



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, DECEMBER 26, 2021
ISAIAH 61:10-62:3; PSALM 147:13-21; GALATIANS 3:23-25; 4:4-7; JOHN 1:1-18

THE HEARTBEAT OF GOD

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.]*

Merry Christmas!

It is good to be with you stalwarts here in the nave and you faithful by livestream. What a beautiful snowy day!

Question: If someone said to you, "Tell me about God," how would you begin? How do

you start to tell the story of God? Today, I want to look at three stories from scripture.

The Bible begins the story of God, of course, with Genesis and a story of creation. My favorite translation reads, "When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the

deep and God's breath hovering over the waters, God said, "Let there be light." And there was light. The first account of God in the Bible is the story of creation, life out of a formless void.

At the Pageant of the Nativity last week, we heard another story of God's creativity – the birth of Jesus according to the gospel of Luke, along with some magi visiting from the gospel of Matthew. Luke's story of the incarnation is very particular. It happens when Augustus is emperor of Rome and Quirinius the governor of Syria. Augustus decrees that all the world must be registered for taxation. Can you imagine the arrogance and power in that edict? A decree for all the world!

So, a couple expecting their first child walk 19 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to obey the emperor's new tax law. There, in a stable, the woman delivers her child – the one an angel has told her will be called "Son of God". And the first to hear this joyful news is not the emperor, the governor, or the temple priests, but people at the bottom rung of society, shepherds who live outdoors in the fields.

As Christians, we profess that Jesus is the unrepeatably, unique and complete revelation of God. And so, the particulars of

Jesus' birth must disclose who God is. What we hear in this story is that God enters human life among the vulnerable, powerless, and weary – once and for all time. This is the source of our call to justice and equity through faithful action.

The third story of God's creativity is our gospel today. It is the story of the incarnation from the gospel of John, in which all of God's infinite creativity coalesces in Jesus. "In the beginning, God and the Word are One. Through him comes life for all people, which can never be overcome by nothingness." Do you hear the parallel to the story from Genesis? "In the beginning . . . !" *This* story of the birth of Christ is universal, beyond a particular moment in time in a single town.

The Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us is an *eternal* gift of grace and truth for all creation (not just humanity), in every age, place, and circumstance. It saturates all of reality, since before time began and forever. Can you wrap your mind around that? It's hard for us time-bound mortals to understand. As the psalmist says, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high I cannot attain it." (Ps. 139:6)

So I am grateful that our gospel ends by regrounding us in the particular. It ends with, "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.*" Close to the Father's heart – now, that is particular.

I'm reminded that when a baby is born, he is immediately placed on his mother's chest for that "golden hour" of skin-to-skin contact so he can adjust to a new environment in the security of her warmth and heartbeat. When my youngest was little and out of sorts, she would push me into the rocking chair, climb on my lap and put her head directly over my heart while we rocked. You might know what it feels like – as a child or an adult -- to rest your head on a loved one's chest, hearing that steady beat and feeling the rise and fall of breath. Imagine that for a moment.

The author of our gospel today knew that feeling, too. While he names other disciples explicitly, he does not identify himself as "John" but as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Not because Jesus loved him more than others, but because more important than his name is his relationship to Jesus.

Tradition says he is the disciple who leaned against Jesus at the Last Supper. I imagine him resting his head on Jesus' chest and experiencing first-hand the Son who, being

close to God's heart, makes God known. In the Celtic spiritual tradition, this beloved disciple is an image of the practice of listening for the heartbeat of God in the daily rhythms of life.¹

And that's how we take the incarnation of Jesus seriously – by staying close to the heart of God beating in this beautiful and broken world. By affirming the sacredness of all of creation – our bodies and everything we do with them, the earth and atmosphere, animals and birds and fish, everything. And by affirming that our spiritual journey is not about getting beyond life but going deeper into it. Deeper in our intimate relationships, in our work in the world, in our giving and receiving of service and justice. And deeper in our inner life and relationship with God.

To live fully as holy and incarnate, we must intentionally take risks in loving and give up control of the outcome. It is messy and we come face to face with our shadows and mistakes. But it is also how the spirit of God moves in us, transforming not only the individual but the whole community of faith. It is how something new is born.

¹ See J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*.

Christmas is all about beginnings. The birth of Jesus marks a new beginning in God's relationship with creation, and a new relationship of humanity with the divine. This Christmas, we begin again ourselves, celebrating that the truth of God and the truth of being human are revealed in Jesus:

- God creates in love, God comes to us in love, God draws us to love in return, and
- Because Jesus lived as one of us, we can trust that God continues to dwell in and among us, seeking our healing and wholeness.

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How do you start to tell the story of God?



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

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