

Christmas 1A 2020 Sermon

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.

In our lectionary, today's Gospel reading from John is assigned to be read every year both on Christmas Day AND on the Sunday *after* Christmas. The people who compiled our lectionary must have known that Christmas Day services are sparsely attended, and they didn't want anyone to miss this profoundly important passage of Scripture; so they assigned this reading *twice* at the beginning of the Christmas season each year, just one week apart.

But since it is my custom to spend the week after Christmas with family, those of you who do not attend worship on Christmas Day (which is the majority of you) miss hearing this profoundly important Gospel passage.

One of our Christ Church members who *did* attend worship on Christmas morning asked that I repeat my Christmas Day sermon for the majority of you who did not attend worship Christmas Day. And, given the importance of this Gospel passage, I agreed to do so. After all, on our Church Calendar it is *still* the Christmas Season – today is the twelfth day of Christmas!

“In the beginning was the Word...” It is no accident that the Book of John begins in the same way as the Book of Genesis: “In the beginning...” For John wants us to know that the story he is about to relate is not simply about a man named Jesus, who walked the earth in the region of Palestine in the First Century. John's story will be about the incarnation of God, to be sure; but in a more *comprehensive* and cosmic sense, paralleling the cosmic scope of the Creation story at the beginning of the Bible. John's poem continues:

“The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.” *Clearly*, John is not simply talking about Jesus of Nazareth, born a baby in Bethlehem a relatively short 2000 years ago. He is talking about the **Eternal** Word, the Eternal Christ, one with God before the creation of the universe some 13.8 billion years ago. The poem resumes:

“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” The material world comes into being through the Eternal Word who is *with* God and *is* God; which means that we might say, as Richard Rohr does, that “the whole universe is the body of God,” the incarnation of God, from the beginning of time.¹ Fr. Rohr defines “incarnation” as “the synthesis of matter and spirit,”¹ and wherever we see matter and spirit united, there we see the Eternal Christ. Fr. Rohr writes, “[I]n Christ, the seeming *gap* between God and everything else has been overcome ‘from the beginning’ (Ephesians 1:4, 9). Without some form of incarnation, [God taking material form,] God remains essentially separate from us and from *all* of creation. Without incarnation, it is not an enchanted universe [a Spirit-suffused universe] but somehow an empty one.”² (unquote)

This more comprehensive understanding of incarnation – that God and the material world have *never* been separate, but that God has **always** *indwelt* creation from the beginning – this cosmic understanding of incarnation, alluded to by St. Francis of Assisi and his followers, is being talked about more and more in recent years by prominent Christian theologians, Bible scholars, and authors. Yet in many parts of the Christian Church, a *dualistic* view of the world has held sway. It has been thought that there exists, on the one hand, heaven, which is pure and spiritual; and on the other hand, earth and its inhabitants, corrupt and sinful. And our goal, many have believed, is to escape this sinful earth, to die and go to heaven. That is what so many of us Christians have been taught.

But renowned New Testament scholar N.T. Wright says that we have gotten this all wrong. Bishop Wright points out that “many people believe... that there is a heaven and an earth and that human souls have been exiled from heaven and are serving out time here on earth until they can return. Indeed, for most modern Christians, the idea of ‘going to heaven when you die’ is not simply one belief among others, but the one that seems to give a point to it all.

“But the people who believed in that kind of ‘heaven’ [during the First Century] when the New Testament was written were **not** the early Christians. [Rather,] they were [what scholars today call] the ‘Middle Platonists...’ [followers of the Greek philosophy of Plato].

“The followers of the *Jesus*-movement that grew up in that complex environment [of the 1st Century] saw ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’... as the twin halves of God’s **good** creation. Rather than rescuing people from [earth] in order to reach [heaven], the creator God would finally bring heaven and earth together in a great act of **new**

creation, completing the original creative purpose by healing the entire cosmos of its ancient ills...

“By his very *existence*, Jesus modeled for us that these two seemingly different worlds are, and always *have* been, **one**. We just couldn’t imagine it intellectually until God put them together in one body that we could see and touch and love (see Ephesians 2:11-20).”³ The body of Jesus.

Another contemporary scholar who points out that God and the material world have been one from the beginning of time is former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. Summarizing Dr. Williams’ thoughts, Prof. Mark Heim writes: “The possibility, the actuality, of divine and human becoming one **had** to have been ‘baked in’ from the beginning...

“A conventional view of creation suggests that incarnation [God taking material form] requires a miracle; [but] faith in the incarnation discovers that creation already *was* [a miracle, and that God’s Spirit has *always* inhabited creation].

“...[Dr.] Williams does not approach the incarnation as the great unknown that has to be explained and interpreted but [rather] as the fundamental **given** that compels... a new understanding of nature and the normal.

“...The world and God *cannot* be thought apart from each other even provisionally...”⁴ (unquote)

So many of us Christians have been taught that Jesus was born into this world because we humans had made such a total mess of God’s **original** plan for Creation that God sent Jesus as “Plan B” to mop up the mess we had made. But Rowan Williams, among *many* others, disagrees. In a sermon given at Canterbury Cathedral on Christmas Day, 2007, Archbishop Williams said, “The coming of Christ is **not** first and foremost a response to human crisis... The whole point of creation is that there should be persons, made up of spirit *and* body, in God’s image and likeness..., who are capable of intimacy with God – not so that **God** can *gain* something but so that these created beings may live in joy. And God’s way of making sure that this joy is fully available is to join humanity on earth so that human beings may recognize what they *are* and what they are *for*. The sinfulness, the appalling tragedy of human history, has set us at what from **our** point of view *seems* an unimaginable **distance** from God; yet God, we might say, takes it in his stride. It means that when he appears on earth, he takes to himself all the terrible consequences of where we have gone wrong...; yet it is only a shadow on the great picture, which is unchanged...

“...[T]here is **nothing** that can destroy that initial divine vision [God’s ‘Plan A’] of what the *world* is for and what we human *beings* are for. Nothing changes, however far we fall; if we decide to settle down with our failures and give way to cynicism and despair, that is indeed dreadful – but God remains the same God

who has decided that the world should exist so that it may enter into his joy. At Christmas, when this mystery is celebrated, we should above all renew our sheer confidence in God.”⁵

In short, God becoming manifest in material form in Jesus was *not* the one and only time God ever inhabited Creation. The Eternal Word spoken of in today’s Gospel has inhabited creation since the beginning of the world. By taking human flesh in Jesus, the Eternal Christ showed us this truth in a way we could finally understand: in a person who loved us unconditionally, and whom we can love in return.

And what does all this mean for how we live our lives in our own day and time? Many early church fathers stated something similar to what St. Athanasius wrote in the Fourth Century: “The Son of God became man so that we might become God.”⁶ Now, if we hold the view that God is impossibly distant from Creation, either inherently or because of human sinfulness, this sounds *blasphemous!* But Jesus himself said, “Scripture calls those to whom God’s word came *gods*, and scripture cannot be abolished” (John 10:35); and St. Paul spoke of “this mystery, which is Christ in you...” (Colossians 1:27) Perhaps 20th-Century scholar and author C.S. Lewis spoke most clearly about what the Word made flesh means for how we live out our daily lives when he said, in a BBC radio message to the British people in the very midst of WWII: “...the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ. If we do, we shall then be sharing a life which was begotten, not made, which always existed and always will exist... Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.”⁷

My friends, in this New Year, may we resolve to let God have His way in our lives, and live out our lives as little, embodied Christs in this world.

AMEN

- 1 Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation, “The Universe Is the Body of God,” Thursday, March 7, 2019
- 2 Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation, “Incarnation,” Thursday, January 25, 2017 (Feast of St. Paul)
- 3 “The New Testament Doesn’t Say What Most People Think It Does About Heaven, BY N.T. WRIGHT, *Time*, DECEMBER 16, 2019: <https://time.com/5743505/new-testament-heaven/>
- 4 “Rowan Williams sees creation through the human, divine Christ,” a book review on Williams’ *Christ: The Heart of Creation* by S. Mark Heim in *The Christian Century*, August 6, 2019
- 5 Preached by Archbishop Rowan Williams at Canterbury Cathedral, Canterbury, UK, on 25 December 2007.

<http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/1584/archbishops-christmas-sermon-2007>

6 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divinization_\(Christian\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divinization_(Christian))

7 from *Mere Christianity* <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/161004-now-the-whole-offer-which-christianity-makes-is-this-that>