

We Have No Need to Touch Him
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin[□]), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe[□] that Jesus is the Messiah, [□] the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Sermon:

The Gospel of John is often described as a pool in which a child may wade and an elephant may swim. In other words, the Gospel is simple enough [on the surface] for a child to enjoy and profound enough to satisfy the most demanding philosophical mind.¹

Among our four NT Gospels, John has the most unique understanding of Jesus. From the text, we gather that the author and his ideas about Jesus are in a broad sweep conversation and conflict with some followers of John the Baptist, more traditional Hellenistic Jews and Christian groups, possibly of the Pauline and Jerusalem apostolic ilk. These conversations and conflicts against the backdrop of expulsion and threats of expulsion from the synagogue are part of the social background and dynamics of the Gospel of John.

In the opening eighteen verses of the Gospel of John, a creation hymn or poem, the Gospel introduces the reader to a radical understanding of who and what Jesus is, reminiscent of the creation story in Genesis 1.

Jesus is referred to as the creative reason, wisdom, or the Sophia-Logos, that was with God in the beginning and through whom the world was spoken into being, not unlike Proverbs chapter eight. This term, Logos, wisdom-reason, plunges us into the deep end of a Greek metaphysical pool of Stoic understandings of the universe-creating, universe-permeating, and universe-sustaining intelligence or God. It is a thought world that the average western Christian does not

¹ Cited by L. Morris, *The Gospel of John* (London: Marshall, 1971), p. 7.

understand, or for that matter doesn't care to understand. However, I would add that in reading any document, especially ancient religious texts such as our New Testament, we must understand that its meanings and purposes are derived from the social system in which it was written. So, if the Gospel of John is to be fully appreciated, we need to understand just a little of the society and the worldview to which and against which the author makes his case for Jesus as the incarnate, creative word and wisdom of God.² (p.11)

John makes his case for Jesus in contrast to the Synoptic Gospels as the cosmic Jewish Messiah to a Jewish world that is deeply enculturated in Hellenistic thought in the city of Ephesus. In this ancient world, what we would call the natural and supernatural existed side by side in a continuum of reality. Also, many in John's predominately Jewish community would have been comfortable for the most part understanding God within the Stoic concept of the Logos.

Many Hellenistic Jews could also have been comfortable seeing Jesus as being possessed by or anointed with the spirit or wisdom of God, a dimension or attribute of the Logos. Furthermore, in this ancient world, the gods or divine beings taking on human forms and appearing to or among humans, impregnating human women, elevating their heroes to the status of semi-divine beings, or possessing and directing people's lives, were all a part of a pervasive worldview. However, in Judaism, God generally facilitated or redefined natural pregnancies - for instance, Sarah, Abraham's wife, Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, etc. God does not appear personally so much as God sends supernatural beings or angels as messengers with God's word. Thus, after Genesis 1, the word of God or the word of the Lord is made known through angelic beings, the prophets, or other inspired people. And God calls and anoints kings and prophets by God's spirit, in Greek, Pneuma; Hebrew, Memra or word, all of which became synonymous with the Greek Logos, and could reside in or upon a person for God's purposes.

So, given that the Gospel was written in a great cosmopolitan city that sported an amalgamation of religious and philosophical viewpoints, we get a sense of John's greater world, but particularly his Hellenistic Jewish world. As Shaye J. D. Cohen indicates in his book The Beginning of Jewishness, most Jews living outside Palestine especially were indistinguishable in appearance, speech, sociability, and worldviews from many of their pagan or non-Jewish contemporaries. This is to say, many Jews simply understood their Judaism within the prevailing paradigms of the Hellenistic world and the Greek language.

Most modern, western Christians read the Gospel of John as if it were all about them, their world, and their personal salvation. This understanding is comforting, but is it the author's intent, is it his worldview? I ask these questions because in the opening creation hymn, the author takes us back to the very purpose for creation in the mind of God; however, the disciple Nathanael in the closing verses of chapter 1 re-cements us in the story of Israel and its Messiah. Therefore, John's Gospel, if you will, "one-ups" all other understandings of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel.

The first chapter of John ends, as I said, with the disciple Nathanael identifying Jesus as the Son of God, King of Israel, and Jesus subsequently laying claim to the title of the end-of-the-ages, Jewish Son of Man, a divine being, who was with God from the beginning and was to come down from the abode of God at the end of the ages to bring final judgment, redemption, and restoration upon the earth. Some rabbinic sources identified this Son of Man with God, the divine self. Others see this Son of Man as an angelic being, possibly, the angel Michael, who comes down from the sky or abode of God with the power and authority of God to judge, redeem, and to inaugurate the fullest manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth.

² Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. (Fortress Pres, 1998), p. 11

Judgment at the personal and collective levels in the author's Jewish world occurs when a person or a people reject; that is, fail to believe in Jesus and his work on the cross. On the cross, Jesus willingly laid down his life to reveal the highest ways of divine-human relationship and human relationships for God's people. Thus, rejecting God's revelation in Jesus is self-exclusion from the family of God. However, those who accept or respond to Jesus' redeeming work will have life and it eternally; that is, they are now and will always be included in the family of God, even if they are kicked out of the synagogues for their beliefs in and about Jesus. And John understands the kingdom of God as already here in the lives of those who believe in and live by the will and ways of God made known in Jesus. How does one have this life in the community or family of God here, now, and eternally?

As we pick our way through the Gospel of John; wherein the author infuses common terms with highly exalted and mystical in-group meanings, we become aware that for John "life" is finding and living within the greater purpose of God; that is, living in the Truth with a capital "T", which goes well beyond just knowing the essentials of things. Truth, that which is the universal absolute, immutable, and stable upon which humans can build reality has the compelling power to convince, change, comfort, and direct human activities along the trajectory of God's will towards the fullness of the kingdom of God on earth.

This Truth is to be experienced in an individual's or community's relationship with the Creator-Sustainer as they participate in God's original reason for creation; which was, to enjoy a loving relationship with the Creator and to care for what the Creator had begotten by the Word - creation, creature, and humankind. Therefore, it is in a human relationship to God based in love that both God and humankind come to realize a sublime joy in relationship to one another, to creation, and creature. I remind us that love of God is not romantic sentimentality, but is an all-consuming loyalty and devotion to God's will even unto death. In love, therefore, we seek to care for and care about what God cares about - creation, creature, self-care, and our fellow human beings - love the neighbor as the self is loving God.

With all this in mind, now let us turn to our text. I will say upfront that Thomas is a hero of mine. I say this because Thomas refuses to suspend his common sense just to affirm his allegiance with this group of men, who like himself, either abandoned or denied Jesus in his final hours. Lastly, I want to make a critical point about Thomas: Thomas in the Gospel of John is not only a pivotal character in the author's narrative but in Christianity. Thomas in effect summarizes Nathanael's understandings that Jesus is the Son of God, Messiah-King of Israel, and clarifies Jesus' claim to be the divine Son of Man, by adding a heretofore unheard of dimension in Judaism, stoicism, or even in the Jewish philosopher Philo's attempts to synthesize Hebrew thought and Greek thought.

Traditionally, the case is made that Thomas doubted the testimony of highly reliable, "male" witnesses to Jesus' resurrection; so, readers and listeners, who have not seen the resurrected Jesus, don't be like Thomas and doubt the witness; that is, the witness of the author or whoever is telling you about Jesus. Don't be a Doubting Thomas.

I hasten to add that in the author's storyline, Thomas would have believed in the dead coming back to life because he witnessed Lazarus being revived. In fact, the first time we hear about Thomas in John's Gospel is when Jesus is called back to Judea upon Lazarus' death. Most of the disciples did not want to go back because some Jews had attempted to stone Jesus in Judea. Thomas, however, says: "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16, NIV).

However, Thomas needed proof; he needed to see Jesus for himself just as he had seen Lazarus come out of the tomb. I mean Jesus raised Lazarus, but who was there to revivify Jesus? I think, given the circumstances, I would have stood with Thomas. I don't care what I had seen Jesus do, I don't care what he said about his resurrection, I would have needed to **see** him for

myself. What is often overlooked, however, in many Christian's attempt to put Thomas down to inflate their own sense of faith, i.e., to be more blessed than those who have seen, is Thomas' insights into the resurrected Jesus once he encountered him, an insight no disciple had had to that date and time.

As the story goes, when Jesus had first appeared to the disciples, Thomas was absent; however, at Jesus' next appearance Thomas was present. Please, listen again, carefully, to Thomas' reaction to the resurrected Jesus in verse 28:

²⁷Then he [Jesus] said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." [That is if you want to be thoroughly convinced, beyond your seeing, touch me] ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas' outburst [I paraphrase], "My Rabbi, My Teacher, **and my God**", not "My Rabbi, My Teacher, my God!" as an exclamation of amazement, but "and my God." Did you catch Thomas' quantum leap beyond Nathanael's insight and Jesus' reference to the Son of Man? Thomas conflates all these understandings about Jesus into him being his god, as a Jew, God. Jesus, as Thomas' resurrected master and his God, are two totally different insights and acknowledgments that are universes apart. In short, I say again, Thomas is the only person to acknowledge what the author understood about the Logos in his creation hymn - Jesus is synonymous with God's creative dimension and activity in human flesh.

Even after having received the Holy Spirit, none of the other disciples or Mary Magdalene, who first saw the resurrected Jesus, make such a declaration of insight. Thomas is all alone in declaring "My Master and My God" - an understanding that has shaped the course of human existence and the world ever since, giving a sense of the absolute most stable thing in this life and in death upon which we can build and live our lives. Here again doubt becomes the playground of faith.

²⁹Jesus said to him [Thomas], "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those [that's you and me] who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

When we hear in the Gospel of John that God, the divine-self, motivated by love in some manner, which defies human explanation, took upon the divine self all aspects of humanity to proclaim the Good News of God's eternal care and concern for humanity, we experience a sense of congruence between what we are hearing and what we intuitively seem to know; which is, our Creator-Sustainer cares for us and wants to be in relationship with us. Jesus' revelation was that in God's and humankind's capacities to respond to one another in love, we can enjoy life now and forever more.

Therefore, let the innate awareness of the Truth of God's eternal care and concern and the testimony of the Word, given its latest and greatest form in the power of the living Christ, continue to give you peace, the power of hope, and the assurances that we are vouched safe in the eternal life of God's love. Furthermore, I point out that neither Thomas nor anyone else touches Jesus as a means of proving him alive although invited to do so. And blessed are those who believe and have no need to see, much less touch, because they have experienced; that is, they have been touched, by the Truth of God in Jesus the Christ. In the words of that great Gaither song:

He touched me, oh He touched me, and oh the joy that floods my soul! Something happened and now I know He touched me and made me whole.