

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is born, the angel has spoken, the shepherds have gone and seen, and then amazed everyone with their tale. Now they are back with their flocks and Mary is left pondering in her heart all these amazing events. All that is extrapolation from the quintessential Christmas story that we read together every year on Christmas Eve. But because we don't usually have a Christmas Day service here at Grace, except when Christmas falls on a Sunday like today, we usually miss the chance to focus on a Christmas text that I consider equally as important as the story of the shepherds and the angels and babe in the manger. So today we have a rare opportunity to do just that.

In order to transition from last night's text to today's, I want you to imagine a tight camera shot from above on the newborn Jesus, asleep on the hay if you will, with Mary alongside pondering, and Joseph looking on. Now the camera pulls back – way back – Google Earth way back. You know what I mean: the zoom-out shot that was so overused in commercials a few years back. Only we need to keep pulling back to encompass the solar system, our galaxy, and then the entire universe in our view. But as we pull back, we also need to move backward in time as our solar system flies apart, as the supernovas that created the elemental building blocks of our solar system and galaxy undo themselves and as the expanding universe collapses in on itself to the primordial singularity that cosmologists postulate was at the beginning of everything almost 14 billion years ago. This is James Webb telescope territory, and then some, and this is where the other Christmas story begins. In the beginning.

This is a very rich text, with much more to talk about than I have time for this morning, so I'm going to narrow my focus to three things that I think help connect it with our present reality. And I'm going to take them in reverse order from how they appear in the text.

So, the first thing I want us to notice is in the very last verse of our reading, verse 18. "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." Because of who Jesus is and where he comes from, because he is God's only Son, and close to God's heart, John tells us, he is the one best able to make sense of God for us. Our translation says that he "makes God known." The Greek word there is the same as the technical term that scholars and pastors use for getting at the meaning of a biblical text (*exegesis*.) More precisely, we use that word for the task of explaining and interpreting a biblical text based on a thorough knowledge of its language and context. So you might say that what scholars do with texts Jesus does with God. That's John's claim here. Jesus' knowledge and understanding of God are unsurpassed, his access to God is unique. No one else can interpret God to the world like Jesus. This is a crucial claim, because there is no end of those who are happy to explain God to us, and to tell us what God wants us to believe and do. It is also crucial because the God Jesus reveals to us is not who we expect God to be.

The God Jesus reveals is a God of grace and truth, and that is the second thing I want us to notice in this reading. And since we're working backwards, let's talk about truth first before we get to grace. There's a historical principle I learned in graduate school that says that if there was a law prohibiting or regulating something, it's a safe bet that that something was already happening. In other words, lawmakers don't sit around thinking up things people *might* do. They react to things people are already *doing*. So when John emphasizes that Jesus was bringing grace and truth into the world, he is letting us know that those things were missing from the world. Jesus was not "bringing coals to Newcastle," to coin a phrase. The truth that Jesus brings instead

exposes the lies we tell about ourselves and the world. We tell ourselves, and one another, that God is a *quid-pro-quo* god, who helps us out if we help him out, a god who blesses us on the condition that we believe and behave in the right ways. We tell ourselves that we, and the people on our team (our religion, our nation, our political party) are the good guys, that God is on our side, and that our enemies are God's enemies. That's some "good old-time religion" right there. The truth that Jesus reveals is much more uncomfortable and inconvenient than that. "This is the judgment," Jesus tells us only two chapters later, "that the light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil." (Jn. 3:19) That's not what we want to hear, that we love the darkness instead of the light, that our deeds are evil, that *we* are the problem that needs solving. But it is necessary to be honest here. The grace part comes only when we are finally able to admit this truth about ourselves, when we can acknowledge that we are a part of the world that needs saving, that we are captivity to sin and cannot free ourselves.

But the grace part is of course what Jesus is ultimately all about. Because God is not content with allowing our love of the darkness to be the end of the story. God's grace is an intervention in our doomed reality. And this is the third thing I want us to note in this reading. In Jesus the only-begotten, God "in the flesh," God comes as light into our darkness, as the opposite of what we're used to, as the opposite of what we expect, as the opposite of what we even want, but as exactly what we need. Into our eye-for-an-eye, threat-for-threat, atrocity-for-atrocity world God injects compassion, mercy, and forgiveness as the antidote to the terminal illness of our sin. This is saving medicine. And to those who by the grace of God get that medicine, who come to believe in him and trust this mission of his, God calls to become partners in the effort, agents and practitioners of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness for the sake of the world.

As we begin the Christmas season at the front of a new church year, may God grant us grace to welcome the light of Christ into our darkness. But let's remember too, that the light of God's presence in our world is not just for special occasions. It is also and especially for the ordinary, mundane, messy reality of our daily lives that we will all be getting back to once the celebrations and festivities are behind us. My hope and prayer for each of us is that we might carry the truth and the grace of the Christmas season into all the days of the coming year, bearing the light of Christ into the darkest corners of the world around us. May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.