Lesson #3

First Encounter

(1: 19 – 2: 12)
Review

Unlike Matthew and Luke in the synoptic tradition, who introduce Jesus through a linear genealogy, John’s gospel takes flight on eagle’s wings, with soaring poetry:

“In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God . . .
and the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us.”

(John 1: 1, 14)

John introduces Jesus not as a descendant of Abraham or a descendant of Adam, but as the incarnate Word; as God, enfleshed.

In addition, John’s Prologue introduces fundamental thematic dichotomies of light/dark, descent/ascent, acceptance/rejection and insiders/outsiders, while at the same time demonstrating superb poetic craftsmanship.
We begin John’s “A Cycle” (1: 19 – 2: 12) in Jericho on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, A.D. 29. With thousands of people fording the Jordan River to make their way up the old Roman Road to Jerusalem for the festival, John the Baptist is busy at the river, baptizing. As he works, a delegation arrives from Jerusalem, sent by the priests and Levites at the Temple, to ask John who he is and what he is doing. The confrontation is brief but bold, and in it we first meet Jesus, standing amidst the crowd, silent and watching.

The next day, as John and his disciples are heading back to the Jordan River, they pass Jesus heading in the opposite direction, and John says something very strange: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (1: 29). It happens again the next day, and this time two of John’s disciples (Andrew, Peter’s brother; and John, our author) follow Jesus, and they spend the day with him.
Through the ingenious use of “time markers” we follow Jesus as he gathers disciples, leaves Jericho and attends—with his newly found friends—a wedding at Cana.

This is exceedingly rich material, and we want to observe two things as we engage it:

1. John’s use of time markers; and
2. the “gaps” in the narrative that we must fill in, if we’re to understand the story.

As we read closely, this seemingly-simple narrative takes on layer upon layer of structural and stylistic complexity as the enigmatic figure of Jesus slowly emerges, like watching an old Polaroid SX-70 photo develop before your very eyes!
John’s “A Cycle” (1: 19 – 2: 12) consists of seven days:

Day 1  Religious leaders confront John the Baptist
Day 2  John the Baptist passes Jesus
Day 3  John and Andrew meet Jesus
Day 4  Jesus and his new friends leave Jericho, walking north to Galilee
Day 5  On the road
Day 6  On the road
Day 7  Wedding at Cana

After the wedding Jesus, his mother Mary and his friends walk to Capernaum for a 3-day “after party.”
Day 1 is set at the beginning of the Jewish pilgrimage festival of Pentecost, the 2\textsuperscript{nd} in the annual cycle of three:

1. **Passover**  
   *Springtime, remembering the Exodus from Egypt*

2. **Pentecost**  
   *50 days after Passover, remembering the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai*

3. **Tabernacles**  
   *Fall, remembering the 40 years in the wilderness*

The geographic location of our scene is opposite Jericho on the east side of the Jordan River, where John is baptizing.
PILGRIMAGE ROUTE FROM GALILEE TO JERUSALEM

GALILEE

Scythopolis ➔ [Beit She’an]

Jericho ➔

Jerusalem ➔

Fording point at Beit She’an

Fording point at Jericho

First Encounter
The scene takes place on the east bank of the Jordan River, opposite Jericho.
Standing on the east bank of the Jordan River as it flows south into the Dead Sea.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas
Modern-day baptismal site in Jordan, the place of Jesus’ baptism and of our scene in John 1: 19-51.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas
Dr. Creasy teaching this story onsite.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas
“And this is the testimony of John. When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites [to him] to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ he admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, ‘I am not the Messiah.’ So they asked him, ‘What are you then? Are you Elijah?’ And he said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the Prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ So they said to him, ‘Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?’

He said:

‘I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, Make straight the way of the Lord,’

as Isaiah the prophet said.”

(1: 19-23)
John the Baptist is drawing HUGE crowds at the Jordan River as thousands of pilgrims are making their way up to Jerusalem. The religious leaders in Jerusalem have heard about it, and they send a delegation to confront John, saying—in effect—“Who are you? What are you doing? And why are we not in charge?”

Notice how John’s replies:
Question: ‘Who are you?’
Answer: ‘I am not the Messiah.’

Question: ‘What are you then? Are you Elijah?’
Answer: ‘I am not.’

Question: ‘Are you the Prophet?’
Answer: ‘No.’
It’s ingenious how John crafts this exchange:

Question: Who are you?
Answer: I am not the Messiah.

Question: What are you then? Are you Elijah?
Answer: I am not.

Question: Are you the Prophet?
Answer: No.
Well, that’s blunt and to the point!

John’s no fancy talker, that’s for sure!
And notice, too, the sequence of questions:

Question #1  Who are you [the Messiah]?
Question #2  Are you Elijah?
Question #3  Are you the Prophet?
   [mentioned by Moses as the one who will follow him (Deuteronomy 18: 15)]

The delegation covers all the possibilities, but John rejects them, answering only by quoting Isaiah 40: 3—

“"I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, make straight the way of the Lord."
“Some Pharisees were also sent. They asked him, ‘Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet?’ John answered them, ‘I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie.’ This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

(1: 24-28)
Recall in Lesson #2, our in-depth study of John’s prologue, when we placed the opening phrase under a microscope:
Humm. Interesting preposition, πρὸς, which means “with” or more accurately, “in the midst of” or “among you.”

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God . . .”
John’s use of \( \pi ρός \) in this scene places Jesus \textit{in the crowd}!

Now THAT is clever!
That’s an astute observation, and as in the opening verse of the prologue, Jesus’ positioning in the crowd hangs entirely upon John’s choice of the tiny preposition πρός!
So, now we move to Day 2:

Day 1  Religious leaders confront John the Baptist
Day 2  John the Baptist passes Jesus
Day 3  John and Andrew meet Jesus
Day 4  Jesus and his new friends leave Jericho, walking north to Galilee
Day 5  On the road
Day 6  On the road
Day 7  Wedding at Kana
“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one of whom I said, ‘A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.’ I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel.’ John testified further, saying ‘I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him. I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘On whomever you see the Spirit come down remain, he is the one who will baptize with the holy Spirit.’ Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God.”

(1: 29-34)
Notice five things about the events of this day:

1. John calls Jesus “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”
2. John says that Jesus existed before him.
3. John claims that he “did not know him” (and he says it twice).
4. When John baptized Jesus, he saw the Spirit come down upon him.
5. John states flatly that Jesus is “the Son of God.”
Let’s look at the first:

1. **John calls Jesus “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”**
2. **John says that Jesus existed before him.**
3. **John claims that he “did not know him” (and he says it twice).**
4. **When John baptized Jesus, he saw the Spirit come down upon him.**
5. **John states flatly that Jesus is “the Son of God.”**
We are used to hearing the phrase “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” After all, it’s been spoken daily in the liturgy for the past 2,000 years.

But this would have shocked John’s listeners!

The “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” goes back to the 5 great sacrifices of Leviticus 1-5: the burnt offering, grain offering, peace offering, sin offering and guilt offering, 4 of which are blood sacrifices in which the animal is slain.

Of course, we know that Jesus is slain upon the cross bearing our sin, and thus enabling our salvation . . . but John the Baptist’s audience would know nothing of this.

They would have been stunned at the phrase being spoken of a man!
Francisco de Zurbaran. *Agnus Dei* (oil on canvas), 1635-1640.
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.
Mary had a little lamb . . . how sweet!

That would be shocking!
Now, look at the second:

1. John calls Jesus “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

2. John says that Jesus existed before him.

3. John claims that he “did not know him” (and he says it twice).

4. When John baptized Jesus, he saw the Spirit come down upon him.

5. John states flatly that Jesus is “the Son of God.”
But we know from the infancy story in Luke’s gospel that John the Baptist was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary’s relatives, and that John was born 6 months before Jesus. Recall that in the 6th month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, Mary left Nazareth—already pregnant herself—and stayed with Elizabeth until the birth of John (Luke 1: 1-56).

So, what does John the Baptist mean when he says that Jesus existed before him?

John’s prologue tells us that Jesus stands outside of time, consubstantial with God; that he is, he was, and he always will be.

In John’s gospel, John the Baptist shares this belief.
Now, we turn to the third:

1. John calls Jesus “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

2. John says that Jesus existed before him.

3. John claims that he “did not know him” (and he says it twice).

4. When John baptized Jesus, he saw the Spirit come down upon him.

5. John states flatly that Jesus is “the Son of God.”
John the Baptist clearly did know Jesus: he was a relative, and being the same age, they would certainly have spent time together while growing up, especially during the pilgrimage festivals when Jesus’ family would go to Jerusalem, John’s family lived nearby.
The answer lies once again in John’s diction, in his word choice. John writes:

“I did not know him, but the reason why I came . . .; I did not know him, but the one who sent me . . .”

(1: 31; 33)

John’s gospel uses two words that are typically translated “know”: ἐδω (eidó) and γνωσκω (ginóskó). In both verses 31 & 33 the word “know” is ἐδω, which suggests “fullness” or “completeness” of knowledge; conversely, the word γνωσκω, suggests the “inception” or the “beginning” of knowing. It is a subtle but important distinction.

Clearly John knows Jesus, but he doesn’t know him fully, until he sees the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus at his baptism.

A better translation might be: “I did not fully perceive him . . .”
So, on to the fourth:

1. John calls Jesus “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”
2. John says that Jesus existed before him.
3. John claims that he “did not know him” (and he says it twice).
4. When John baptized Jesus, he saw the Spirit come down upon him.
5. John states flatly that Jesus is “the Son of God.”
Jordan is famous for its mosaics, and this one ornaments the Jordanian baptismal site.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas
Notice the mosaic’s similarities with the Verrocchio/da Vinci
*Baptism of Christ* (oil on wood), c. 1472-1475 in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence.
Jesus’ baptism inaugurates his public ministry, which Luke’s gospel tells us began when “he was about thirty years of age” (3: 23).

This scene in John takes place at the beginning of a pilgrimage festival, and Jesus is standing “in the midst” of the crowd.

On Day 2 of our sequence, John notes that he had baptized Jesus sometime in the past. We know from the synoptic gospels that immediately after Jesus’ baptism the Holy Spirit drove him into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan for 40 days.
We might reasonably conclude, then, that John baptized Jesus at Passover, A.D. 29; that Jesus spent the next 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan; and now he has returned from the wilderness at the start of Pentecost, and he is standing in the midst of the pilgrimage crowd at the Jordan River.
PILGRIMAGE ROUTE FROM GALILEE TO JERUSALEM

GALILEE

Beit She’an ➔

JUDEAN WILDERNESS

Jerusalem ➔
And I’ll bet that as John is speaking, he and Jesus make eye contact.

I’ll bet they wink at each other, knowingly!
Finally, the fifth:

1. John calls Jesus “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”
2. John says that Jesus existed before him.
3. John claims that he “did not know him” (and he says it twice).
4. When John baptized Jesus, he saw the Spirit come down upon him.
5. John states flatly that Jesus is “the Son of God.”
Of course, this is exactly what the prologue established, using John the Baptist’s testimony.

And here John the Baptist says it plainly, summarizing the prologue’s message.
I’m impressed. This scene flows directly out of the prologue, making the abstract concrete!

Yes, it does!
Now we move to Day 3:

Day 1  Religious leaders confront John the Baptist
Day 2  John the Baptist passes Jesus
Day 3  John and Andrew meet Jesus
Day 4  Jesus and his new friends leave Jericho, walking north to Galilee
Day 5  On the road
Day 6  On the road
Day 7  Wedding at Kana
“The next day John was there again with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God.’ The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which when translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come, and you will see.’ So they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. It was about [the tenth hour]. Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus. He first found his brother Simon and told him, ‘We have found the Messiah (which is translated Anointed). Then he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter).” (1: 35-42)
This is an engaging sequence on many levels. On Day 3 as John the Baptist and his disciples head toward the Jordan River for another day of baptizing, Jesus again walks by. Again John says, “Behold, the Lamb of God.” Andrew and John (who is not named here, but is clearly one of the two), turn and follow Jesus.

It was the “10th hour,” and they end up spending the day with him. We don’t hear their conversation, but at day’s end Andrew and John believe they have found the Messiah.

They rush to tell Peter, and they return to Jesus with Peter in tow.
In John the “10th hour” is 10:00 am, according to Roman time, which starts at midnight.

In the synoptic gospels the “10th hour” would be 4:00 pm, counting from sunrise.
And then an odd thing happens: upon seeing Peter, Jesus recognizes him and says, in effect—“So, you’re Simon! From now on you will be Cephas.”

This is a very funny encounter!

Although we don’t know the content of the day-long conversation Jesus had with Andrew and John, they must have talked about Peter and about his mercurial character. When Jesus finally meets Simon, he nicknames him “Cephus”—the Rock. That is the exact opposite of Peter’s character!
Ha, ha, ha!
Now to Day 4:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<td>Day 1</td>
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<td>Day 7</td>
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“The next day he decided to go to Galilee, and he found Philip. And Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the town of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets, Jesus son of Joseph, from Nazareth.’ But Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

(1: 43-46a)
Jesus decides to leave for Galilee (as we learn later, he has a wedding to go to in Cana), and he rounds up Philip, whom Jesus apparently met in Jerusalem or Jericho, as he had met Andrew, John and Peter. Like them, Philip is from Bethsaida, a few miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee, so they all decide to walk back together.

Philip rounds up Nathanael, who apparently is traveling with them. As we’ll see, Nathanael had been waiting for them, reading.
When Philip tells Nathanael about Jesus “of Nazareth,” Nathanael comments: “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

There are two reasons for his saying this:

• Nazareth is a totally insignificant village of at most 20 extended families—perhaps 200 or so people—on a finger ridge in the Jezreel Valley, 60 miles north in Galilee; and

• In Jesus’ day Galilee was a hotbed of radical, revolutionary thought and activities, a rat’s-nest of troublemakers. The great Jewish revolt of A.D. 66-72 will originate there, as did several earlier violent uprisings against the Roman Empire.

It’s best to keep away from such people, if you know what’s good for you!
“Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, ‘Here is a true Israelite. There is no duplicity in him.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘How do you know me?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.’ Nathanael answered him, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this.’ And he said to him, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.’”

(1: 46b-51)
This encounter between Jesus and Nathanael is infinitely intriguing, and it has stumped scholars for centuries. Reading the story superficially, it makes no sense whatsoever.

Why does Jesus say upon Nathanael approaching him: “Here is a true [αληθῶς = “genuine”] Israelite. There is no duplicity [δόλος = “guile” or “deceit”] in him?”

Why does Nathanael respond: “How do you know me?”

What does Jesus mean when he says: “I saw you under the fig tree?”

And why does Nathanael reply: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel?”
This is a puzzling story.

I’m sooo confused!
Jesus and Nathanael must know something that we don’t.

Raymond Brown, the great Roman Catholic Scripture scholar, addresses this story in-depth in his magisterial 2-volume commentary on John’s gospel and he suggests several possibilities, all of which he says are pure speculation.¹

So, let’s speculate ourselves.

Nathanael is sitting “under the fig tree,” reading Genesis 28, the story of Jacob having a dream at Bethel of “a stairway . . . with its top reaching to the heavens; and God’s angels were going up and down on it” (28: 12).

¹ The Gospel according to John, vol. 1, p. 82
You’ll recall the story. Jacob is fleeing his twin brother Esau’s wrath, escaping to Haran where he will stay with his uncle Laban and later marry Leah and Rachael, Laban’s daughters. Jacob’s 12 sons will become the founders of the 12 tribes of Israel. Yet, Jacob’s name literally means “deceiver,” and he has deceived everyone—his father, his mother and his brother—repeatedly.

Why in the world, thinks Nathanael, would God deal with an old deceiver like Jacob?

If Jesus knows what Nathanael is thinking as he reads, then we have context for Jesus’ greeting: “Here is a true Israelite. There is no duplicity in him” [in contrast to Jacob]. And we then understand Nathanael’s stunned response: “How do you know me?” (If you know what I was thinking, then you are the Son of God!)
Jesus validates our speculation when he says to Nathanael:

“Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? . . . Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

(1: 59)

John’s narrative forces us to “fill in the gaps”; it forces us to actively engage the text and to probe beneath the surface to extract meaning and understanding.

This is a very sophisticated storytelling technique.
Now Jesus and his new friends leave Jericho and head back home to Galilee. Jesus has a wedding to go to at Cana, and he invites his friends, who accept the invitation.

Day 1  Religious leaders confront John the Baptist
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Day 7  Wedding at Kana
 Nazareth

Jericho

Jerusalem

Cana

Jericho to Cana ➔
63 miles, a 3-day journey

Jericho ➔

Jericho ➔

Fording point at Jericho

Fording point at Beit She’an

PILGRIMAGE ROUTE FROM GALILEE TO JERUSALEM

First Encounter
Follow the pilgrim road north, along the east side of the Jordan River from Jericho to Beit She’an.

*Photography by Ana Maria Vargas*
Ford the Jordan River at Beit She’an, crossing to the east bank of the Jordan.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

On the Road to Jerusalem
First Encounter
On the road to Cana, during our hike along the 43-mile “Jesus Trail,” Nazareth to Capernaum.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas
We’re approaching Cana.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

First Encounter
We made it! Time for a group photo at the “Wedding Chapel.”

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas
“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding. When the wine ran short, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ [And] Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servers, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ Now there were six stone water jars there for Jewish ceremonial washings, each holding twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus told them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ So they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, ‘Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter.’ So they took it. And when the headwaiter tasted the water that had become wine, without knowing where it came from . . .
“(although the servers who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves good wine first, and then when people have drunk freely, an inferior one; but you have kept the good wine until now.’ Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs in Cana in Galilee and so revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him. After this, he and his mother, [his] brothers, and his disciples went down to Capernaum and stayed there only a few days.”

(2: 1-12)
First Encounter

Looks like a great celebration!

Party hearty, Dude!
Jesus and his new friends walk from Jericho to Beit She’an, a 44 mile journey, taking 2 days. At Beit She’an, they would split up, Jesus going to Cana and the others heading north to Capernaum and Bethsaida.

But they don’t want to part company . . . so, Jesus invites them to attend the wedding.

Weddings in the Middle East (then and now) are really big deals! EVERYONE comes—all the relatives, all the friends, all the neighbors—and the celebration can last several days.

It’s shocking news when the host runs out of wine (a major social faux pas). When they do, a strange thing happens: Mary looks directly at Jesus (perhaps raising one eyebrow), and says flatly: “They have no wine.”
Why would she say this to Jesus . . . unless Jesus’ uninvited guests had something to do with it!

Yes, the text tells us that “Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding” (2: 2). Well, Jesus was certainly invited; that’s why he had to leave Jericho and head to Cana. But Peter, Andrew, John, Philip, Nathanael . . . and perhaps others who were with them . . . were most certainly not invited: Jesus had just met them a few days earlier in Jerusalem/Jericho at Pentecost!

So, what does Jesus do? He changes water into wine, six full water jars of 20-30 gallons each: that’s 120-180 GALLONS of wine!

This is a very funny scene! And it’s meant to be.
In applying the scene, a pastor may preach a homily saying:

- Jesus’ actions institute the sacrament of marriage
- Jesus gives magnanimously to those in need
- Jesus obeys his mother’s intercession . . .
- or any number of other theological suggestions.

But as a story, the scene interjects an element of humor that we cannot deny. For all of John’s “high” Christology, Jesus still enjoys a good party, and he displays an impish sense of humor, creating 280 gallons of wine—and the best wine, at that.

Notice, too, that when the wedding celebration is finally over, Jesus, his mother Mary, his brothers and his disciples head for Capernaum—a 40-mile walk—for the 3-day “after party” at Peter’s home!
John’s gospel most certainly presents Jesus as God “enfleshed”:

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

(1: 1, 14)

But God is not all pomp and piety. At a wedding party he has a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye!
Questions for discussion and thought

1. How does John’s use of “time markers” move our story forward in 1: 19 – 2:12?

2. How do we know in John that Jesus was baptized during the Jewish feast of Passover?

3. How do we know that Jesus was in the crowd when John the Baptist spoke about him?

4. Why would Nathanael speak so disparagingly about Jesus “of Nazareth”?

5. Why did Mary bring the absence of wine at the wedding party to Jesus’ attention?