



CHRISTMAS EVE HOMILY
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
December 24, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

A reading from the Gospel of John.
Listen for the Holy wisdom we need tonight.

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.

“What an amazing night it is!” the Presbyterian minister exclaims to the gaggle of children gathered around him on Christmas Eve at a Presbyterian Church in a university town that shall remain nameless.

You can feel the magic in the air—kids are so excited. The church feels electric with joy and anticipation.

“Do you know what this special night is all about?” the preacher asks the kids.

“It’s Jesus’ birthday!” several of the kids shout. Another little one raises his hand.

“Yes, Jacob, what would you like to say,” the preacher asked. “Umm, it’s Jesus’ birthday!” Jacob says.

“Yes,” the preacher says. “Jesus’ birth is why we are together tonight.” Then another little boy on the crowded steps of the church raises his hand in a way that the preacher cannot ignore.

“Yes, Micah, do you have something to share?” the preacher asks, anticipating another sweet, innocent comment of childhood wonderment.

“Well, actually,” Micah answers in a very loud and authoritative voice for a 2nd grader, “technically this is not Jesus’ actual birthday. December 25 is just a myth that Emperor Constantine created a long time ago to have a Christian holiday at the same time as the pagans were having a big celebration.”

The following few seconds at that Presbyterian Church give new meaning to the words “silent night.”

Preachers are seldom at a loss for words, but this second grader has just thrown a theological curve ball for the ages, and on Christmas Eve for goodness sake.

Micah was a faculty child, and had undoubtedly received this set of cold, hard historical facts from his professorial parents. Normally such fact

sharing is a point of pride in Presbyterian preaching. We Presbyterians can turn the gospel good news into a lecture worthy of the university classroom like nobody else.

But Christmas Eve is the one night we have an unspoken agreement, right—to quiet the inner intellectual skeptic and let ourselves enjoy the beauty of children’s excitement and the comfort of the familiar words of scripture and the Christmas carols we know by heart.

And then here comes, Micah, to point out the big, huge elephant in the room. Do we really believe this stuff? Why are we here anyway?

The Gospel writer of John cuts right to the heart of our intellectualization (which, by the way, is a defense mechanism you know—we intellectualize things when we want to hold them at arm’s length, when we are afraid of letting something change us.)

The Gospel writer of John does not spend time trying to make any kind of historical argument—unlike the synoptic Gospels, Mark, Luke and Matthew, that spend time with genealogies, prophecies, and birth narratives. The gospel writer of John explodes history, prophecy, and genealogy—this story goes back to the very beginning—before time and space even existed.

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

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

1:4 in the Word 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.

Theologians call John’s writing here “Logos” theology. This idea of “Logos” predates Christianity though—it is an early Greek philosophical

concept—universal reason that seeks to permeate humanity with the capacity to be wise.

Judaism attributed divine status to the Logos—it became not simply God’s Word, but God’s creative power to bring things into being with Word.

The New Testament usage of this “Logos” is pretty much limited to John.

The Gospel writer’s poetic intertwining of “Logos” with the Messiah would have been something altogether new in the religious and philosophical landscape of the 1st century.

As Christian theology developed, John’s coupling of Logos and Messiah caught on—and Logos was increasingly linked to doctrines of redemption.

A retrospective back to these potent opening words of John’s Gospel takes us right back to that moment of pregnant silence in that Presbyterian Church holding its breath after Micah, the 2nd grader, dropped his theological bombshell during the Christmas Eve children’s sermon.

The gospel writer would have had no trouble responding to Micah’s fact sharing.

Of course Jesus doesn’t have a birthday—Jesus, the Christ, is beyond time, beyond space, beyond calendars and festivals and church politics. Jesus is the Word made flesh—God’s creative, generative, redemptive power coming closer to us so that we can see the truth about ourselves, so that we can be redeemed, so that we can be transformed.

1:10 [The Word] 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.

This powerful poetics is just the beginning of the story of this gospel writer—the story of humanity’s encounter with God’s Word made flesh is the story John believes we must hear and make our own, to come home to our true selves.

So the most important question is not whether December 25 is the actual date Jesus was born, but whether you and I, ourselves, have let God come close enough to us for us to be born, for us to be redeemed. Have we let God come close enough to learn to be at home with ourselves?

What does it mean to be at home with our selves?

Friedrich Schleiermacher, one of the greatest theologians of the 18th and 19th centuries, believed that we will be at home with ourselves when we know God is at home in us.

His deepest belief is that each of us are knit together by God consciousness, or *Gefühl*—the feeling of absolute dependence on God. This is a kind of religious subconscious—a visceral feeling, an inclination, an intuition that is preconscious and that taps into what is truest about us—we are absolutely dependent on God—for our very being and for our redemption and for our flourishing.

The more our practices, behavior, consciousness, and awareness folds out from this *Gefühl*, the more we will flourish, the more we will embody God’s intentions for us.

So, basically think of it this way, God has placed within each of us, a spiritual impulse to know ourselves to be God’s children and we need to know that about ourselves in order to be our best selves.

Schleiermacher wrote many dense and some would say (not me, but others would say) esoteric and even boring theological texts. Perhaps his two greatest works came not from his intellectual prowess but from his spiritual courage.

The first is his *Christmas Eve Dialogues* (1806, 1827) in which he describes a discussion around the Christmas Eve table about what Christmas is really about.

Leonard, one of the dinner guests, uses up a lot of airtime with his overly intellectual reflections on the contradictory historical nature of the biblical birth narratives. Christmas cannot be about Jesus' historical birth.

Ernest is the feeling one—Christmas is about joy—the joy of redemption. Ernest says Christmas is about celebrating that human nature and divine nature are unified in Christ.

The dialogue ends with Joseph, the mystical guest. He argues that words are too stiff, too cold, too coarse to describe something as mysterious and powerful as Christmas. Christmas is, Joseph believes, unspeakable and so it can only really be seen in moments of unspeakable joy.

Joseph tell the dinner guests that he sees them all as children—their wrinkles disappear, all their wear and tear is gone—and they are children again—children that help him laugh and love and enjoy.

Joseph seems to be suggesting that Christmas erases, or at least conceals, the battle scars of human life—that we return to some kind of childlike innocence, or even ignorance, about how hard life can be in order to truly feel Christmas joy.

Later, Schleiermacher wrote, *A Sermon at Nathaniel's Grave* (1829). These are the words he preached at the graveside of his young son, Nathaniel, who died after a brief illness.

Schleiermacher stands before his colleagues, congregants, family, and friends a broken man, “a stooped father,” “an old stalk...shaken to the roots.”¹ He describes his grief with such poignancy—it is truly one of the most powerful testimonies of the Christian faith I have ever read.

¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Sermon at Nathanael's Grave*,

He explains that none of the words of consolation that people are offering him have given him solace. He leans, instead, into God's promise to be near the brokenhearted.

He ends this sermon with a prayer asking God that this grief he is sharing—this “communal pain,” might somehow fold into a “new bond of still more intimate love.”

Schleiermacher prays to come closer to divine mystery in that place of unbearable grief—he does not curse the darkness, but trusts that it, too, can be a carrier of God's grace and tender love.

His son's death does not destroy the truth of Christmas—it reveals it. Christmas is about intimacy with God. And Schleiermacher was able to receive that intimacy because he was not afraid to be broken in front of his community, he was not afraid to trust God's capacity for healing even the deepest wounds that afflict us.

In our wounded world—it is hard to hold on to hope, it can be hard to believe that God is anywhere near the pain we see around us, the pain we feel within us.

We are in a time of unveiling—when mythologies trying to pass for history are being exposed, when we are seeing laid bare the ugliness that ensues when power is abused, when people like priests and teachers and doctors and elected officials—people we were taught to trust—are among those crossing boundaries—sexual boundaries, professional boundaries, ethical boundaries, and covering up systemic oppression. We are seeing the costs of consumption, the wages of greed, the collateral damage of ignoring the health of our planet.

Profound grief and anxiety and anger define our times.

And then along comes Christmas again—this amazing night—this night that calls on us to have a child's wonder once again—to see what is true in the flesh and blood world around us.

But if Christmas 2018 teaches us anything, it is that the wonder we are called to in these times is not one of innocence or ignorance of the world's pain—we are called to be wise—the kind of wise the Word made flesh empowers us to be. The kind of wise that can be up close to the world's suffering and see the face of God.

Each week of Advent, we have together fixed our gaze on an image of redemption—glimpses of God's love, God's justice, God's mercy, God's welcome home inviting us to come closer, come closer and see what God's love looks like when it takes on flesh. These glimpses of redemption abide in a world where injustice, hatred, and harm persist.

And tonight, we are called again to fix our gaze on this flesh and blood story that our ancestors have given us, that our God has given us—in full color, three dimensional, asking for room, asking for acknowledgment.

It is a story of the world being given a way to be at home with itself. This story of heaven and earth weaving together new healing opportunities for us to love each other, to love God, and to love ourselves.

This story has the power to change us. This story can give us the eyes to see God in utter vulnerability, the eyes to see God in the ravages of poverty, in the cruelty of human pride, in the marginalization of empire.

We can learn to see Christ light in the beauty of a moment like this one—when people like us wonder and wander their way to a sacred space once again, only to be rendered quiet by a child who teaches us a new way to see the world.

Look around. Really look around. Look each other in the eye—people you know, strangers, friends, people who have helped you, maybe people who have hurt you, too. Look around and let yourself see God in the flesh.

Christmas is beyond time and space—beyond history and cold hard facts, and at the same time, Christmas is right here, right now—in the

face of the child of God right next to you, and behind you, and, yes, the child of God inside of you.

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.

Thanks be to God.