

2nd Sunday of Christmas, January 3, 2021
John 1:[1-9]10-18

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ

Didn't we just hear this Gospel reading on Christmas Eve? You were thinking that as I was reading the text, weren't you? We did hear it, or at least the first part. The lectionary folks knew this when they assigned the readings, and what they really want us to focus on is the second half of today's reading, and that is what I will do in the next few minutes here. But they also knew that the second half doesn't make much sense without the first, so we read it again.

As I explained in the Children's sermon, it's still Christmas today, so we have one more chance to focus on Jesus' birth from a slightly different angle. I also mentioned that there are two different Christmas stories, one with the shepherds and the angels, and the other with the wise men. But really there is another Christmas story, and it is this prolog to John's Gospel. It's just that this story isn't quite as easy to depict in a nativity scene. This one takes place on a cosmic scale, and right back at the beginning of time. John takes us back to the beginning of the Bible to reinterpret the creation story for us. This one who has now "become flesh and lived among us" was present at the creation of the world. In fact, he was instrumental in making the creation happen. He is the source of life, and is still at work bringing life into the world. Life is the point, life that is like light in the darkness. This is what God is up to in him. And if you flip back to the end of John's Gospel, you'll learn there that the whole point of his Gospel is delivering that life to everyone who hears it. That's you! And it's me too.

That is the bold proclamation and promise of Christmas Eve, that the Word has become flesh, that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it, a perfect message for one of the longest nights of the year. What comes next, though, what we focus on today, helps us to recognize that hearing the Christmas promise of this Gospel is far from a simple or straightforward matter. Things get complicated, for Jesus and for us. I want to focus on three of those complications in this text that I think are still as relevant as they ever were, and maybe especially so in this time of global pandemic and political turmoil, and the vision that John has for our future as those who by God's grace receive the Christmas promise.

The first complication is that although the Word became flesh, the source of life comes into our midst to make sure we get this precious gift, our response has been disappointing. We don't recognize him. We don't acknowledge him. We don't accept or receive him. You see why we skipped over these verses on Christmas Eve and went straight for verse 14. What a bummer it would be on that most holy night to hear already about our failure to receive the original Christmas present. Because John isn't just talking about those who didn't believe or appreciate Jesus back in the early first century. He's talking about us too. He's also talking about us later in chapter three when he says that this is the judgment about the world he has come into: that people love the darkness rather than the light. It turns out that we prefer loving and serving ourselves to loving and serving our neighbor. Some of us are more overt about it than others these days, those who refuse to look out for the common good by wearing a mask, or those who indulge in conspiracy theories and threaten public health officials and destroy vaccines. But all of us are guilty of not loving our neighbors as ourselves. It's what we confess here every week at the beginning of the service. Those of us who have more than we need might be giving some of our surplus to help those who are in need, but we're spending even more on ourselves and our loved ones. Check your credit card statements and tell me I'm wrong about that. If we want to

find comfort in John 3:16, that wonderful affirmation that God loves the world, then we also have to acknowledge this uncomfortable truth about the world God loves.

The second, related complication is that although Jesus the Word-made-flesh has given us the power and authority to become children of God, we're not so sure we want that either. Because being reborn as children of God means becoming different than we are now, living differently than we want to live. And we're not keen to give up our independence or our control over our lives, even if they are only illusions of independence and control. The words 'repent' and 'repentance' are not used at all in the Gospel according to John, but this is what John means by becoming children of God: changing from who we have become as people walking in darkness to who God has created us to be. But by talking about it this way, as he does again in chapter 3 in that famous conversation with Nicodemus, he makes it clear that this kind of transformation is not something we can do ourselves. It's another way of saying that we are in captivity to sin and cannot free ourselves. But it's also a way of saying that God *can* free us, that God *wants* to free us, that in Jesus God gives us the authority and status of being God's children, a new and different kind of life that we are being born into by God's grace.

The third, and still related complication is that Jesus, the source of life, the Word-made-flesh, the light in the darkness, has unique access to God and God's intentions for us. This is a radical claim about Jesus that can seem unfriendly in a multi-cultural world. And the problem is that we can indeed use such a claim in an unfriendly, arrogant, and even oppressive way, as if we *possessed* the truth and could use it against others, as if our goal was to become the world's dominant religion and ideology, and to make everyone else like us. Not only *can* we do this, but we *have* done this repeatedly throughout history, using faith as a weapon to be exploited rather than as gift to be given away. But our misuse does not invalidate the central claim. Jesus reveals something about God that no one else can, namely that in spite of all the terrible things the light reveals about us people of the darkness, bent on death, destruction, and domination, God means to love us back to life and to right relationship with God and one another. God's ultimate disposition toward us and the world God loves is not one of law but grace, not justice but mercy, not karma or kismet, but life in abundance.

The New Year is upon us, people of God. There is always a renewed sense of possibility at this time of year, and now there is a glimmer of hope in the face of the global pandemic with the advent of new vaccines, and the dream of life returning to normal before too long. But there is still a long road ahead. The pandemic is much worse now than it has ever been, and it has spawned a more contagious, though less lethal strain. We will have to continue to be patient and diligent for the sake of our neighbor and the common good, to exercise restraint in our physical contact with others. These are still dark times we are living in, and many others have it much worse than we do.

But the good news of Christmas also continues in the early days of this new year. There is light in our darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. God is with us in Jesus in the midst of our present difficulty, even when we fail to recognize or acknowledge God's presence, and God will not let our intransigence and enmity be the last words. God means to love us back to life, and to love us into love, for God and for the world around us that God continues to love in Jesus Christ. May that good news open our eyes and hearts, and give us courage and determination for the days to come. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.