

January 2, 2022

Second Sunday of Christmas

John 1:1-18

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There are words and phrases that can stop you in your tracks, suddenly bring up long-forgotten memories, or make your heart swell. I can think of a few, and I imagine you can, too: “I have a dream”... “I love you”... “The Lord is my shepherd.” Words are powerful, aren’t they, and in the hands of writers and poets they can even take our breath away. My favorite contemporary poet Mary Oliver could do that:

To live in this world (she wrote)
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

Words like those are what John wants to use to describe the Word in this morning’s Gospel. Not interested in historical facts like Luke, or genealogies like Matthew, or in jumping right into Jesus’ ministry like Mark; John presses pause: “In the beginning was the Word” (capital W; as in God’s living Word, Jesus.) For the next 17 verses John writes poetry: “In Christ was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Imagine hearing those lines read out loud to you a couple thousand years ago. Most of the words you heard every day were declarations from Rome, who ruled the world--maybe some Greek philosophers, too, but nothing like our 21st century, where we are bombarded every day by words in social media, advertisements, news and streaming. Imagine hearing this poetic description of who Jesus is and

what Jesus makes possible. Do you think it would take your breath away? “The light shines in the darkness...”

This is a wonderful Gospel to hear on this first Sunday of a new year, and the last Sunday of the Christmas season. The passing holiday celebrations of the last month can leave a variety of emotions in their wake: joy, exhaustion, hope, relief, and other feelings only you can describe. And depending on your mood, it might leave this question in its wake: What was that all about, anyway?”

After all, the post-Christmas world goes on, doesn't it? Sales and returns and back to school and masks and variants and devastating fires and plans made and then discarded. Putin postures on Ukraine's border, the Afghan people are suffering and a man shoots his way across Denver and Lakewood. What difference does Jesus' coming make in the midst of all of that?

Well, says John “The Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth.” A large percentage of people believe in God, the *idea* of God, or perhaps a force like God at work in the universe--but John, even in beautiful poetry, will have nothing to do with a generic, generalized faith. No--God came to us--as a vulnerable, flesh and blood human being in Jesus, whose life shows us the depth of God's love.

This isn't some anemic deity, or a god who stands far off. In Jesus, God comes as close as possible, delivering love in person, choosing--*choosing* to enter all of human life--all of it. Always. Everywhere. In every moment, every breath. The Word made flesh, with a heart full of love for every person, no exception. Jesus embodies and invites *us* again and again to a new way of living. A way which trusts God's promises and seeks to respond to all of life with love.

Imagine the year ahead infused with that invitation. To be able to give and to share because we know we have first been loved by Christ. To embrace others in tragedy, struggle, and sorrow, knowing we are all held in the arms of Christ. To trust that the future is held in the hands of God who dwells with us in this day and the next and the next.

We see that love and presence so concretely this morning in the sacrament of baptism. There are no prerequisites for Anika, no perfection expected or required. Jesus simply reaches out and says “You are mine. Always.” Forever marked with the cross and given the name “child of God.” What a wonder for Anika and for all of us...in the water of baptism, and in this bread and wine, offered to all--all--of us, placed in our hands with the promise: “this is for you...for you.”

That, we could say, is poetry in motion.

“And from Christ’s fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”