

Grace Upon Grace
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Revelation 21.5-6 (NRSV)

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."

John 1.1-18 (NRSV)

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. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 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.

ONE: What is Christmas all about?

Later in the service we are going to sing "Of the Father's Love Begotten."¹ It's one of my favorite hymns. Although it isn't included with the other Christmas carols in our hymnal, it really is

¹ The Latin text "Corde natus ex Parentis" was written by Aurelius Clemens Prudentius. He was the most prolific and prominent author of early sacred Latin poetry. A native of Spain, Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348 - c. 413) was educated in imperial schools where he studied the Latin poets Horace and Virgil. He became a law student and twice a magistrate before being appointed to court office by Theodosius. At age fifty-seven he renounced the world and retreated to a life of poverty, seclusion, and writing. The hymn was translated by John Mason Neale (1854) as "Of the Father Sole Begotten," and revised by Henry Williams Baker for *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861). Baker also included a translation of the Doxology in the hymn.

Divinum Mysterium is a plainsong melody used by John Mason Neale for his translation of "Corde natus ex Parentis" in the collection *The Hymnal Noted* (1851). There it was captioned "Melody from a manuscript at Wolfenbutel of the XIIIth century." More than likely the source of the tune was *Piae Cantiones Ecclesiasticae et Scholasticae* (1582). The collection was used by Thomas Helmore, music editor of *The Hymnal Noted*. The harmonization is by C. Winfred Douglas for *The Hymnal* (1940) of the Episcopal Church.

a Christmas song, based in part on the two texts we just read from Revelation and John's Gospel. The first verse goes like this:

Of the Father's love begotten,
Ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega,
He the source, the ending He,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see,
Evermore and evermore!²

With that in mind, I want to begin by asking a simple question, although in some ways it is a very difficult question. What *is* Christmas all about? I ask this today, the tenth day of Christmas, because it's easier to ask about Christmas after it's over. Before Christmas we are too busy and too rushed to think clearly about it. Afterwards, we have a better perspective. So what is Christmas all about?

Ask children that question and they will likely answer "presents." Other answers will be given too: the lights, the trees, the star, Christmas dinner, perhaps even the birth of Jesus. But underlying and fueling the excitement of Christmas are presents. And there is nothing inherently wrong with that. Even the first Christmas was marked by presents: the Magi brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to honor the Christ Child.

The problem for us is that giving Christmas presents has become the engine that powers unthinking overconsumption. If we take seriously what's behind the advertisements on our televisions and in our magazines and newspapers, if we observe the media with any kind of critical discernment, then we cannot help but see that the image of the ideal American today is a picture of the consumer. And this should give us some pause for we claim to follow the Bible's God whose fundamental claim on us is, "I am the LORD your God ... you shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20.2-3) But if gods are those things to which we give our greatest energy and devotion, then in America today consumption is our god and the malls and the dot.coms of the Internet are the shrines at which we worship and bow down.

In fact, the malls are the villages of modern American life (and the dot.coms are the virtual villages). They are where we go to meet, to eat, to have fun, to hang. But what is the underlying purpose of the mall? For merchants to sell and consumers to buy. And in so many ways now our way of life depends on this unending and intensifying cycle of consumption. And we've turned Christmas into the engine that drives it.

Of course, for a long time preachers have complained about overconsumption and commercializing Christmas. But others become concerned too. A few years ago I clipped out a magazine article called "Buy a Buffalo!" The author wrote, "Beyond the religious significance of Christmas, I have always loved its tacky excesses: the plastic decorations, chain-store elves and TV spectaculars that feature talking reindeer, children's choirs and ads with Santa flying down a hill on a Norelco razor. But a couple of years ago, I had a midnight epiphany at Wal-Mart. Weighed down by sporting equipment and plastic toys, I realized that I had bought more gifts than anyone on my

² *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990) 309.

list could want or need and that it wasn't good for their spirits — or mine."³

One of her suggestions was "buy a buffalo" like her cousin had done for her family. Actually it was a water buffalo donated to a family in the Philippines through Heifer International. That's a good idea. Through Heifer our son gave Merrie and me two goats this year. We often do the same and I know many of you have too.

TWO: Christmas is about incarnation

But even if we get past the over-consuming, what *is* Christmas about? The true answer is a word: incarnation. That's what our texts are about. Incarnation. The Word became flesh. God became human. The Alpha and Omega, the First and Last, the one through whom all things came to be and in whom there is light and life and hope — grace upon grace — this God entered fully into the world. Incarnation.⁴

Maybe we can better understand the importance of incarnation if we think of it this way. What makes Christmas blessed? We might ask the same question in a sad way: what makes Christmas painful and lonely? The answer to either question is *presence*. Not *presents* as in the things we give or receive, but *presence* as in being with each other. The reason Christmas is so hard when we have lost loved ones or are separated by time and distance is that we miss their presence. The reason Christmas is joyous is being together in the circles of love and care that are important to us.

The greatest present we can give or receive is our presence with those we love or their presence with us. Were you able to wrap up an entire mall with pretty paper and a bow and deliver it under your or someone else's tree, that would not be as great a gift as your simple presence with them. A preacher named John Killinger gets at this by asking us to think of those who are shut-ins at Christmas: the elderly, the hospitalized, the frail. How much would our presence mean to them? Killinger was in London once and in a used book store ran across an old book about the nursing profession called *Notes from Sick Rooms*. A nurse named Leslie Stephens wrote about helpful hints for persons who were charged with taking care of the sick. One suggestion was that the nurse place a mirror in the room at such an angle that the patient could see outside the window. "It will," Mrs. Stephens wrote, "be a refreshment to the eyes which have for long not pierced beyond the narrow

³ Amy Dickinson, "Buy a Buffalo!," *Time* 154:25 (1999): 115.

⁴ We perpetually misunderstand incarnation and everything else about God's revelation in Christ. Douglas John Hall wonders if our Christology is "Incarnation or Apotheosis [elevation to divine status]?" "Christology can perform this service [disencumbering God's self-communication in Christ], but it does not do so as a matter of course. What Christology seems to have done on an all too regular basis throughout the history of the Christian church, in fact, is to constitute an end in itself. Instead of being an aid to the Self-communication of the one who cannot be communicated, christological doctrine has too often been substituted for that one. Just as human beings are constantly at work creating images of one another, on whose basis they may then avoid the difficult and always unpredictable business of relating to one another as living persons, so it is habitual in the Christian community to fashion images of the one called Jesus Christ and to treat these images, works of our own minds, as though they were God's own representative among us. Christology thus becomes the particular form of idolatry having to do with the second person of the Trinity." Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 440. Hall quotes Tom F. Driver: "Much of the churches' teaching about Christ has turned into something that is dictatorial in its heart and is preparing society for an American fascism. Most people do not notice, because they think it is enough to call upon the name of Jesus. It is not enough, as Jesus himself said; it never has been, and it has always been dangerous." Tom F. Driver, *Christ in a Changing World: Toward an Ethical Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 3.

boundary of the sick room."

Are not our visits with loved ones just such mirrors? For they permit people to see outside, to hear the sounds of busy streets and smell the fresh air through which we have come to their sides. Our presence, not just for those who are shut-in but for everyone, is much more meaningful than merely giving presents.

Presence is what incarnation is all about and incarnation is what Christmas is all about. God became flesh and took on an earthly presence and to see Jesus it is a refreshment to our eyes in our often sad and lonely world. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory ... full of grace and truth.... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."⁵

Conclusion

Over the years I have preached on this text from John's Gospel at least a dozen times. These words are among the most beautiful and meaningful in all of the Bible. But can we trust them? Yes, the text said "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." But those are just words and words seem pretty flimsy sometimes. Can we really trust these words and the Word about whom they speak? Really, what is this Word — the original Greek word is *Logos* — that John says became flesh and blesses us with grace upon grace?

There was a Greek philosopher named Heraclitus who lived more than 500 years before Christ. You probably have heard his name because he famously said you can't step twice into the same river. Step into a river and then step out. But step in again and it is not the same river, for the water has flowed on and the river has changed.⁶ To Heraclitus all things are in constant flux and change.

So if everything is in constant flux, why is life not complete chaos? Why doesn't the world just fly apart? Heraclitus and others influenced by his teaching said that the world doesn't come apart because within everything there is a universal Reason, a universal Word — he called it *Logos* and the *Logos* holds all things together in unity.⁷

It's impossible to know if John had Heraclitus in mind when he wrote his Gospel. But he knew that the word *Logos* meant that which holds all things together. And John wrote that the *Logos* was in the beginning and the *Logos* was with God and the *Logos* was God and in the *Logos* was light and life and the *Logos* became flesh and lived among us and we are blessed with the presence of the *Logos* — grace upon grace.

Yes, we can trust these words because we can trust the *Logos*. For as John put it, "All who believe this Word receive the right to become children of God." To trust this word puts our feet

⁵ This discussion of presence builds on a sermon by John Killinger called "Are You Giving Any Christmas Presence This Year?" John Killinger, *Christmas Spoken Here* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1989) 56-58.

⁶ "You cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you." Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, part 1 (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1962) 55.

⁷ "God is the universal Reason (Λογος), the universal law immanent in all things, binding all things into a unity and determining the constant change in the universe according to universal law. Man's reason is a moment in this universal Reason, or a contraction and canalization of it, and man should therefore strive to attain to the viewpoint of reason and to live by reason, realizing the unity of all things and the reign of unalterable law, being content with the necessary process of the universe and not rebelling against it, inasmuch as it is the expression of the all-comprehensive, all-ordering Λογος or Law." Copleston, 59.

upon a path laid down long ago. We find ourselves in the presence of brothers and sisters who do not forsake us during hard days and dark nights.

I read about a seminary professor who shared the story of years of pain in his own family, as his wife became afflicted with severe and unyielding depression. She was finally hospitalized, a near zombie. All the life and joy had been drained out of her by the illness. He said, "The worst part of it all was that I would go and sit by her bed day after day. I would take her hand in mine and tell her that I loved her. But she would not believe me."

After many months she began to recover. After some years she was well. They are still married today, nearly fifty years together now. He stuck with her through it all, until the day came that she could again believe his words, words made true by his sitting with her through the darkest hours.⁸

Jesus is that eternal Word, from before creation, who has come in person to take our hand, and lead us back into the family of God. He will not give up on us, or on this creation, until we are whole and wholly God's.

My friends, this is our hope and the source of hope is the Incarnation, the quiet coming of God into human history, the gentle appearance of light in the darkness, the birth of a child in the night, weak, helpless, vulnerable — the very incarnation of God, the irresistible power of love, the promise of hope.

Of the Father's love begotten,
Ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega,
He the source, the ending He,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see,
Evermore and evermore. Amen.

⁸ Charles A. Summers, "Underneath Are The Words," online, www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=10536, 30 Dec. 2009.