



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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CHRISTMAS DAY, DECEMBER 25, 2022
ISAIAH 52:7-10; PSALM 98; HEBREWS 1:1-4; JOHN 1:1-14

THE BRILLIANT DARKNESS OF POTENTIAL LIFE

***John 1:1-14** [In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 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.]*

Merry Christmas!

This morning you might have your favorite carols playing in your mind. You might have images too, lingering, of the shepherds keeping watch and the angels' glorious proclamation that

they bring good tidings of great joy to all people! The Christ child is born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes. The words and the images of this Feast Day, this season, are vivid, enduring. And

there is a great power in revisiting each year a story almost as familiar as our own. It anchors us, we have this in common, and it is something outside of ourselves which we can encounter together, something that we can share. Really, it's iconic.

Just like a religious icon, the story of the nativity is sacred art, a sacred object of our devotion. Also, like an icon, the story of Jesus' birth has a beauty, a symbolism that grasps our attention. And, like an icon, the birth story draws us in so that we might see through and beyond it, so that our mind's gaze might pass through and beyond to contemplate the mystery at its heart, the Divine mystery itself. And those first verses from John's gospel we just heard, call our attention to that, to the Divine mystery that lay through and beyond the familiar Christmas story that tells of Jesus' birth.

"What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

It's exquisite. Poetic. ... but not easy to fully grasp, to entirely understand what's meant, what's being said.

As we gather around the birth story at Christmas, as we sing together, bask in the familiarity and the comfort together, we might also, each of us in our own way, let our minds go on, let them reach a little further,

reach for the mystery, explore the incomplete knowing stirred up by the beginning of John's gospel. A theologian of the early 6th century wrote that the mysteries of God's Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness.¹

This is the stuff of the mystics, for sure. And yet it offers all of us a powerful way of thinking about the darkness that John speaks of, and reclaiming it; the idea that this darkness is something to be feared, that somehow it is "bad" in contrast with the goodness of the light is a wholly unhelpful metaphor that began in European theology, and

¹ Attributed to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

has flourished for centuries, it is an unhelpful understanding and one which has proved itself to be dangerous, and limiting. So please, let us set that to one side...

Our celebration of the Nativity, rings with echoes of the Creation story as it's told in Genesis. Our Gospel reading this morning opens with the words "In the beginning" and on hearing these words we're prompted to grasp the cosmological significance of Jesus' birth.

We're immediately reminded of God's actions 'in the beginning', from the first chapter of Genesis, the very first words of the Bible: in the beginning when "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep ... God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."

The darkness from which that light was drawn is a depiction of unlimited possibility and potential, it's a metaphor to describe that which *is* before life takes on its shape, before it takes specific form. *This* darkness is

not malevolent, it does not need to be beaten back or triumphed over.

Life in all its magnificent beauty and wild creativity is born of this darkness.

Life is the fruit, the good fruit, this darkness the tree.

The darkness, here, is potential, it is fertile waiting, it is possibility, it is preparation; like the sacred earth in mid-winter, that holds the dormant seed, that provides a home for hibernating creatures.

This darkness is the protective and incubating womb.

It is the mind, in the moments before an idea forms.

There is an expansive fullness within the safety of this darkness that's waiting to be given shape, to be called into presence, into being, by that loving radiant light of life that emanates from God, that is God.

Unbound potential, limitless creativity is called into finite being from infinite possibility by God, is given shape by God.

As it was *in the beginning*, so it is with each new life. ... and we are here, at the beginning with the newborn baby that is the Christ, the savior and redeemer of the world.

“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Each life called into being now holds, contains within itself, that glorious darkness of potential, the fertile darkness of possibility from which shape and form continually emerge.

Christ’s radiant and brilliant light shines to call us into being, his light a guiding *way* into fullness of life. As we celebrate his birth, as we gaze upon the “icon” of his birth story, we are called to contemplate Jesus, contemplate him as the light that shines in the darkness of all possibility, the darkness of yet unexpressed creativity. We’re to contemplate Jesus as the guiding light that offers us a way to give our own lives shape and form. Jesus is the light that calls us forth into life.

Jesus is the way, when we feel we have no way, or when we feel we’ve lost our way. Jesus is the radiant light shining in the brilliant darkness of potential life, he *is* life, life that was and is and always will be the light of all people.

Jesus is the light, our call into fullness of life, the way in which our creative potential is drawn into life-giving form from the cradling darkness of all possibility.

And so the story of Jesus’ birth, with its iconic narrative, imagery, and the music we love, tells us an important story *and* serves as an icon of a sort. There is a great mystery at the heart of it all for us to explore, the mystery of a creative, life-giving and loving God calling each of us from possibility into actuality, and on into fullness of life.

When we wish each other a Merry Christmas, this is, then, surely what we’re celebrating, that Christ was born so that we might perceive more clearly, that we might be transformed through him more readily, and that we might know the Way more confidently.

Merry Christmas!