

The Light Shines In The Darkness . . .

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Christmas Day, 2022
based on John 1:1-13

This past advent we looked carefully into Luke and Matthew at elements of the Christmas story. This morning we look to the gospel writer, John. He is the one who stands back the furthest and explains it all in cosmic proportions. He is perhaps the most gifted of the four gospel writers in his way with words. He has the largest vocabulary, and is the most poetic, as he reflects on the meaning of the birth of Christ.

His story does not include the story of an angel visiting a virgin in an out of the way town in the hill country of Galilee. He is apparently unaware of shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night, awakened by angels. He knows nothing of the magi who see a star in the sky and follow it to an inn at the end of the world.

He tells his story with a different perspective and starts much earlier than all the others. "In the beginning was the Word," John says. And by "the beginning," he means the beginning of time.

When God looked out on space and saw the enormous void of nothingness, before anything was created, the Word was with God. In fact, he says, nothing was made in all of the universe without that Word.

This *Word* became flesh and dwelt among us, "full of grace and truth, and we have beheld his glory," glory as that of an only child seen through the eyes of an adoring parent.

Matthew gives us a genealogy for Jesus dating back to Abraham. Luke traces his line all the way to Adam. Crazy stuff.

Mark doesn't know what to tell us of Jesus' origins so he says nothing at all. But John wants us to know that before all time there was a Word in God's mind, a Word that was more action than speech.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by this word; and without it was not any thing made that was made.

What John wants us to know is something most of us have trouble believing. That is that God (who created every thing in the universe) and maybe multiple universes, really cares about us -- is concerned for us.

That being doesn't want us to be strangers. That being wants us to know that God has taken the initiative and become flesh so God could dwell among us.

I like John's honesty about it. "No one has ever seen God," he says.

That reminds me of the way in which God is never really seen by human eyes in the Old Testament. In the book of Genesis God came to Abraham as three visitors in the heat of the afternoon one day, but God was in disguise.

Isaiah got a peek at the throne of God, "I saw the Lord high and lifted up," he says, and he saw the hem of God's robe, so big it filled the temple. That's a lot of hem, a lot of fabric. But even Isaiah doesn't say that he actually saw God.

God came to Moses in the fire of a burning bush, but Moses did not get to see God's face. And of course, up on Mt. Sinai, Moses begged just once to see God's visage and God compromised a little and let Moses see God's back, but never God's face. Pretty wild stuff.

Well, God is not some divine bellhop. God is God, and we are not, and that's an important distinction.

John wants us to know that more than we realize, the Word has become flesh and dwells among us, because while no one has seen God, we have seen Jesus, and in Jesus, tradition tells us, we have a window of sorts on God. In Jesus's words and actions we can see a sketch of the beating heart of our purposeful Creator.

But like the sun itself, so bright that it burns our eyes to look directly at it, we see God better in what God illumines, like the landscape at sunrise. We see God in our peripheral vision better than straight on. C.S. Lewis once put it similarly ...

“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because *by it* I see everything else.”

God, according to the Christmas story, is to be seen indirectly, in the flesh, in the birth of a child who is the child of Bethlehem and also the fruit of our own bodies, in a sense. Because if you have had a child of your own and you look into her eyes for the first time, you see something that transcends our flesh.

That’s why even some narcissists who are the sole focus of their lives will sometimes say, “I’d give my life for my new baby,” and mean it.

What John wants us to know (and we, of course, struggle to believe) is that God is not isolated in some ethereal heaven, which we will only get to see when we die some day by and by.

God is not some all-permeating gas in the universe. Not some disembodied idea, or philosophy, or presence that long ago guided the Big Bang and then retreated to see what would happen.

If God is, in fact, the thing physicists now call “dark matter” that matter is *for* us, not against us.

John’s confidence that “the Word has become flesh” “is that there is no experience so hidden that God’s grace cannot find it. There is no soil so sterile that the seed of holy wonder cannot grow in it. There is no moment so dark that it can extinguish the light of God which, even now, shines in it.” (Tom Long).

In Annie Dillard’s book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she writes about seeing a mockingbird dive straight down off the roof of a four-story building. She says, “It was an act as careless and spontaneous as the curl of a stem.”

The mockingbird, her wings held tightly against her body, descended at thirty-two feet per second toward the earth, and then, Dillard said, she spread her wings at the last possible second and floated to the ground.

Dillard came upon this scene as she rounded a corner and no one else saw it except her.

She connected the bird's alighting to the old philosophical question about a tree falling in the forest. If no one were there to hear it, would it make a sound? "The answer must be," said Dillard, "...that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will sense them. The least we can do, she says, is try to be there." Try to take it in.

Sublime acts of beauty and grace are at work in our world whether we sense them or not. What we can try to do is to have the wit to pay attention, to be there and to notice, to see the presence of God for what it is whenever it appears, for it is all around us. . . . on Christmas morning, and every morning.

Merry Christmas everyone !

Amen