



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR ENGAGEMENT & CONNECTION  
CHRISTMAS DAY, DECEMBER 25, 2023  
ISAIAH 52:7-10; PSALM 98; HEBREWS 1:1-4; JOHN 1:1-14

## ONE STORY



A 15th century nativity scene by Paolo Schiavo. Photograph: Philadelphia Museum of Art/Corbis

**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.]*

Merry Christmas!

This morning is full of glad tidings – Christ is born today! Hear the angels rejoice over peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!

When we sing these familiar carols, we are telling the story of a birth in Palestine over 2000 years ago, the beginning of a single human life that transformed humanity's understanding of who God is and what God desires for creation. Most people – even non-Christians – can tell this story of Christmas, the sweet tale depicted in our pageant last Wednesday, based on the gospel of Luke.

But there's more. When we sing these carols, we are also celebrating the great, mysterious, eternal, inbreaking, life-changing gift of the Incarnation. The cosmic birth of creation, when all was God and all was pregnant, holy, darkness and God's spirit stirred up light and life and love that became flesh and lived among us.

And there's even more. When we sing them, we staking a claim of hope that even today,

in our broken, beautiful world, all *\*is\** God, and all *\*is\** pregnant, holy darkness, and God's spirit *\*is\** stirring up light and life and love, embodied and living among us.

It may seem that this second story of cosmic birth, the one we heard in John's gospel today, is an alternative, mystical story of Christmas, but, from the earliest days of the church, Christians have understood them to be the same story. And we can see that in the symbolism of the nativity scene.

Simple depictions of Jesus' birth date back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the oldest being on a Roman sarcophagus. And the full nativity scene is attributed to Francis of Assisi, the 12<sup>th</sup> century Italian saint. In a time when books were still copied by hand, important stories of history and faith were told through art or song.

When St Francis visited Jesus' traditional birthplace in Bethlehem he was inspired to create a three-dimensional scene that could tell both stories of the birth of Christ. The one bound by time and space – the birth of Jesus, and the one that is infinite and eternal

– the birth of Christ. Two stories that are, in fact, one.

Who is in this scene?

Mary, mother of Jesus, who's typically clothed in deep blue, the color of the sky and seas, embodying the endless expanse that connects heaven and earth.

Joseph, Mary's husband, who's often seen holding a lamp. He is the guardian of the Christ-light that illuminates the shadows of the world.

They kneel by the baby Jesus, who is cradled in a crib of straw, a manger. In the earliest nativity scenes, this manger was not in a stable, but in a cave. Because in 1<sup>st</sup> C Palestine, animals weren't kept in a detached building, but in small hollows in or under the family home.

And this is important, because for millennia, the cave symbolizes creation, the great womb of earth and sky, a symbol of life, but also of death. So, it is fitting that Jesus was born and buried in a cave.

Who else is in this scene?

Shepherds – ordinary people, who listen carefully to the angels' divine news and let their hearts and plans for the day be changed when they abruptly leave their flocks and hurry to Bethlehem.

Three magi – understood as kings or wise sages, each a different nationality and ethnicity, each offering their unique gifts to Christ.

And a donkey and ox. Did you know the earliest image of the nativity – the one on that Roman sarcophagus – shows only the baby Jesus attended by an ass and an ox? This is a reference to one of the first verses of Isaiah: "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but my people do not understand." The ox and donkey know the messiah the day he is born.

In addition, these symbolic foster parents were opposites, the ox considered ritually clean while the donkey was not. Now, at the birth of Christ, they are joined, so there is no division between pure and impure, spirit and flesh, the Divine and earthly creation.

I can imagine Saint Francis gathering children and adults around a nativity scene,

telling the simple story of a human birth that is also the truth of the cosmic incarnation.

The truth is that there is no dividing line between the sacred and profane, between the spiritual world and mundane, messy reality. All the elements of Embodiment are expressions of divine love, gathered around the light of Christ.

As Pelagius wrote in the early Celtic church,

*“Look at the animals roaming the forest: God’s spirit dwells within them. Look at the birds flying across the sky: God’s spirit dwells within them. Look at the tiny insects crawling in the grass: God’s spirit dwells within them. . . . Look too at the great trees of the forest; look at the wildflowers and the grass in the fields; look even at your crops. God’s spirit is present within all plants as well. The presence of God’s spirit in all living things is what makes them beautiful; and if we look with God’s eyes, nothing [and no one] on the earth is ugly.”*

The Incarnation proclaims that God created humanity in original blessing (not sin), to be

a reflection of God, in relationship with God, to be the tangible presence of God in this world.

It also promises that God’s holy spirit so saturates creation that to be human is be enlivened with the spark of the divine. Which means that Christ’s work of salvation is not a rescue from our essential selves, but a restoration of our original sacredness.

This can be hard to remember when human brokenness and cruelty cause terrible violence and oppression. In Bethlehem this year, one Lutheran church has replaced the traditional nativity scene with a scene of baby Jesus laid in the rubble of a destroyed masonry building like so many in Gaza.<sup>1</sup>

The pastor said, “Christmas is the solidarity of God with those who are oppressed . . . [and] suffering, and if Jesus is to be born again . . . this year he will be born . . . under the rubble in solidarity with the people of Gaza.”

And so He will.

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<sup>1</sup>  
[https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/23/world/](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/23/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-bethlehem-christmas.html)

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In Wales, alongside Mary and Joseph in every nativity scene, is a washerwoman.<sup>2</sup> She is a symbol of everywoman and everyman, engaged in their daily routine of work, family, and community.

The belief is that all of us stand at the manger, and the birth of Christ is not a story from long ago and far away, but a powerful, transformative love that we invite into our lives, here and now. St. Augustine said, “What does it avail me that this birth is always happening, if it does not happen in me?”

So that is our prayer today.

May the blessings of Christmas enter your lives, that the Holy One is born anew in you, strengthening you to be Christ’s hands and heart in this beautiful, hurting world.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Mary C. Earle.