



CHRISTMAS DAY SERMON

Incarnation is Us

From the magnificent prologue to John's gospel: "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." But further on, in the same passage: "No one has ever seen God, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." We have seen God's glory, but no one has ever seen God. Well, has anyone ever seen God, or not? Have you?

One day, visiting a Sunday School class, I came upon a little girl, drawing very earnestly with her crayons, using all her colors, drawing away with all her might. Her teacher asked her what she was drawing. "I am drawing a picture of God," she replied. Her teacher said, "But my dear, nobody knows what God looks like." The girl kept right on coloring, but said this: "They will when I'm finished."

I have always looked forward to the reading of this passage, this beginning of John's gospel, every Christmas morning. The language is gorgeous, sweeping – it transposes the Christmas story we hear from Luke on Christmas Eve into a grander, more theological key. The specifics of stable and shepherds and the poor couple huddled over the baby while angels sing in the night sky have fallen away, and what is announced here is something profound and true about God and about how God is in the world.

For years I didn't have much sense of what this truth in the passage might actually be; I just knew I loved it, the heft and the gravitas of it. But now, finally, reading it yet again, these words go farther and say more than I'd dreamed. They connect, really connect, with how I think about Jesus and incarnation and what we are celebrating at Christmas.

My emerging theology here is one of radical incarnation. I think these days of God as an inhabiting and embracing mystery. I think of God, not as a separate being, but as a presence that inhabits our humanity and all creation. That is what D.H. Lawrence affirms in a wonderful poem entitled "The Body of God". Part of it reads this way:

God is the great urge that has not yet found a body
but urges toward incarnation with the great creative urge.
and becomes at last a clove carnation: lo! that is god!
and becomes at last Helen, or Ninon: any lovely and generous woman
at her best and most beautiful, being god, made manifest,
any clear and fearless man being god, very god.
There is no god
apart from poppies and the flying fish,
men singing songs, and women brushing their hair in the sun.
The lovely things are god that has come to pass, like Jesus came.

continued

DATE
Christmas Day
Tuesday, Dec. 25, 2018

PREACHER
The Rev. Susan Flanders

John 1:1-18

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But it seems Lawrence here is limiting God to this world only and only to what is lovely, so then I'm not with him because I don't believe he goes far enough. I believe God inhabits the entire creation, not just what is beautiful, but everything - the all of it, even the evil, the dark and the ugly, even though we can't understand why. I believe that beyond inhabiting, God also embraces all that is, goes beyond all that is into unfathomable mystery. God as both imminent and transcendent, an inhabiting and embracing mystery.

For me, this means God in us and in Jesus – embodied in the same way. We see that very thing if we read John very carefully here in this gospel prologue. Jesus is God's Word, God's expression of Godself, but as Word, Jesus, a human being, becomes an ever-living expression of God – from the beginning and for all time. And his humanity is our humanity, this same pouring out of God's very being in Jesus is poured into us – we are part of God's Word in the world. John also calls the Word the light of the world, the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness doesn't overcome it. Can this mean, then, that we too are that Word, that light, that there is something in each of us that is created to shine in the world, to lighten its darkness. I believe there is.

For Christians, this truth bursts forth in Jesus, and I do believe Jesus' own self-understanding was deeply connected with his sense of God – an intimate connection, grounded in himself, the way a son or daughter might feel deeply connected with a mother or father. Haven't you sometimes felt your father's or mother's presence very much in you, even if they have died? Jesus felt God's power and presence within him, and he wanted his followers to discover this presence within themselves and to share this great and good news.

The church has too often limited incarnation to Jesus. All the traditional theology about Jesus as God's only Son, born of a virgin and the Holy Spirit, of Jesus as fully human but also fully divine just gets in the way for me. It sets Jesus apart in a way that lets us off the hook in terms of incarnation. It keeps that truth about God within us tied to Jesus, but not extended to us, and we end up worshiping rather than being incarnation. If Jesus is God's Word in the world, then we are too! And we are to be and do what Jesus did - not in the specific "What would Jesus do?" slogan way, but far more broadly. We are to be channels of God's grace, light in the darkness, instruments of peace, each in our own way, our own time. St. Teresa of Avila, the 16th century mystic understood this well when she wrote these words long ago:

Christ has no body on earth but ours.
Ours are the feet with which he walks,
ours the hands with which he blesses,
ours the eyes with which he looks on the world with compassion.

Incarnation means so much more to me when I recognize myself as part of it, no matter how faltering and frail I can feel in my efforts to live this. We are all born of God, and we are given power to become and live as children of God. I believe this is the heart of the Christmas story – the place where the baby in the manger meets both the vulnerability and potential power of each of us.

Later today, when Bill and I gather at table with children and grandchildren and hold hands while someone offers thanks, for me, the love that holds us together is God, God in us, God surrounding us. We feel this, at such times, even if we laugh and make toasts, and whether or not we say prayers - these family ties are expressions of God's being in us.

That's the easy part. But darkness and sad things and tragedy are also part of our world - too much so lately in the terrible conditions faced by immigrants, so many injustices here and abroad, our tortured political climate strewn with lies and criminality, the mounting threats to climate stability. How can we bring light, be helpers, live as God's hands and feet and eyes in the ways we govern ourselves and teach our children and work for justice everywhere. This is the hard,

never-ending part. It's hard to figure out what exactly to do; it's hard to be patient and never be sure of the fruits of our works, but we must try, we must participate in what we're here for. We are part of God's incarnation of Godself - we are here to live, to BE incarnation!

Howard Thurman, the 20th century prophet-mystic and noted educator leads us to this way of participating in incarnation in his poem "Christmas Begins":

When the song of the angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone
When the kings and princes are home
When the shepherds are back with their flocks
The work of Christmas begins.
To find the lost
To heal the broken To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among people
To make music in the heart.

This is now - this is when Christmas really begins. Last night the beautiful story was told of the birth of Jesus, the herald of God's incarnation, but now we are called to continue living it. God is still incarnate, still in us and in all creation. And Jesus' birth is about us and all people, not just Jesus. And so, I hold to my faith that the light of God's presence in us does shine, and the darkness does not overcome it. This is the challenge and the blessing of Christmas. Amen.