



SERMONS THAT WORK

Christmas 1 Year B

In the Beginning...

[RCL] Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 147 or 147:13-21; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

The first eighteen verses of the Gospel of John are certainly well-known—“In the beginning was the Word.” But this passage can seem too floaty, too esoteric, too obscure, abstract, and idealized. It’s poetry, yes, but it’s not particularly helpful poetry, and when we read the Bible, most of us like to gather some sort of concrete idea of what to do in our lives on an everyday basis.

But if John thought poetry was the best way to introduce Jesus and encourage us to encounter Jesus, why was that?

This text reveals that we need to think differently about who we are. It’s very easy as we go about our daily lives making our daily mistakes to get very down on ourselves, to believe we are constantly disappointing God and everyone else. And while it’s important to never lose sight of our feet of clay, the fact is that God created us but a little lower than the angels, and sometimes we need to rise into the stratosphere with John and live into that a bit.

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means being changed. We are born blessed by God, created in the image of God, but salvation makes us a new creation in Christ. Listen to how Isaiah talks about how God has changed him in our lesson today: “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels...You shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give.”

Our trust and faith in God that we struggle so doggedly to maintain and renew makes us, who are already cherished by God, into souls who shine with new potential and the beauty of life immersed in God. *This is true even when we are sinning* because the underlying reality of our desire and hunger for God will always drive us to stand up again when we’ve fallen, to reach out again when we’ve lost contact with God, to open up again when we’ve hardened our hearts.

What can we learn about what *Jesus wants us to be* from what we learn about *who Jesus is* in John’s prologue? John says, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” You were part of a process much greater than your parents creating a biological exchange. Jesus Christ himself, the great and eternal Word, was the vehicle of your creation, was the medium and the messenger that spoke a unique word into the universe that never was before and never will be again. That’s you.

You might not believe little old you could be that special or important. But John says it himself: “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.” You are a child of God born of the will of God.

In fact, we were so important to God that Jesus chose to leave all his heavenly glory, emptying himself and taking on the form of a slave, as Philippians says. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,” John goes on. That’s what we’re celebrating today, on this first Sunday of Christmas. God chose to humble Godself to the level of a poor, limited, human creature. And more than that—notice that John adds, “And we have seen his glory.” Jesus didn’t just become human for a minute or an hour or a day and then go right back to heaven. He lived among us for thirty-three years, enduring the messiness, the heartbreak, the inconvenience, the joy, and the pain of human life.

And he never walked out on that pain. He could have used his power at so many moments to ease his way. It would never have affected his healing or his teaching. There was no reason for him to suffer the pain he went through, from getting sick to getting in arguments to having clueless disciples, to having friends die, all the way up to the excruciating suffering he experienced on the cross. But he did it because he loves us, and he would never abandon us to suffer alone.

He entered the pain willingly because he wanted to go to the darkest depths of human suffering, because that is where all of us end up at some point in our lives, some of us more than once. That is what John means when he says “and we have seen his glory.” Not his glory in the sense of being powerful or mighty or wearing a robe that shines like the sun and ascending to heaven on a cloud. We have seen his glory as he dwelt among us because there never has been and there never will be any place of pain, lostness, suffering, or addiction that we can go and not find him there with us, bearing it with us and for us.

“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,” John says. This can help us see the Incarnation and the Christmas season in a whole different way. If Jesus had not been born, that first sentence, “No one has ever seen God,” would still be true. Mary and Joseph and Peter and John would not have seen God, and we would not have seen God. But because God made the choice to share Godself with us in human form, we have seen God in Jesus Christ, and it is amazing.

And that second sentence, “It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.” This shows us once again what Jesus gave up and sacrificed to come to us, a completely different sacrifice from the giving of his life on the cross. He was close to the Father’s heart. That was where he lived, in the perfect Trinity of love. And he left that peaceful, radiant and loving place, the place close to the Father’s heart, for us. And why? To stay with us forever? Yes, but more than that. To bring us *to* that place. To bring *us* close to the Father’s heart. He told us so himself: “I go to prepare a place for you.” He doesn’t even take his special place back for himself. He gives it up for us. And this is the fundamental reordering of the universe that happened on Christmas that we celebrate today.

It’s worth living in the poetry sometimes. We can get frustrated when we don’t get concrete direction from a Bible passage. But the poetry is what explains the *why* of all the literal actions of discipleship we’re trying to do. What takes tithing and studying and praying and worshipping and serving from being rote, mechanical duties to being our offering of our very selves to the living God, is the cosmic story of God and humanity of which John sings. The beauty of the words, and underneath that, the beauty of the truth

that, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”—that poetry is what makes our souls catch fire for God and all God asks of us.

This is why scripture matters so much. Because when real life comes crashing in, when the divorce papers are served, when the job loss happens, when the cancer or Alzheimer’s diagnosis comes through, we have to have somewhere to anchor our souls. And we do, in a few simple words a man named John wrote a very long time ago. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” The hard knocks of life plus the poetry of scripture give us the chance to build our lives so that we become a word of poetry ourselves, one little phrase expressed by the great Word that is God.

The Rev. Whitney Rice is an Episcopal priest in the Diocese of Indianapolis and currently the Associate Rector the St. Francis-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church in Zionsville, Indiana. A native of Lee’s Summit, Missouri, she comes to ordained ministry by way of the University of Kansas and Yale Divinity School, where she won the Yale University Charles S. Mersick Prize for Public Address and Preaching and the Yale University E. William Muehl Award for Excellence in Preaching. See more of her work at www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com.