

“A Message of Advent Love”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 19, 2021

4th Sunday of Advent

Psalm 89:1-2, 19-26

Rev. John Wahl

John 1:1-14

What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. Christmas is known as the festival of lights. We place lights on our trees, our houses, and in our windows. Weekly, we light the candles of the Advent wreath and then hold them aloft as we sing “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light.*

Festivals of light are essential in these darkest days of the year and so Christmas originated as a celebration that could rival the Roman holiday *Saturnalia*.¹ For us, light serves as a symbol and sign for life: like the hope, peace, and joy of new birth.

Today’s reading comes from the prologue to John’s gospel; a prelude to this poetic song portraying Jesus as God incarnate: the Word made flesh who came to live with us, as one of us. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* This is where John’s gospel begins – in the beginning. This is John’s nativity story: not with shepherds and angels or a baby lying in a manger. In this birth story, this Christmas story, John takes us all the way back to the very start, echoing the words from the book of Genesis: *In the beginning, God created; God moved over the chaos and darkness and said, “let there be light.”* The God who moved over the darkness, who spoke light into being; this same God, the Word, became flesh and blood and dwelt among us.

These days, it seems like we are bombarded with words; literally up to our ears in emails, phone solicitations, and advertising jingles. Amid the seemingly endless debate and disruption, silence and stillness can be difficult to come by. Maybe, we should find comfort that *in the beginning*, God spoke to us an alternate Word, one that would not just be more empty talk, but a full and complete message

¹ Forbes, “Christmas: A Candid History”

of God's love: a teacher who lead by example; a healer who was also a friend; a leader who gave himself freely for the sake of all.

Thus, Jesus is not just a "word" spoken by God, but an expression of God's own being. Throughout the gospel, John will use different signs and symbols to describe this relationship between the creation and the creator; mediated by the Word made flesh. Thus, we will be asked to imagine ourselves as sheep to the shepherd and branches to the vine. God, in Christ, will be presented as light and love, the way, the truth, and the life. We'll be challenged to ponder the meaning of water turned to wine, the humble washing of feet, sight restored to a man born blind, and a dead man raised to life. For, the God who takes on flesh does not ignore the darkness but shines in the very midst of it.

Here, in John's prologue – this prelude to the gospel song – Jesus is presented to us as being the light of the world; *glory like that of a father's son, full of grace and truth*. Just as in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, which tell the story of a baby being born to Mary and Joseph, we learn of this special family relationship: parent and child. The gospel imagines that everything a child might need from a parent – for survival and protection, to be sustained and nurtured, to grow and mature – is what God provides for us through Christ.

Indeed, the Christmas story places us in the manger with Jesus and helps us to understand the relationship God seeks to have with each of us – like that of a parent and child. God's love is unconditional and eternal; God desires more for us than we could ever imagine for ourselves.²

Christmas is about the Almighty, powerful, transcendent God who comes to be near us, to be with us. Sometimes we do talk about God's transcendence: mysterious and unknowable, beyond our comprehension – which is all true – but here, in this celebration of the nativity, God takes on human flesh and becomes one of us; making his home among us. In the midst of our darkness, in the midst of the chaos of our lives – in the midst of a pandemic that seems to never end, a climate crisis that seems to be building like a snowball, a myriad of societal and personal challenges and obstacles – Jesus comes announcing light and life. Later in John's gospel, we will hear Jesus say, *I come that you may have life and have it abundantly*; a claim that in the midst of the darkness around us is all-too-easy to dismiss. But, Jesus' way is the way of the Creator, the way of life. He is the Word spoken over the chaos and darkness that creates life even where all may seem impossible. In and through Jesus, we are shown how we are meant to be: full of

² Karoline Lewis from *WorkingPreacher.com*

life, hope, peace, joy and love; that even as the light of God's incarnate Word shines on us, we are to let this light shine forth in our lives.³

God's ancient promise to be with God's people wherever they go takes on a different level of meaning in Jesus. God living among us, dwelling with us, is a deeply intimate claim. In the Word made flesh, God not only goes where God's people go, but is who they are. Now God dwells with us by taking on our full humanity. Whatever our hopes or fears, whatever our joys or sorrows, God in Christ has experienced them. Ultimately, this is what love is: being willing and able to dwell with and alongside; fully investing in a relationship like that of a family.

As the days before we celebrate Christmas wane to only a few, I pray that each and all of you will experience such light and life as John sings of in this prelude. Because of the intimate, family relationship God claims with us, we are also bound together as God's children: sisters and brothers in Christ. This means that we should be loving each other: listening, looking, noticing, and caring; reaching out and opening up; patiently bearing and humbly giving. In these coming days, many of us will be gathering with our family members of origin or choice; this, in many cases, will require us to temper our personal desires for the sake of the whole. For some, travel logistics, costs, or health issues will curtail being together. Others of us will spend time alone while loved ones gather with in-laws or exes.

Regardless of what your family gatherings look like this Christmas – a Norman Rockwell painting or a Jackson Pollack abstract, John's prologue assures us that God our creator, the Word made flesh, has come and is with us. The same Jesus that was born in stable in that back-water town two millennia ago is right here, even now, in our midst. As Eugene Peterson says, he *pitched his tent and moved into the neighborhood*.⁴ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. That light is life in its fullness; a life that is embodied in grace and truth and love.

Friends, hear this good news. In Christ, God with us, we are never alone; a new day is always dawning. We may not yet see it, nor comprehend when or how; but all that we are, all that we do, all that we hope or fear; God knows it, has lived it, and loves us still. Amen.

³ William McCord, "Christmastide: A Reminder Where Our Hearts Belong" from *Day1.org*

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*