

1 Christmas 2014
John 1:1-18
December 28th, 2014
The Rev. John Forman

Before time and matter existed, there was Awareness. The Awareness was God's. That is to say, the originating Awareness was distinct from the source of all being, which Paul Tillich called "Beingness-itself." The original Awareness was also distinct from the Love of God, Love-itself. Paradoxically, the Awareness was God and always was God. This "not-one and not-three" relationship was and is God's pattern for all things. God is the pattern and everything that exists emerges from that pattern. God's pattern is the source of life, the meaning of life and the energy of life. God's "not-one and not-three" pattern, which is available for all people, radiates through nothingness eternally and nothingness can never overcome it.

Once, the pattern became a human being: Jesus Christ. God lived so fully in the human body, mind and spirit of Jesus Christ that we correctly call him the Son of God. We, too, have been invited to receive the same pattern freely given to us so that we can be called the children of God by a loving parent who is the source, the meaning and the light of life itself. There are people who have learned to trust God's pattern so fully that they are compelled to show others how to recognize it. John was one of those people, and I aspire to be one as well.

Both John and I have described something that cannot be known by descriptions. John's prologue is poetry, which I have tried to rephrase as prose. The best that either John's poetry or my interpretation can hope to leave are impressions, emotions and the sense of some elusive deeper meaning and clarity. T.S. Eliot said that "genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood." Because of that, poetry, especially poetic descriptions of the indescribable, must be held gently, as though we held a live dove in our hands: not so tightly that we squeeze the life out of it and not so loosely that we lose contact with it. Fortunately, after those first impressions, a bit of interpretation and explanation can help focus and guide us into deeper understanding.

Fuller knowledge is what we seek together, but because the meaning of John's poetry is Jesus Christ, the embodiment of the meaning of life, we walk toward a

constantly receding horizon. And yet, because we have been adopted as children, God's Spirit within us makes progress toward it. Another paradox.

I have a good friend, a Benedictine Camaldolese nun, who once told me that "paradox is the footprint of the Divine." And if there are footprints, there is a path. That path is filled with still more paradox, but that's how we know that the Spirit is taking us deeper into the mystery.

The first step on the mystic paradoxical path involves our own awareness. We start by not starting, but by relaxing into a state of unknowing. John twice refers to the Kosmos coming into being through the Word, in Greek, the Logos, or what I am calling the very Awareness of God, Jesus the Christ. Our own coming to know Christ often begins with the recognition of our unknowing, a helpless state of knowing that we do not know. First step, first paradox. The awareness of our unknowing can be triggered by any number of events. Like poetry, something may be intuited before it is understood—sensed before it makes sense. Some life-changing experiences, such as falling in love, the birth of a child or a positive medical outcome can stimulate our attention in this way. Some life-threatening experiences can do the same. Many combat veterans and trauma victims become seekers of spiritual knowledge when the stress hormones fade away. Others start to question after receiving a particular kindness or experiencing a sense of awe in nature. Music and the arts are common stimulants.

Once we have entered knowingly into this state of unknowing, we are ready for the next paradoxical step: we start to realize that what caught our attention comes from outside ourselves and that the way to connect to it is to go deeply within ourselves. John's testimony tells us that the Awareness, the Word, "came to what was his own." In practical terms, that often means an encounter with compassion. Christ, in the form of another, comes to be present to us at a critical juncture. Most of us can remember someone a little farther down the path who was alert enough to be with us in our questioning. A parent, a friend, a counselor who helped us to begin following the light within us. For some, it was a person who willingly sat with us while we mourned. For others, it was a person who listened without judging while we do our best to give words

to a powerful experience. Still others remember a person who forgave us for something we deeply regret having done. These are all versions of Christ coming to Christ's own.

The church should be the most obvious resource, especially in light of John's Gospel. The "not-one, not-three" pattern is a pattern of relationship: individuals always in community. Each individual will have particular and perhaps unique experiences, but the power God gives to us as adopted children is always plural *and* singular. John's Gospel stresses the community indwelling with each other and with God. The paradox of the second step is that individuals receive Christ within by learning how God lives with others of God's children. The self-knowledge of ourselves as children of God—recognizing the desire and vulnerability of needing to be loved—is the self-knowledge, the vision of reality, that begins to heal us. The impulse to extend that knowledge into community is what draws us closer to fuller healing as whole people acting in service to others. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of God's grace and the church, the communal body of Christ, consists of individual extensions of Christ in relationship with each other and with God.

Most people will enjoy a period of satisfying spiritual growth at this point on the path that may last months or years or a lifetime. For others, there is a third step on the paradoxical path. When God draws us further along, people encounter the need for a new belief on the other side of disbelief. Our expectations of God or, more often, the church, meet with disappointment or staleness or frustration. Or we resist the responsibility that comes with community life. Or we allow resentments to fester. Or we have become judgmental. In any case, our experience of God becomes dry and our prayer life begins to suffer.

This phase is sometimes called a "dark night of the senses." We have outgrown our early experiences and explanations without our knowledge. We have entered a new state of unknowing. This new state can be especially difficult if we start worrying that we are regressing or that we have done something to lose God's favor. But it may be, instead, that God is preparing that person to enter more deeply in the love of God. The soul learns to seek the God of consolation, not merely the consolations of God.

The paradox at this point is that to move closer to Christ requires letting go of what we know of Christ. We believe more deeply by surrendering our belief. Through the first two phases on the mystical path, belief in the sense of “accepting as true,” has been sufficient. The Greek phrase translated as “believe” is *pisteuein eis*. (pis-tow-ain ice). This phrase does not show up before the New Testament and appears only in Christian scripture until 200.C.E. The phrase means “being persuaded into” and implies exactly what is required for further spiritual growth. To live and act in Christ with the Spirit indwelling.

A period of a dark night of the senses is a gift of grace from God that urges us to take up a new attitude of loving receptivity in which we do not insist on maintaining our old ways of engaging Christ, the church and each other. Working our way through those periods calls for practices of contemplative prayer, through which God teaches us to give ourselves over fully, to trust God completely, until we experience a mystical union with God. The Word becoming flesh; manifesting in us, who were born of God.

The Kosmos exists by the love that God gives away—the love that we see but do not fully comprehend in a helpless baby and a dying man. “Jesus, the word made human flesh and blood,” writes former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, “has given us the freedom, the authority, to become God’s children by our trust in him, and so to have a fuller and fuller share in God’s own joy.¹¹” The true light that enlivens the entire Kosmos is God’s “not-one, not-three” pattern of harmonious relation. That is what was made flesh at Christmas. For us, following that pattern made flesh means that we speak, work and live for and in Christ in the everyday encounters to which God sends us, like John, to radiate and share the glory that we have seen—the glory as of a parent’s only child, full of grace and truth.

¹¹ Rowan Williams. *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter Sermons in Canterbury Cathedral*. Bloomsbury. London. 2013