
The Gift of Presence

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Christmas 1 – Year B

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.

John 1:1-18

In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen. I bid each of you good morning and a heartfelt welcome to the Cathedral on this first Sunday after Christmas! Just a few days ago we heard the lovely narrative from the Gospel of Luke, telling of the birth and infancy narratives of Jesus of which we are all so fond. The Gospel of John, in contrast, does not include an account of the birth of Christ as do Luke and Matthew, who are ever the storytellers. They charm us with angels and shepherds, a virgin birth in a stable, a villain named Herod, and heroes in the form of peripatetic kings.

John, who is more of a theologian, gives us in these first 18 verses pure poetry in the form of a lovely Christological hymn and a dazzling, paradoxical conundrum: the light by which everyone sees came into the world, *yet the world did not see it*. Is John right? Does that include us? John tells us that the Word became flesh in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word that is the source of light and life for the world—and the innate goodness of creation is made manifest in this light ... *this life ... this Word made flesh*. So, John is not concerned with the birth narrative of Jesus so much as with the cosmic dimension of the *always already there* Word of God, made manifest in the birth of Christ. Indeed, in verse 14 we find the consummate expression of John's Christology: "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*" The Logos—the Word—became part of human history and dwells—the literal translation is "*itches a tent*"—among us, even now. From this fullness—this abundance—we have all received grace upon grace. It is important to remember that law, instruction, and guidance for living were given through Moses, but grace and truth have now become flesh in the form of Jesus. Through the Incarnation, Jesus became one of us so we could see, hear, and touch the living Word of God, and participate in that divine fullness. Yet, John cautions us that this light came into the world at the risk of being unperceived. What are we to do

with this paradox? And perhaps more to the point, *can we cultivate moments of light*, of transcendence in the midst of the ordinary? Can we co-participate in the ongoing unfolding of the light of which John speaks? I believe we can.

The theologian Ronald Goetz has suggested that John is holding up a mirror which reflects the true nature of faith—and the gratitude for the fruitful tension that comes with it. This year, on the night of the winter solstice, my running buddies and I ventured once again into the darkness of the trail, with our headlamps lighting the way until we reached a place we affectionately call “Beech Cove.” Deep in the woods, alongside a lovely brook, we turned off our headlamps and let the darkness settle in around us. The water, flowing down and over the stones in the stream, could be heard in a new way, and Orion and the Pleiades became visible above us. Wendell Berry, our American treasure, wrote this about the dark: “*To go in the dark with a light is to know the light. To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet, and dark wings.*” Anyone who has spent time in the woods at night will know the truth of this poem, and its paradoxical lesson that we know the light, in part, because we are willing to become familiar with the dark. And, sometimes we know the dark by virtue of the fact that we are human, and vulnerable, and in spite of this, amid our darkest moments, we see glimpses of light.

When I was young my maternal grandparents had a small farm in North Georgia. They, and that place, were a sanctuary to me, especially during some difficult years for my family. You might say they were lights in a time of darkness, and because of the darkness, I saw the light more clearly. And I needed that light to guide me. Looking back on it now, I see that my grandparents, and the farm set upon that hill beneath a lovely grove of ancient oaks, and the fields and ponds, allowed me to become who I was meant to be, a becoming that was in some ways at risk during those years. Were it not for that sacred space, and for football, and for holding on to my books for dear life, things might have turned out very differently. I remember one fall afternoon during a particularly difficult time. I had strung my Pawley’s Island hammock between two of the gnarled, lovely oaks, and in the autumn breeze, book in hand, I had fallen asleep in a synesthesia of dappled light and changing leaves. When I awoke, I saw through the sunlight my grandmother lovingly hanging her quilts on the clothesline, in the fresh air, in anticipation of winter. Crafted of an infinite variety of colorful scraps of cloth, in imaginative designs, she made these quilts all her life. Some she kept, and some she gave to family, and some she simply gave away. On cold winter nights they would keep generations of her family, and others warm. What I remember most about that moment was the autumn light reflected back in the colors of those quilts. They seemed, well, to somehow embody her spirit, her care for me during a difficult time, and the unfolding hopefulness that in spite of challenges, all would be well. Truth told, even now, in this season of light and hope, when I look at the lights on the trees and the light all around us, I see her quilts. I would say it is almost like the word became flesh. It is as if her spirit became embodied in and then reflected out from those quilts, grace upon grace upon grace. And that sustained me, and it gave me hope.

The incarnation we observe and celebrate in this season, dear ones, means nothing less than that God is no longer a God of the sky, relegated to Orion’s realm, but rather walks in the rhythm of humanity. Now, in Christ, we can gaze upon God, both human and divine, just as light is both particle and wave, and in seeing Christ we see who we were meant to be, that person we are becoming. Just as how we pray shapes what we believe, what we believe in turns shapes our choices, and our practices, and who we are becoming. Like my grandmother’s quilts, the word became flesh, it became love, and dwelt among us, and it was the light, and that light continues to shine outward and onward.

This past year many of us participated in a class entitled “Painting the Stars,” or what one person in the class called “*Religious Life on the Edge of the Universe.*” This prompted me to read a lovely book by the Franciscan theologian and scientist Ilia Delio, who said that we now understand that the universe is not static, but dynamic and expanding. Her mentor, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, saw Christianity as the religion of evolution and we are now coming to see that “we are on the cusp of an evolutionary breakthrough — one that requires our conscious participation as co-creative agents of love ... as midwives of the new creation.” Delio points out that old science assumed a static universe. Creation was something that God caused in the past. God was separate from creation, but also with us, “close to us but distinct from us.” The more we become conscious of the evolutionary cosmos, the more we leave behind that language of separation. God and creation belong to the same whole, mutually related, but not identical. She invites us to shift our consciousness to the new cosmic story, in which God is *still creating* and we are co-creators, shaping the future direction of evolution by the choices we make. Teilhard saw the fundamental force of the universe as attraction; it is what evolution is all about, the coming together of things so that new things emerge, moving towards more complexity, more consciousness, and more wholeness.

I think the Gospel of John says much the same. The term *creation* points to that which is always coming to be; it is being-

held-in-love, or existence that *longs* for more being-in-love. Perhaps a better translation of Genesis has God say to us, “I am becoming who I am becoming.” This longing is a type of suffering in the sense that what exists is not yet filled; creation lacks what it still needs to be complete. Creation, therefore, is not so much a past event as a present becoming that is oriented toward new being up ahead. Salvation is God’s love at the heart of the cosmos that heals, makes whole and generates new life. This love is visibly expressed in the cross of Jesus Christ. As we are healed and made whole by God’s love, we, in turn, can promote greater wholeness in our communities in our world. If we look at the life of Jesus, we see that his life, from the beginning, was a forward-moving life ... it ushers in a new creation. It recognizes that the best of life is ahead of us, not behind us. So, too, the God who is calling us into the fullness of life is ahead, not behind us.

So there is more to the cry of the infant in that cold, dark stable than meets the eye, and sometimes, even if through a glass darkly, we glimpse that something more. John, in his paradoxical insistence that the world cannot see the light which supposedly enlightens it, would not deny that even our unknowing, at times uncaring world sees glimpses of the light. Despite the sometimes self-indulgent crassness of the season, are there not times when we can see glimpses of our own best selves reflected in the glimpses of light that we can barely make out? This being human can be so very hard, until we remember that we are held in the hands of a God who has chosen—and is still choosing—not to leave us alone. Once we really, deeply believe this, we will never be the same. *God has come to “pitch his tent” among all of us.* And we become the Body of Christ in the world when we do as Mary Oliver says:

Everyday
I see or hear
something
that more or less

kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle

in the haystack
of light.
It was what I was born for —
to look, to listen,

to lose myself
inside this soft world —
to instruct myself
over and over

in joy,
and acclamation.
Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant —
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.
Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help

but grow wise

with such teachings
as these —
the untrimmable light

of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

("Mindful" by Mary Oliver from *Why I Wake Early*. © Beacon Press, 2005.)

David Brooks, in a recent op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, has said of faith that all this discerning and talking leads to the main business of faith: living *attentively* every day. The faithful are trying to live in ways their creator loves. They are trying to turn moments of spontaneous consciousness into an ethos of strict conscience. They are using effervescent sensations of holiness to inspire concrete habits, moral practices and practical ways of living well. Insecure believers sometimes cling to a rigid and simplistic faith. But confident believers are willing to face their dry spells, doubts, and evolution. Faith as practiced by such people is change. It is restless, growing. It's not right and wrong that change, but their spiritual state and their daily practice. As the longings grow richer, life does, too. "To be truly alive is to feel one's ultimate existence within one's daily existence." This is what Richard Rohr has called non-dualistic consciousness. It is alive, flourishing, and evolving. It is like seeing in that one moment my grandmother's quilts, filled with light and hope in a time of darkness. This same beloved grandmother, who took a hand in raising me in a big way, would often say to me when I was feeling sorry for myself, "Why don't you go out and do something for someone else?" Turns out, there was science behind her kitchen-table wisdom: Practicing giving is one of the surest steps you can take toward this kind of practiced faithful, flourishing life. When you read to the elderly, walk a 5K for cancer, visit someone in prison, or find ways to contribute to the unfolding Body of Christ that is this beloved Cathedral community, the reward center of your brain pumps out the mood-elevating neurotransmitter dopamine, creating what researchers call a helper's high. "Each action has a cumulative effect. The more generative, compassionate you are, the more people will respond positively toward you, and the better you'll feel." And, this changes our neural pathways and neurochemistry. We are transformed by giving ourselves away. As we get older, our social networks can sometimes shrink," say the authors of the study. "Volunteering may offer an opportunity to establish more social connections and form new bonds with people who care about you and motivate you to take care of yourself." In the remarkable Harvard Grant Study, George Vaillant writes that the #1 most important finding is this: "*The seventy-five years and twenty million dollars expended on the Grant Study points to a straightforward five-word conclusion: Happiness is love. We can make choices to give of ourselves, and to continue to grow with grace, vitality, and flourishing well into old age. It is more a matter of choices than genetics. It is about getting connected, and staying connected.*" It is not a matter of either/or. Rather, it is yes...*and*: it is darkness and light; suffering and compassion; loving, and being loved...when we allow Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, to pitch his tent in our heart, it transforms us in mind, body, and yes, spirit. I once asked my grandmother, many years later, why she continued to make new quilts, lovingly woven in the midst of the everydayness of her life, long after she had given so many to us, and to her extended family, and friends. "Do you really need more quilts?" I asked. "Oh sweetheart," she said, "I don't keep these. I give them away. That's how they become so much more than the scraps they are made of. They become something else altogether when I give them away." My grandmother gave me the *gift of presence*. As Mary Oliver said so well, "Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world." Word made flesh. Grace upon grace. Love always becoming a new creation. That is an Incarnation we can all live with, and into, co-creating God's beloved community one gift, one life-giving, light-filled quilt at a time. Amen.