

First Sunday in Christmas  
John 1:1-18  
December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018  
The Rev. John Forman

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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. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

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These eighteen verses from the prologue of John's Gospel are among the most theologically dense in all of Christian scripture and there is probably no passage more resistant to simple translation from Greek into English.

Last week, we heard about Luke's shepherds and angels and a baby wrapped in bands of cloth. Next week, we will hear about Matthew's wise men carrying gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh from the East with a star to guide them.

All these are much easier to imagine than John's light and glory, grace and truth.

At the beginning of the Christmas season and at the end, we can tell the story in rational, sensible prose. But here in the heart of Christmastide, we must rely on poetry to apprehend what can never be fully comprehended, because as T.S. Eliot once said, "genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood."

Poetry, if we will let it, allows us to experience John's Kosmic Christmas story before we try to explain it. We can hold John's poetry up to the light like a color slide, as Poet Laureate Billy Collins once wrote, or walk inside it and feel the walls for a light switch. Any way of allowing ourselves just to be inside

the poetry of this passage is more fruitful than, as Collins wrote, “to tie the poem to a chair with a rope and torture a confession out of it.”

Recasting some of the English rendering of the Greek may help: “As God began creation of time and matter, there was Awareness. Awareness was present with and aware of God. Never a being among other beings, instead Awareness *was* God, who is Being-Itself. This same Awareness was present with God in all originating. Through this Awareness, all things came to have being, and apart from the same not one thing comes to be. What was in the Awareness of Being-Itself was the life-energy of God’s Love-Itself, and this love was the Light of all people. And the Light in the darkness *is* shining and darkness *did not* overtake it.”

The genius of John’s poetry was to recast the opening of Genesis without dismissing the Jewish relationship with YHWH. He also revised a part of the Book of the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira, sometimes called simply the Book of Sirach. The central figure of that book is a mysterious female figure who also appears elsewhere in Hebrew scripture. She is more than a wise woman; she is Wisdom itself, the personified breath and word of YHWH.

In a hymn at the center of the book, Wisdom “tells of her glory.” This glory is the presence of YHWH, called the “shekinah”, that pitches its tent in the Temple of Jerusalem. For John the Witness, this is the glory of God, the shekinah, that he saw in Christ.

John the Gospeler left us a story with a thoroughly Jewish context. The twist is a gentle but purposeful turn of the Jewish wisdom tradition toward a slightly divergent path. Wisdom, the author claims, the Awareness that reveals the glory of God, no longer dwells only in the Temple and the teachings of Torah. Instead, Wisdom, the very Consciousness of the living God, has manifested in a human being, Jesus the Christ.

Like Sophia, the originating Awareness was distinct from the source of all being – the “Reality as such” that underlies every created thing. And yet, Awareness is also not *other* than God. Unlike Sophia, who was a creation of God, the Awareness of God that John witnessed was the non-created, true Light of God.

Jesus of Nazareth, born to Joseph and Mary, was a perfect human embodiment of divine wisdom. Jesus, born in the city of David called

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Bethlehem, expressed God's Love-Itself as a freely obedient vehicle of the Light and image of the invisible God.

And through the life, death and rising of Jesus the Anointed, God still draws us deeper into a relationship with what Oxford professor of Divinity Keith Ward describes as "the utterly transcendent creative ground of all being, beyond all human comprehension, the unlimited ocean of infinity, the abyss beyond duality from which all things issue, the ultimate cause of all."

Within that relationship, we encounter an aspect of God that Ward depicts as, "the supreme intelligence in which all possibilities exist as thoughts exist in the mind. Here," Ward goes on, "all the archetypes of being are rooted and ordered with perfect wisdom. Infinity takes form as mind and self-luminous awareness and exists as the uncreated light of wisdom which gives form and intelligibility to all things."

And by tending to that relationship, we become increasingly attuned to what Ward portrays as "the dynamic energy which gives actuality to the forms conceived by the divine wisdom, which values and affirms them, and which delights in their particularity."

For us, the Consciousness of God took on being – incarnated – in the life and love of a baby and even when "his own people did not receive him," the Anointed One still pitches a tent with us, still touches us.

And *that* is the mystical and incarnational heart of John's Christmas story where we find ourselves this morning. On the first of the 12 days of Christmastide, we celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, a human being filled with the Presence and Mind and Breath of God in a uniquely complete and sustained way. The entire life of Jesus the Anointed was filled with the shining glory of God from birth to the crucifixion to the ascension.

During the remaining days of Christmas, we contemplate our own adoption as children of God who tend to radiate the Holy Spirit in shorter bursts or in less flawless ways. When the season ends on Epiphany, we honor the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles, the Magi, who represent the larger world beyond the immediate community and culture of the Holy Family.

"Jesus, the word made human flesh and blood," wrote 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."

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That is to say, every human being is a potential carrier of the Spirit of God. Jesus was an especially intense and spiritually perfected human, although he was not necessarily unique in that regard.

There is more.

Jesus the Anointed is the image and act of God in a unique form of unity with God – a unity that was present by divine grace from the beginning of God’s creating. Jesus Christ is the image of God and a unique vehicle of God’s actions in creation, and is, consequently, properly the focus of our devotion.

Now, as soon as we start talking about the infinite and absolute God, we have to return to poetic and paradoxical language. Because to say that Jesus was God made manifest in human form does not mean that the entirety of God’s Being/Awareness/Love walked the earth 2,000 years ago. John reminded us that “No one has ever *seen* God. It is the unique manifestation of God, the one who is close to God’s bosom, who has made God known.”

During his 30-some years walking the earth, Jesus of Nazareth did not have access to the sum of all human knowledge. He had no clue, for example, how to change the spark plugs in a 2015 Volkswagen Passat. And yet, paradoxically, even that information is contained in the Consciousness of God.

The earthly Jesus never encountered you or me because we did not yet have our being. And yet, our being is and was held in the Being-ness of God, the source of being beyond all beings. Jesus of Nazareth did not share the life-affirming love that perfumes this congregation. And yet, that love is not other than the life and love of Christ.

The true light that has always enlivened the Kosmos is God’s “not-one, not-three” pattern of harmonious relation. That pattern was made flesh In Jesus the Anointed. And what we rightly worship, invite into ourselves and share with others is the mystery of the infinite Godhead so that we, too, might develop into unique images of God.

Right about now, you may be feeling exactly what it is to *apprehend* that which can never be fully *comprehended*. And so, let me just say that, for most of us, following the draw of the Word made flesh is a daily practice. We speak, work and live for and in Christ in our everyday encounters. To allow the

mystery of the incarnation to live through us is to be like John the Witness, radiating and sharing the glory that we have seen, full of grace and truth.

With our consent and trust in the true light that illuminated our brother, Jesus – the light that illuminates all people will work with us and within us and around us to bring grace, love and joy, even in the darkest places that we can imagine.

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