moses floated down the Nile in Egypt. Back before baby Isaac brought laughter to Abraham and Sarah. Even back before Adam and Eve begot babies Cain and Abel (which did not work out so well). Back before all that was good went so wrong. Before everything. John takes us back to the beginning to tell us about Jesus.

In the Beginning was the Word, God the Creator, making all things. The Word who gives Life, making everything alive. The Word who gives everything its meaning, its purpose, its coherence, its future. The Word who shines Light into darkness.

To anchor us in who Jesus is, John flies us back to the Beginning. Then, he sweeps us forward to the astonishing moment when the Word was coming into the world.

This is going to be good!

C. K. Barrett, one of the brightest New Testament scholars of the last century, said this about this moment in our story of Jesus:

*The coming of the Word, or Light, is now reached;
a coming which was an almost unmitigated failure.*¹

Failure?!?

Are we surprised, really? Last week I spoke out with hope about Jesus the Word coming to divided places like Ferguson, and Jerusalem, and Iraq, and Syria. The Word coming to Ebola infested nations, and fleeing refugees, and homeless men, and abused women. The Word coming to you and me. But do you see any evidence of it? Signs things have changed? I want to sing out, “Joy to the World, the Word Has Come!” But does anyone notice? Do I notice?

II

*He was in the world,
the world was there through him,
and yet the world didn't even notice.
He came to his own people,
but they didn't want him.*²

Serene Jones is President of Union Theological Seminary.³ She teaches about Christianity, including what it means to be . . . us!

She starts with this: “*You are beloved creatures of God.*”⁴ You are a gift. You are good. God desires a relationship with you, and you can say “Yes” to God. God loves you and wants you to live well, so you and everyone around you flourishes.⁵ (Jones finds this is always a popular lesson.)

Ready for what's next? “*You—along with all humanity—are an unfaithful sinner living*

¹ Quoted in Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 25. To find out more about C. K. Barrett, you can read his obituary here:

www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/religion-obituaries/8745353/The-Reverend-CK-Barrett.html

² Eugene Peterson's translation of John 1.10-11.

³ www.utsnyc.edu/serenejones

⁴ Serene Jones, “Performing Human Nature” in William C. Placher (ed), Essentials of Christian Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003): 143.

⁵ Ibid, 143-146.

contrary to God's will, and God is angry."⁶ Students shift in their seats and glance at each other. The fun has left the room.

Instead of thanking the Creator, we try to create ourselves. Instead of knowing God makes us good, we try to prove ourselves, and end up consuming ourselves. We deny the goodness of others, dehumanizing and neglecting them and worse. Instead of celebrating God, we worship things we make up.⁷ Yuck!

So wrapped up in our own stuff are we, that when God-Word is in the world we don't notice. We don't want to!⁸ We prefer the darkness to the light.⁹

Does this make any sense?

No! Serene Jones says "*at its heart sin doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense that humanity would turn away from the wondrous offer of covenant relation with God; in this regard, sin is inexplicable.*"¹⁰

It is astonishing how without-exception this is. Even God's people Israel, chosen by God to shine light and live God's good ways for a world gone wrong, miss it. "*His own did not receive him.*"

An important aside here. The early Christian generations wrestled with why most Jews did not receive Jesus and rejected him. John's Gospel was written amid this conflict. We have to be so careful. Too many Christians have read this as a reason to despise and persecute Jews. To read John right, we have to realize that Israel represents us all. Any Jewish rejection of Jesus is but a sample of the entire world's rejection of Jesus. We are all in this together.

So, why do we fail to see the light?

Are we so busy trying to strike our own matches, we don't notice the fire already blazing?¹¹

Are we so ensnared in carrying each other along. We're heading further from the light, but

⁶ Ibid, 148.

⁷ Ibid, 150f.

⁸ See Paul's description of human rebellion in Romans 1:18-22.

⁹ John 3:19.

¹⁰ Jones, 149.

¹¹ "We cannot fix the world; we cannot even fix ourselves. Indeed, if we try to save ourselves, then we begin to assume the prideful position of God." Jones, 153.

since we're all going the same way, we think nothing of it?¹²

Has sin been so absorbed into our souls, that our very desires are imprisoned and twisted? Our ability to choose is impaired. It's like we've all gotten so slam-drunk, and so used to it, that we suppose ourselves to be sober and sensible.¹³

This isn't theoretical. I live this every day, most of the time not even noticing. I miss the Light. I stop my ears to the Word. I could list the multple ways. It would bore you. Most are mundane and hardly noticed. This toxicity is deeper than daily choices and actions, attitudes and habits. It strikes me deep, tarnishing my very core.

Amazingly, God-Word allows himself to be not-recognized, not-received, rejected! So maybe there is some hope for us, in this strange, loving God.

III

*But those who did receive the Word, those who believed in His name,
He authorized to become God's children,
born not from blood
nor from natural desire
nor from a man's will
but born of God.*

Remember what C. K. Barrett said: *"The coming of the Word . . . was an almost unmitigated failure."* Almost! Shout it out joyfully! Almost! Cling to it tightly! The "almost" changes everything. In that "almost" is all we need – the rescuing, healing, restoring and renewing grace of the Word, Jesus.

When we totally miss him, the Word still shines. When we reject him, deny him, betray him and crucify him, the Word flickers and fades, then bursts in glorious rays. The deepest, stormiest darkness will never put him out.

Some will see him. Some will receive him. Not because they have some advantage. Not

¹² ". . . sin is passed onto me through my commerce with the world in which I live. In this sense, sin is something I inherit; it is given to me by virtue of my relationship to an expansive environment of relations shot through with unfaithful modes of being." Jones, 151.

¹³ "... the tradition has invoked the concept of the bondage of the will. When the social reality of sin seeps deep into our being, it profoundly affects our will. It takes over our desires, and we start actively wanting to sin. . . . My will is, as it were, imprisoned—not disabled, because I am still 'choosing,' but locked into a prison house from which it cannot escape." Jones, 153.

because of a privileged ancestry – springing from generations of good church-goers will not help. Not because they make the right decision or have the right desire – remember, we're all messed up in our decisions and desires. Not because of any human effort whatsoever.

It's all the Word's idea, all the Word's work, showering grace and kindness on us. It's the Word's gift from start to finish. The Word makes us. The Word saves us. All we can do is trust the Word Jesus enough to let him do it!¹⁴ We achieve nothing. We just receive him who is everything.

No one ever births themselves, right. The Word births you into Life, in the Light. The Word births you into your God-designed, God-saved, God-delighted, child-of-God self.

Once more, from Serene Jones:

“On the cross we meet a God who takes on the power of sin and bears it in God's body; in the resurrection, we meet a God who announces to us that new life is ours, constantly, in the abiding grace of God's love.”¹⁵

Those who receive the God-Word-Jesus; those who believe the God-Word-Jesus; those who see, and hear, and trust, and follow . . . to them is life and light, and new birth and new beginning.

This is huge and glorious, and it is as focused and tangible as me and you.

This Advent, we welcome the Word Jesus again. We see. We hear. Might this be a time, again or for the first time, to receive? Let Jesus' light shine through you, his life spring from you, so all around you will be blessed too. And give thanks.

¹⁴ Based on Eugene Peterson's translation of Ephesians 2:8-9.

¹⁵ Jones, 156.