



CHRISTMAS EVE HOMILY
SCRIPTURE: JOHN 1: 1-14
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
December 24, 2017, 9pm Service
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

John 1:1-14

1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 1:2 He was in the beginning with God.

1:3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being

1:4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

1:5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

1:6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

1:7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

1:8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

1:9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

1:10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

1:11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

1:12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,

1:13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

1:14 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.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

It started with a simple question in a staff meeting several days ago—every week in our meetings a designated member of the staff leads us in an opening activity—it can be anything from a question everyone has to answer to a team building exercise.

So a couple of weeks ago—it was Jeff's turn. And he asked us to share our favorite Christmas movie of all time.

You can guess what some of them were—It's a Wonderful Life, A Christmas Story, Elf, Christmas Vacation, White Christmas...

I couldn't actually remember the name of my favorite Christmas movie—just the Claymation characters heat miser and cold miser, the dueling brothers who controlled the weather in the south and north and Yerger Meister Meister Burger, the cruel mayor who outlawed toys because he tripped over one and broke his leg.

Turns out I got two movies mixed up with each other. One was the Claymation movie about the origin story of Kris Kringle—"Santa Claus is Coming to Town." The other is the one about the Christmas Santa Clause decided he was too tired and sick to do the whole Christmas thing, "The Year Without Santa Claus."

For old times sake, I got my family to watch those movies with me. I realized, first of all, that these movies were chocked full of really bad music to which I, within minutes of the movies beginning, could remember every word.

I also realized they were remarkably formulaic—a common story line—something is threatening Christmas—or the spirit of Christmas—and it is directly connected to a lack of belief, or an increase in cruelty or cold heartedness in the world.

I realized, too, that pretty much all Christmas movies have that theme at their core—as belief in Christmas wanes, so goes Christmas itself. Believing in Christmas is what makes Christmas happen—it’s what makes Santa’s sleigh go, it’s what makes presents show up under the tree, it’s what makes reindeer able to fly, it’s what makes the world a place where we can believe that good things can actually happen and that cruelty doesn’t rule the day.

Christmas, after all, is supposed to be a time when the fever of the world’s violence and hostility and greed and arrogance subside, when the rage and the vitriol is silenced. And there is a peace that takes hold everywhere, in every heart—and we can breathe, we can feel good, we can feel joy and wonder and love.

Maybe that’s why we Christians have softened the Christmas story so—why we’ve taken a story of scandal, exploitation, and revolution, and gotten in the habit of reenacting it with sweet lullabies and a sanitized manger scene—a manger scene minus the smell of manure and the peril of bringing a baby into the world exposed to the elements, not sheltered, not safe, not assured of good fortune or success.

From the moment Mary knew she was pregnant, the story of Jesus’ entry into the world does not provide escape from the harshness of the world, it is a revolutionary immersion into the harshness of the world—he comes into the world a refugee, displaced by a new tax plan the Emperor has made into law. Mary must not have had health insurance or she wouldn’t have had her baby back in a stable out behind an Inn crammed with people far from any place they know as home.

The Incarnation was not a genteel moment in human history—it was epic. And it changed everything.

The Gospel of John wants to make sure we get that message—that the Incarnation changed everything. That Jesus' birth story isn't the story of a family down on their luck. It's the story of a God whose love for us is so fierce that the very structures of time and space are stretched and reshaped beyond recognition.

The creator of the universe, the Logos, the Word—the Word that brought all that lives and breathes into being, the origin of all wisdom, the essence of all love—came to us in utter need, in utter and complete vulnerability.

John's Gospel doesn't tell the story of the nativity that Luke's and Matthew's Gospels tell—instead this Gospel writer tells us the story of the cosmos—before there was time, before there was anything—this source of all wisdom, the source of light and life, yearned to come close to us—and the Incarnation is that yearning becoming as concrete, as mind-blowing, as world changing as a God who believes in *our* capacity to be redeemed enough to come to us this way—the way of need and exposure and vulnerability, this way that needs us to be tender, that needs our better angels to risk wondering and risk believing.

This year the world feels intensely precarious—so many things make us hold our breath, clench our fists, brace ourselves—and then the tiny cry of a new born baby breaks through the harshness of it all and needs us to come closer, to exhale, to open our hands and our hearts and let our defenses down—for a Holy moment that demands nothing short of our whole lives transformed, indeed the whole world transformed.

John's Gospel tells us in no uncertain terms, when you see Jesus, you see God. And God is in the very fabric of the universe—infusing light and love, in everyone, in those who have the eyes to see and the wisdom to know, and in those who know not, to those who are blind.

What is threatening Christmas these days—commercialism, the economy, and international strife—like all the Christmas movies ask, what is threatening Christmas these days? For the church what is threatening Christmas is clear—it is us; it is our failure to treat Christmas as the scandal that it truly is.

The world needs Christmas to be real this year, brothers and sisters, for all of us to have the courage to believe what the Incarnation is, was, and always will be—the truth of God with us, in the flesh—in the lowly, in the struggling, in the displaced and the confused, in the family under siege, in the rejected and the reviled, in the places where shadows loom and the way forward is concealed—what a different world it would be if we could see God where God tells us so clearly that God is—in the places that seem at first glance God-forsaken.

Come closer, God whispers in the voice of a tired mother adoring the miracle she never expected would be hers. Come closer, God says, come closer so you can see me in all things, in the world that I made for you.

1:14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.

Can you see the Glory, brothers and sisters, the Glory worthy of angels singing and shepherds racing through fields, and wise ones traversing harsh desert for days? The Glory of time and history collapsed into a moment that seems to defy all logic. And the Glory of the likes of us believing against all evidence to the contrary—that far from God-forsaken, the world is God's birthing bed and all things are being made new even now.

Thanks be to God.