



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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CHRISTMAS DAY, DECEMBER 25, 2024
ISAIAH 52:7-10; PSALM 98; HEBREWS 1:1-12; JOHN 1:1-14

A COSMIC SYMPHONY



Merry Christmas!

Well, it's been a week now since the Pageant of the Nativity drew hundreds seeking Christmas cheer into its orbit of glee and glitter. The costumed children flitted about as angels and shepherds, enacting the Christmas story with an earnest zeal. Their faces of anticipatory joy tell the story as well as the scripted words.

And last night, more than 2000 passed through this hallowed cathedral on Christmas pilgrimage, many with kids whose energy suggested sugar was already dancing in their bloodstreams. More than visions of sugarplums danced in their heads! It was a treat to take in!

We sang our carols, lit candles to sing Silent Night, heard the story of Jesus' birth once more. Why is it that the same familiar rituals

repeated each year create such anticipatory excitement and sublime delight?

Gathering here on Christmas morning takes a different tack into the story, a decidedly more cosmic one. All the rituals up to now draw mostly from Luke's gospel for its visual vocabulary of a manger and swaddled clothes, and olfactory images of barnyard animals and stinky shepherds watching their flocks by night. In it all, there is a frenzied scene of new birth and the hope borne by it. Beautiful, and heart-warming, but there is nothing really silent about it, if we are honest.

This morning what is delivered unto us is the immanently quiet mystery of the Incarnation drawn from John's gospel. This is not a prosaic retelling of the story; rather, it is divine poetry dancing creation into being. What has come into being in the Word was life.

To shift metaphors, John's poetic prologue is like a cosmic symphony. There's that delightful moment when the musicians are in their places, with instruments tuned and ready (but silent), the lights dim, the conductor raises his baton, and then a pause of sheer silence before the conductor's downbeat flashes an opening volley of music-making that stirs the universe to life.

*In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God.*¹

This is the marvelous moment when the music of creation begins: First, the mystery of nothingness, then light, then the earth, then life. An orchestral score of sweet music that beams goodness and beauty across the expanse of the universe.

The Gospel of Mark begins with baptism; Matthew and Luke open with beautiful renditions of birth narratives—they are the source for pageants. But John transcends all that earthy detail to build on the theme as old as the created order... even older—in the beginning... it hearkens back to the first words of Genesis, picking up on that ancient theme of melodious beauty... In the beginning...

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God.

In John's opus, the orchestra pulls out all the cosmic stops, and there are themes of light and dark, heaven meeting earth, we see the glory of God, full of grace and truth. No pageant can do it justice—there's just not

¹ *The idea for this illustration is attributed to Rhoda Swanner Montgomery who preached a sermon with this theme in Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, Austin, Texas, while I was there in seminary.*

enough velvet and hot glue in the world to make costumes for this version of the Incarnation.

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God.

In Greek thought, the Word (Logos) was that which lent order to things—rational, logical order.

John composes a variation on this theme, a digression in which the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. Such a notion was dissonant with Greek logic—the flesh was fallen, bad, and was to be spurned. Some would posit that Jesus simply donned a costume of humanity, never really becoming human, but early on the Church dispelled that notion. The Word truly did become flesh, and dwelt among us. John would dash any thought of that quasi-humanity from the beginning.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory... full of grace and truth...

The Word lived among us—or literally, dwelled with the people—surely a reference to the tabernacle where God resided with the Israelites in their forty-year wilderness experience, another story with familiar rituals. God dwelt among the people, and

the people of God knew it with all their heart and mind and soul and strength.

But then as time passed, memories blurred, and the people weren't so sure whether God dwelt among them, and so the prophets time and again cried out to God to pitch a tent among them once more. And now, John declares, the time has come, and we have seen his glory.

The verbs create the musical action of this symphonic piece—the Word *became* flesh; the Light *shines* in the darkness; *testify* to the Light... which *enlightens* everyone... and all *received* grace.

The clarion call is one of action grounded in trust that God is stirring even here, even now, inviting us to respond as people of God.

Author and civil rights advocate Howard Thurman famously wrote:

*When the song of the angels is still, when
the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds
are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to rebuild nations,*

*to bring peace among people,
to make music in the heart.*

More verbs of the season... more notes in the symphony.

Long after we have enjoyed the sights and sounds of the season, long after we have feasted, and sung, and chuckled at little angels flitting about in their lacy wings, the season of Christmas lives on. In the great mystery of the Incarnation, the moment of glory is carried forward and defined by the powerful words of this overture of John's gospel.

Christ was and is, my friends. Christ dwells among us and lights the way. Christ bids us to come and take our places in the Divine Symphony.

And for that may God's holy name be praised.

John 1:1-14 *[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.]*

ⁱ A symphony of colors from the Webb Telescope. A galaxy 170,000 light years away.

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