

“Christmas *Carpe Diem*”  
A sermon on John 1: 1-18  
Christmas 2 C

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That the “word became flesh” marks an “outrageous novelty”<sup>1</sup> that has entered our world. It means we shall no longer be here and God remote in heaven. It means that no place is safe from his presence. The word become flesh means we could run into God about anywhere.<sup>2</sup> That the “word became flesh” anticipates all of the news that is to come in the rest of John’s Gospel.

The word became flesh means we could run into God not only in the sunny successes of our lives, but that we are just as likely to find him in the dark places we avoid. It means he is as likely to be as present in our losses, our suffering, our desperation as in the faces of our children, our prosperous reputations, or in our neighbor. .

We have known for some time that God was to be found in the rules. We have known through Moses that God was to be found in the “oughts” of life. We have characterized him as duty, obligation, the “shoulds” under which we have labor or from which we have rebelled. Most of what passes as religion finds God only in the rules. And, while there is truth in this, it is also a spiritual dead end.<sup>3</sup>

This time of year, what with the double whammy of Christmas and the New Year, there is no want of advice, resolution, or personal reforms. Consider this season to be the popular “how to” season of personal reform. And if there is some reassurance here in this season that we are all good and generous people, its purpose will have been served.

But reassurance through the law – what you and I *ought* to be – also places us in a very difficult conundrums. To demonstrate the very spiritual dead end of the law is something

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<sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden, “For The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio,” *Collected Poems*, ed by Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 273.

<sup>2</sup> This is very much the theology of the Sirach 24:1-12 passage. “This God [Sirach24:1-12] sounds very different from the Roarer of Sinai who spits lightning and thunder. Serene and infinitely subtle, the metaphors are primarily feminine. . . . She rejoices and dances - and so is to be found around hearth and full table, in laughter and, as the Song of Songs has it, in intense love trysts.” David S. Toolan, “Praying in a Post-Einsteinian Universe,” at [www.crosscurrents.org/toolan.html](http://www.crosscurrents.org/toolan.html).

<sup>3</sup> “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”  
Romans 7:21-24

of a specialty of the Christmas season. Stanley Fish, in a column in the paper, reflects on what happens to him about this time of year. He worries. He worries about his generosity at Christmas. He worries about what he *ought* to be and do:

If I don't do anything, I feel guilty. If I reach into my pocket and hand over a few dollars, I feel guiltier. I thought for a moment that the problem was the amount, so I started giving out more, sometimes significantly more; but that only felt like an effort to buy my way out of an imbalance between what I had and what the objects. . . of my largesse either lacked or had lost. . . . The accounts could never be made square. They would always be behind in resources, I would always be behind in the obligation to care for those less fortunate than I. . . . I could always do more, but I could never do enough.<sup>4</sup>

Fish identifies the problem, correctly, as “original sin,” or what George Herbert called “the tincture of the private.” “Apparently selfless acts are always done in the service of the ego’s enhancement.” Giving is never free of the charge that its motive is the conscience of the giver, not the good it delivers to the receiver. He concludes,

In short, however much you try – indeed, because you try – you cannot be good or do good. A hard lesson, especially in this season.<sup>5</sup>

We have known since Moses that God was to be found in the rules. And there is nothing false in this statement. Indeed, God does place demands on us. Moses famously delivered from God the Ten Commandments, not a bad place to begin if you want to get in touch with what God demands of you. As John puts it, the law indeed came through Moses.

But the Christian message of this season is very different from personal advice on how to get it right this time. The Christian gospel of this season is in the receiving of God’s gift. God, at Christmas, is the giver. And that giving is fundamentally different from the law. As John puts it, “grace and truth” came through Jesus Christ.

“Grace and truth.” The deepest, most important truth of this season has something to do with the grace (gift) God gives. The Christmas gospel “interrupts the world’s reality with a supreme statement.”<sup>6</sup> The gospel is not an inducement, a command, or an aspiration. The gospel of Christmas is a *statement*. “It is a gracious statement of God’s righteousness which simply does not come from this world’s reality. . . .”<sup>7</sup> “To you *is born* this day in the City of David a savior.” The gospel is in the indicative. There are no preconditions, qualifications, or demonstrations asked of you or anyone else for this gift to be given.

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley Fish, “’Tis The Season,” *The New York Times*, December 21, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, “Living By God’s Righteousness,” *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, trans. by Jeffrey F. Cayzer (London: T and T Clark, 2006), p. 261.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Indeed, Luke exaggerates the giftedness of this birth by announcing it first to shepherds, and no one would ever even imagine how shepherds could conceivably qualify in the slightest for this gift. In response to this gift the shepherds – and you, of course -- would be quite right in demurring, “Oh, you shouldn’t have.”

This is the outrageous novelty of the word made flesh. This is something new. No one has seen this before.

There was another article I noted in the paper for Christmas. It was by John Tierney entitled “Carpe Diem? Maybe Tomorrow.”<sup>8</sup> *Carpe diem*, of course is that old world advice to “seize the day,” or we might state it in a more colloquial voice, “Have fun now!” Tierney writes with tongue in cheek,

. . . [Y]ou just need the strength to cash in your gift certificates, drink that special bottle of wine, redeem your frequent flier miles and take that vacation you always promised yourself. If your resolve weakens, do not succumb to guilt or shame. Acknowledge what you are: a recovering procrastinator of pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

Could this be, in part, a result of receiving “grace upon grace.” Could this be Christian permission to *enjoy* the world? Without the tincture of reform that seems to be implied by this statement, could this be Christian *permission*? Could “have fun now!” be a direct invitation to give up hoarding the gift of Christmas but to enjoy and share it. That’s what the rollicking shepherds did. Here is something to get the hills singing and the trees clapping their hands.<sup>10</sup>

John’s gospel announces a novelty which is the,

carefully constructed declaration of a new creation. . . . John begins with the new creation because every aspect of his gospel is an intrusion and revelation of the new creation which has dawned in Christ Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

Eberhard Jüngel describes the new, novel creation in this way:

So, living by the righteousness of God is, first of all, nothing more than being here in a new way and enjoying it. . . . For believers trust in God at

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<sup>8</sup> *The New York Times*, December 29, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> “For you shall go out in joy,/ and be led back in peace;/the mountains and the hills before you/ shall burst into song,/ and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” Isaiah 55:12.

<sup>11</sup> James T. Dennison, Jr., “The Prologue of John’s Gospel” at [www.kerux.com/documents/KruxV8N2A1.asp](http://www.kerux.com/documents/KruxV8N2A1.asp).

work. And this trust in God, as far as we are concerned, consists quite simply in enjoying our new existence.<sup>12</sup>

The news of the word became flesh is that nowhere is safe from God. We are likely to run into God about anywhere in all of creation. Most of us have routinely expected to run into God in the solemn rules of life, in the strenuous performance of the moral life, in the *gravitas* that Jean Calvin successfully draped over all Christendom. But the witness of shepherds in Luke, and when John trumpets the novelty of the “word become flesh,” the “grace upon grace,” the “grace and truth” it just may be that God is also found . . . in joy.

*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. . . . From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

“Grace and truth,” enjoy and share, *carpe diem*. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Jüngel, p. 267.