

On Earth as In Heaven

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner

First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, TN

January 3, 2021

Epiphany

John 1:1-18



“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth...”

Let us, at the beginning of a new year, place these words on the watch-posts of our hearts and minds, let us open our souls to the light contained in them, light enough, more than enough, to mark the way for us in 2021.

If it has not happened already, soon we will all put away the trees and ornaments, the lights and blow-up lawn displays, even the Nativity sets with their assorted casts of news-bearing shepherds, and gift-bearing Magi; along with various and sundry animals, quiet Joseph, pondering Mary, and, yes, even baby Jesus, put away for another year.

And I suspect more than one of us will pause to remember what it felt like to put all those decorations up at the beginning of 2020, completely unaware as we opened the attic and trudged them to their annual resting places what the year would bring, oblivious to the emergence of a virus that would lock down huge portions of the country for the better part of the year, throwing us onto Zoom, which many had never heard of until 2020, witnessing the horrific killing of a Black man named George Floyd that would send people to the streets in protest in all fifty states, as well as nations abroad, and seeing an election season rivaling among the worst in our history in terms of vitriol and division. No, we did not see any of it coming in early January a year ago.

Do you remember how, when the virus had taken hold and it became clear the magnitude of its toll, how some wanted a Christmas do-over? We were encouraged to get the Christmas decorations back out, put up the lights in April and leave them up as a reminder of hope. It was an admirable thought, but I am glad most people did not do it. And I am looking forward to putting it all away this year.

I am with John this morning – both the Baptizer and the Gospel writer. It is time for baby Jesus to be put to bed. Not because there is anything wrong with baby Jesus, but because sooner or later the grown-up Jesus needs to speak, and, for us today perhaps even more so, the Word made flesh needs space to light the way.

Some of you may remember the spoof of a prayer that the character Ricky Bobby did in the movie, “Talladega Nights.” Played as a racecar driver by Will Ferrell, he is leading a prayer before a meal and he addresses his prayer to “Little Baby Jesus.” He calls him, “Dear eight pound, six ounces, newborn infant Jesus with blond hair and blue eyes, don’t even know a word yet...” He proceeds to pray an obscene and ridiculous prayer to this version of Jesus which is his favorite version. Now, I know most people do not look to Talladega Nights for theological reflection, but it seems to me the movie does a deft satirical take on why we need John’s Word made flesh, why we need a grown-up Jesus who *does* know words. Otherwise, we can make Jesus into our own image and put our own words into his mouth and our own ego in place of his light.

But today we hear that little baby Jesus is the place where the Word is made flesh, where earth is touched with heaven, a Word that transcends all our words, that scatters the darkness of the world and of our hearts; a Word that invites not only the acceptance of the adult Jesus, but also his rejection.

In the Gospel of John, the invitation is always before us: Will we accept this Jesus, will we believe in him, which is to say trust in him; will we see in him the very face of God; will we walk in his way, guided by his light? John’s Gospel proclaims that all people, *all people*, whether they believe it or not, all people live in a world illuminated by the light, just as they live in a world created by the Word. The invitation is to trust the light, walk in it, and thereby become children of the light.¹

The Word is a manifestation, an epiphany, of heaven, which is not to say a place far away with golden streets and pearly gates, but the very presence of God in God’s fullness, in that baby Jesus who grows into a man, yes, but also here and now, in grace and in truth.

Another good theologian not often considered as such is Emily Dickinson, in her little poem called “A Word is Dead.”

*A WORD is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.*

¹ Beverly Gaventa, Texts for Preaching: Year B. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), page 85.

The Word that is present with God and *is* God from the very beginning is only just beginning to be spoken in Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ continues to speak, his light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John says this Word is not some ethereal mist from the beginning of time. The Word has content. John calls it “grace and truth.” You know heaven touching earth when you know something of God’s generosity, God’s grace, which is the heart of our faith. It is this gift, this grace, that makes a life of following the Way possible at all. Grace displaces our egos, it ushers in humility, it is the ground of love.

Novelist Douglas Coupland writes of it when he says, “My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”

Generosity, kindness, love – none of us on our own can walk in this way; if we do at all it is because the fount of God’s Word rises in us.

Grace *and* truth. There is no truth without grace, likewise deceit marks a discarding of grace, a forgetting of that which grounds us in the way. The grown-up Jesus was full of grace to be sure. His love and kindness and generosity shined the light of God’s welcoming grace upon all, especially those who had been consigned to the outer darkness because of things like their gender or their race or their economic status.

But that same grace was also truth-telling. When the light shines, those who benefit from the darkness because, as Jesus will say elsewhere, their deeds are evil, are exposed. And that exposure poses a crisis for them, and for a world that often covers itself in lies. Will they, will we all, stand in the light, tell the truth about ourselves and the world in which we live, and see, really see, the heaven that has always been right there, waiting for us to awaken to it?

I have seen that awakening in you this past year in so many ways, in your truth-telling and generosity and kindness and love. The virus is still with us. The racial reckoning is still unfolding. The election being over does not mean we are no longer divided. And yet, the light still shines. Let us accept it, trust in it, and walk by it. Let us continue this year to write those words – grace and truth – on the doorposts of our hearts and minds, and welcome 2021 knowing that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not and will not overcome it. Amen.