

“Christmas Eve Meditation”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
December 24, 2019

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. . . .

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ 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.

Every year I look forward to Luke’s telling of the birth of Jesus. In that moment, I forget Mary’s predicament as an unwed mother in a patriarchal society. And Joseph’s dilemma. I dismiss, for a time, their status as members of an oppressed nation who must go here or there at the whim of a Roman emperor, or virtually any Roman citizen. I simply rest in the telling of the story of Mary and Joseph, Jesus, angels and shepherds.

In preparing this message, I thought about why people would be coming to church today/this evening. We come to celebrate together the birth of Christ, to listen to the old, old story. We come to pray together and to sing familiar carols. But it’s more than that. We come to be reminded of something that’s bigger than we are ourselves. To join in a shared-remembering of a moment when God’s finger (if you will) reached out and touched the earth, when God entered the lives of ordinary people, bringing about extraordinary happenings.

Our lives are generally ordinary. Yet we long to be part of something special. Perhaps, we think, if God shows up in these lives God will show up in ours. If this is you, take heart. When we are open to God, when we set aside our notions of God, God will *always* make their presence known. I say “set aside our notions” because God is not who we might think. God is so much more, so much other than anything we can imagine. In our reading from John, we get an inkling of this.

It's toward the end of the 1st century and Jesus' followers are feeling uncertain. The original twelve disciples had died. Jerusalem's Temple lay in ruins. Christ-followers were now scattered throughout the known world. Faithful people have been living their faith, waiting, believing that Jesus would return before his followers died. Now, they wonder if they have been mistaken.

It is in this context that John writes his gospel account. Shaping his thoughts carefully, he writes of the profound mystery that is God. And he offers some ideas to help his readers make sense of the mystery. He starts with familiar words, "In the beginning..." but then he turns the story. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.... Everything came into being through him, and without him nothing came into being. In the word was life."

John knows his community is wrestling with doubts. They want to know, "Was Jesus truly God? Or were we wrong?" John responds by calling to mind the first creation story in Genesis. He reminds them of the role Christ plays in that story. All things are made through him. Nothing is made apart from him.

Mystery. Plainly.

I've never been a fan of mysteries. The excitement of mystery for the sake of mystery eludes me. For all that, I recently discovered that I enjoy reading Sherlock Holmes. One thing I like about Holmes is his dramatic flair in solving a mystery. He cracked the case, he says, almost immediately. He simply wanted to clarify some details to be sure. I also like that the story does not end with his big reveal. We read on, as Holmes explains to Watson each clue, each decision and movement in minute detail. For someone who is less than thrilled about the chase, an explanation of all that had seemed to be shrouded confusion is satisfying.

This may describe John's purpose in writing his gospel account the way he does. He knows that his contemporary readers want assurances that what they have believed is really true. Fully confident in Christ's divinity himself, John goes deeper, encouraging them, and us, to ask, "But what does it mean?" What does it mean that Christ, present from the beginning of time, takes on human form? For what reason does God's Word become one of us and invite us into relationship with Emmanuel, God-with-us? And, what does it mean that Christ authorizes those who welcome him to become God's children?

To answer these questions, John points to Jesus. He lays out our clues. Jesus is rejected by people who had been watching for him. He comes into the world and is not recognized, not accepted. When faced with the possibility that God is walking and talking throughout Palestine, most people reject the idea. Ordinary folk like you and me turn our

backs on the possibility that God cares enough to meet us where we are. And, yet, this is a few pages further in John's account, God does care this much. God loves, not just some people but, all the world so much that God sends Christ so that through him we might taste eternal life.

God cares that deeply. And what God wants from us is to be a part of our lives. To help us with the ups and downs of life. To guide us when we're lost, even if we don't know yet that we're lost. It sounds so good yet, throughout history, people of God have chosen to follow our own path rather than God's path for us. We think our own ways are best.

People who have been longing for God's presence-ness miss what's right in front of them. Well, some people notice. Some accepted Christ. And to them is given the authority to be God's children. God's children, not by human action or human intention, but born of God. We become fully participating member in the household of God.

The word translated as *authority* refers to the power of choice. This power is given with permission, combining privilege with responsibility. Do you have a house key? Would you pull it out and hold it in your hand? What does a house key have to do with authority? That key you're holding allows you access to the home, right? But doesn't it also come with a responsible for what's inside?

Ruth Taylor owns a farm in Oklahoma. On the property, behind her house, is an old stone building. In that building, there's an old pie safe full of canning and freezing supplies. And, there amongst the lids, rings and containers is a key to Ruth's back door. Her children and her grandchildren know about the key. Also most, if not all the members of Ruth's church as well as the man who rents the pasture, and the neighbors on either side of her property. Through the years, as she has come to trust people and invite them into her life, Ruth has shared the location of this key. After all, she might need help someday. Over time, this woman has adopted neighbors, church members, and maybe even renters into her family. Family by birth and family by choice all share access to her home. Everyone has the same authority to enter her house. And... everyone who knows where to find that key also bears responsibility for Ruth's safety and trust.

Every person who welcomes Jesus into their life receives the authority to become children of God, joint-heirs along with Christ. We come to church on Christmas Eve partly to bask in the familiar as we light candles and sing "Silent Night." But we come also to sink deep, for a time, into the mystery that is God. In the mystery, we find comfort.

We will never understand God completely, but we don't need to. It is enough to trust that for our sake and for the sake of all the world, God shows up – in a way we can recognize – as a child who would grow up to teach us even further about this love God has for us

and about God's never-ending hope that we will accept the offer – that we'll welcome God into our lives and let ourselves be welcomed into God's family.

Why God would do this is a mystery. But one strangely, easily solved. God does it for love.

Merry Christmas!