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## The Gift of Presence

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins  
Christmas Day – Year C

*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 of St. Philip on this Christmas morning! Last night, 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 15 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 "*pitches 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. I believe we must*

The theologian Ronald Goetz has suggested that John is holding up a mirror reflecting the true nature of faith—and the gratitude for the fruitful tension that comes with it. This year, on a night just before 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 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 colors 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, then and now.

The incarnation we observe and celebrate in this season, dear one's, 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.

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, has written "Being Human," a lovely book, just now published. He writes, "*When the Holy Spirit sweeps over us in the wind and the flame of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit gives us the life of Jesus. It gives us something of Jesus' capacity to hear what is really being said by human beings. It gives us the courage not to screen out those bits of the human world that are difficult, unpleasant, those that are not edifying. It opens our eyes and our ears and our hearts to the full range of what being human means, so that, instead of being somebody who needs to be sheltered from the rough truth of the world, the Christian is someone who should be more open and vulnerable to that great range of human experience...we feel the edge, the ache in human suffering. And we recognize that it can be taken into Christ...it can be healed. It can be transformed.*"

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. 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.* 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. 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.

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