



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, DECEMBER 30, 2018  
ISAIAH 61:10-62:3; PSALM 147:13-16, 20-21; GALATIANS 3:23-25, 4:4-7; JOHN 1:1-18

## SHINE NOW

**John 1:1-18** *[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. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.]*

I have a confession to make. Yesterday, as I was replying to emails from friends, I started wishing them "Happy New Year." It just seemed the right wish for yesterday. Christmas is over, after all, right? We've been to church, sung the glorious carols, and opened the cool presents. Doesn't it feel a little behind-the-times on December 29 to say, "Merry Christmas?" So on to New Year's!

But is it? IS Christmas over?

I mean, is Christmas a one-day happening and celebration, like your birthday and my birthday? And even if you're a cradle Episcopalian, with this tradition's attentiveness to the holy waiting of Advent, there's probably a time in your life when you stretched it out, and were saying "Merry

Christmas” and singing carols and decorating with snowmen and reindeer from about Black Friday on. Christmastime was a whole season after Thanksgiving, *culminating* with Christmas Day – so you’d been at it a while, and by the time the day *after* Christmas comes, and the dry needles are tinkling against the delicate glass ornaments as they drive off the tree, well, aren’t you now over it?

Well, when I went to work on the readings to prepare for this Sunday, I said to myself, “Didn’t we just read John 1?” And in fact, we did, five days ago. John’s gospel of “In the beginning was the Word” is the Christmas morning gospel. And here it is again. **Not** over it, apparently! And, in fact, we can’t tell this story enough, and it’s not just because we all love that cozy Christmas feeling. John’s gospel isn’t even the coziest shepherds and angels Christmas narrative, right? But it IS the essence of our understanding of the Incarnation:

“that because Jesus, the very embodiment of God’s grace (v. 16) takes on human flesh, we are granted the chance to know the unknowable God (v.18) and recognize ourselves as those children beloved of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Emmanuel, God with us, is not the one-day birth event marked on December 25, but it’s the dazzling reality that the Word – the very Word from Genesis, the “in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word WAS God – THIS Word became flesh and lived among us – and *lives* among us every day, not just Christmas Day

– and we have seen his glory – and see it *every* day, not just Christmas Day – full of grace and truth.

There are all kinds of theological musings and mutterings about why God came among us, but what rings truest, both in my experience of God and my experience of creation, of each other, is also in the Gospel of John: that “God so loved the world” (John 3:16). The incarnation is about love, and so it is definitely not a one-day, birth event. It is a whole new season of life that cannot be contained, because it is ongoing and always among us.

“Becoming one of us” is integral to the human experience. It’s what we do. Time and again, we become part of something because we love it. “*On my honor I will try to do my duty to God and my country, to help other people at all times and to obey the Girl Scout laws.*” I still know the Girl Scout promise by heart, because we said it at every meeting, and I LOVED being a Girl Scout: the uniform, the crafts, the camping, the singing, the community of girls...the sash full of badges. What a wonderful “one of us” to be, back when I was ten years old.

And then when I got married, and my husband Jim became one of us Rosses, I think he was as drawn to my big raucous, close-knit family’s gestalt, and being one of my sweet, amazing mother’s beloveds, as he was to me! He truly became one of us.

Becoming one of a beautiful “us” is a human hunger. It’s one of the ways that we know

each other. And so God became one of us so that we could know God.

The iconoclastic difference in God becoming one of us in Jesus is that the “us” for Jesus is ALL of us. There’s **no** them. Unlike our human associations, there are no subsets, no Girl Scout Troop 27, no “Joe Ross” branch of the family. One troop, one family. ALL of us together, transformed in the grace and truth of God becoming one of us in the birth of Jesus. Because of love.

And so, we keep telling this story, God’s and OUR awe-inspiring story, and God keeps being born among us, born in every single person, every single beloved child of God.

Christmas is not about the arrival of a new philosophy or a new religion, but the arrival of one of us, to make us one with God.<sup>2</sup> In our human way, we like to make rules about belonging, about how you become one of us. But Jesus didn’t make it complicated. The Word became flesh, common flesh, in a simple manger, beside the lowliest of us, and so, beside all of us.

Today’s Gospel says, “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.” The Light of **All** People didn’t create a “them.” That is the radical becoming of Jesus, and the radical message of God with us. It is OUR false idea of “us and them” that sits in darkness. But we read with hope those words: “the darkness did not overcome it.”

We need those words. We need to **know** the darkness does not overcome the light. Even standing under the bright star of Bethlehem of Christmastime, another child has died in an ICE Detention Center, a place built to separate a “them” from the “us.” We live in a world where there is always a “them” to oppress, where the oppressed suffer and the powerful get away, literally, with murder. It feels pretty dark.

But John reminds us, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did **not** overcome it.” It did not overcome it with no room at the inn, or with Herod’s soldiers searching to destroy it, or with Scribes and Pharisees railing against it, or even with crucifixion trying to kill it! The light could not be overcome. And even still clinging as we are to the darkness of wanting to create a false “them,” John reminds us that “what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of ALL people.”

Our job is to shine with that light, the light of Christ, beyond Christmas Day. To recognize and honor that light in every other person, every day. To remember what happens when the powers that be grow dark and afraid of losing their power and so treat a group of people as disposable. To truly celebrate the birth of Christ means working against the dark, against the forces that perpetuate suffering in our name.

On the heels of Christmas Day, we are called to welcome not just the little stranger in the manger, but every stranger – to live like we

know the life incarnated in our midst is the light for ALL people.

Parker Palmer wrote:

*In times of deep darkness, we not only need light — we need to be light for one another. That's a message we must take to heart as we find ourselves lost once again in the all-too-familiar darkness of America's culture of violence... There are many kinds of light. There's the light that allows people lost in the dark to find their way home. There's the light of compassion that comforts everything it touches. There's the light of truth-telling about ourselves that allows us to see what we are doing — or allowing — that has helped bring this darkness upon us. There's the light that shows us the way forward toward a better world. There's the light of courage to walk that path no matter who says "Stop!" No one of us can provide all of the light we need. But every one of us can shed some kind of light. Every day we can ask ourselves, "What kind of light can I provide today?"*<sup>3</sup>

That's how we live into our call as Christians, sharing the light of Christ's birth. It is not easy, and it can be scary when the dark is strong, but the light shines the way. The Persian poet Hafiz wrote:

**How  
did the rose**

**ever open its heart  
and give to this world all of its  
beauty?  
It felt the encouragement of light  
against its being,  
otherwise  
we all remain too  
frightened.**<sup>4</sup>

I love that – the encouragement of light against its being. That is what John's Gospel is telling us: the light has come and the darkness does not overcome it. That is our faith and our hope as Christians. That is why we are not afraid to love, that is why we know there is no "them," only one beloved community of "us," that is why it's still Christmas today and it is EVERY day. Because the Word became flesh and DWELLS among us.

The light of Christ is shining in the darkness. We just need to boldly step up and reflect it and follow it.

<sup>1</sup> Lose, David. "Commentary on John 1:1-14." Working Preacher. Dec. 25, 2010. Accessed Dec. 28, 2018 at [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=857](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=857)

<sup>2</sup> Tristram, Gregory. "Come and See." Society of St. John the Evangelist Sermons. Dec. 24, 2012. Accessed Dec. 28, 2018 at <https://www.ssje.org/2012/12/24/come-and-see-br-geoffrey-tristram/>

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, Parker. "The Light for Another." On Being. December 17, 2014. Accessed December 28, 2018 at <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-light-for-another/>

<sup>4</sup> Hafiz. "It Felt Love." Poetry of Hafiz. Accessed December 28, 2018 at <http://www.songofhome.com/hafiz.htm>