

Our lesson this morning comes from the Gospel according to John. Chapter 1, verses 1-4. Listen to these words and may we hear a word--of transformation:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was 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.

Wait, what? This is the scripture for Christmas Day?

Where is the Christmas story that we are all most familiar with. Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, Bethlehem, angels, shepherds and some really good singing. We usually throw in a donkey, a stable and add our own bit of drama that every door in Bethlehem was slammed in poor Joseph and Mary's face, although none of that is in the text at all.

This morning however, we hear the Christmas story, but told very, very differently than the one we are most familiar with. No Mary and Joseph, no angels or shepherds, no little town of Bethlehem, no swaddling clothes or manger.

When asked to lead our service this morning and present a sermon reflection on the lectionary text for the day, I confess, I had not looked at it when I agreed to do so. Pastor Gusti and I were discussing the season of Advent—back in October or early November, and our hearts and minds became centered on the Guns to Gardens project that was brewing in the church—nationally and here at SPC.

For those of you who are not familiar with this program, Guns to gardens is an initiative led by PCUSA to receive unwanted guns from the community, dismantle them in a public prayerful ceremony, and turn the metal from them into gardening tools, or works of art. A small event took place here on December 11 when two guns were volunteered by members of our church and were chopped by a saw in our parking area around back.

By the end of our conversation that afternoon a theme had developed around the Sundays in Advent. We envisioned and planned worship from cross to cradle with each Sunday's lesson and focus as a way to be in a Spirit of Transforming Compassion, with the emphasis on our children.

I still hadn't paid any attention to our lesson for today...

When Advent began on November 27, the guest preacher for that Sunday, Rev. Mary Jane Hitt, couldn't make it due to a positive Covid test from her husband the day before Thanksgiving. He had mild symptoms which was the good news, and the service went on with some minor adjustments and major scrambling from yours truly, and with a mother's insistence that her son, Than read her sermon on her behalf. Than graciously agreed and did a wonderful job.

Transforming Compassion had begun, just in time for Advent.

I looked at the scripture reading for **today** around that time. You've got to be kidding, I thought. I love this text! It is beautiful poetry with a beautiful and meaningful message.

Before one of my seminary classes that week, a few of us gathered early on zoom. Noticing that I was a bit distracted, one of my classmates asked what was up. He assumed I was flustered by that week's assignment. When I said to our little group—"I'm just thinking of what to say for Christmas Day and wondering how to focus on John's prologue",

A small voice cried out from the wilderness on zoom. "Is that what's in the lectionary? It's John for Christmas?" It turns out that several of us were responsible for Christmas Sunday services and with the workload of classes and life we had yet to begin. And with those words, I didn't feel alone anymore.

John presents us with very simple imagery—word, light, being, life. If you notice the NRSV translation capitalizes the W in Word in this passage. Word—big letter—pay attention reader, notice this. John begins his entire Gospel with: "In the beginning" the word. Hearing this phrasing, we are reminded of the first book of the Bible which reads "In the beginning" in Genesis 1. The beginning of the whole Bible, echoed here in the first verse of John.

The creation story tells of the world and universe created out of chaos, ordered and declared good by God. In the beginning the world was a formless void covered in darkness until God said "Let there be light" and separated it from the darkness, and called it good. This is our Christmas story today. The same Spirit that hovered over the water in the beginning is the Spirit who hovered over Mary.

This is the story told in the words of my ancestors, an indigenous translation of the New Testament: First Nations Version. Listen again for a word of transformation:

1-2 Long ago, in the time before all days, before the creation of all things, the one who is known as the Word was there face to face with the Great Spirit. This Word fully represents Creator and shows us who he is and what he is like. He has always been there from the beginning, for the Word and creator are one and the same. 3 Through the Word all things came into being, and not one thing exists that he did not create.

4 Creator's life shined out from the Word, giving light to all human beings. This is the true Light that comes to all the peoples of the world and shines on everyone.

It is the Christmas story told from God's perspective, of which God is the first eyewitness (In the beginning). This is the cosmic story of Christmas that no one who lives in time and space and human history could ever begin to imagine unless God alone told it.

In the beginning...God speaks. In the beginning...God. John invites us on a magical transformation in his translation of the story of Jesus' birth. God is with us now, he writes, this baby is God. Just like the prophets promised—here with us, finally. I wonder if any of the witnesses to this event were asking--What took you so long, where ya been? We've been waiting, we've had Advent waiting for centuries and centuries! Probably not.

What has come into being is a human being, out of love. Out of love for humanity, God becomes human. In Jesus, God does not seek out the most perfect human example either. Jesus is born poor, to poor parents, in a very oppressive society. In the Gospels, Jesus' ministry is with those who are trying to figure things out, the outcast and forgotten. God takes us as we are. God transforms us compassionately.

Dietrick Bonhoeffer offered these words about this passage in a Christmas sermon in 1940: "This is about the birth of a child, not the astonishing work of a strong man, not the bold discovery of a wise man, not the pious work of a saint. It really is beyond all our understanding: the birth of a child shall bring about great change, shall bring to all mankind salvation and deliverance."

The promise that that comes into the world on Christmas Day is full of grace and of truth and is given to us to be the light of all people. We are not people of light, but children of God. This Cosmic Risen Christ is here and all we need to do is know that it is good to be human. It is good to be part of creation, to be one with the earth. God in Jesus says “a resounding Yes” to humanity.

Eugene Peterson observes that on Christmas and for a few days around it, we turn aside from our pre occupations with life reduced to biology or economics or politics or psychology and join together in a community of wonder.

I did a lot of Advent reading this year, from many different theologians and scholars. The things they said were presented in different ways and voices, but the message of Christmas is as ancient as scripture and as new as a just born baby:

Hope would not be hope without its waiting space. One of the most sacred elements of hope is the capacity to wait and to continue to live faithfully, even when you cannot see how it all turns out.

And even more powerful is when we are willing to sit in the waiting space with one another.

We don't need to have all the answers or connections or explanations. We only need to be, to listen, to trust in God and God's faithfulness to us and to the whole creation.

Advent passes on, quietly, peacefully, joyfully, with love. We trust in the words of Scripture that have been read over the centuries again and again. We read them over and over, for we need their reminder. We are prone to forget. The stories, the letters, the songs and narratives remind us of the many decades and lifetimes of darkness, as well as the sparkle of God's light in their midst. God is always present. God is not done. Life is not over.

Instead, we learn to walk in the dark.

Because sometimes, what later turns to joy doesn't always start out that way. There are times of uncertainty and stress that come with any new beginning, any birth, any step of saying “yes” to God. Joy does not discount our humanity and

the feelings that come with it. But many times, we must endure and step into the rocky unlevel path, trusting that joy is a part of it.

Jesus did not come promising to eliminate darkness in life. What he promised was that he is powerful enough to bring us through it. Vv 12-13 in the First Nations translation cites “all who welcome and trust him receive their birthright as children of the Great Spirit. They are born in a new way, not from a human father’s plans or desires, but born from above—by the Great Spirit.”

Love changes us—our trajectories but even beyond them, transforming the people and the world around us. And because of God’s love, sent to us in the baby Jesus, we are welcomed into a greater story that pulses in time, synced to the beating of our hearts.

Author Ann Voskamp says it like this: “Love had to come back for you. Love had to get to you. The Love that has been coming for you since the beginning - He slays dragons for you. This is the truest love story of history, and it’s His-Story, and it’s for you. This is love you can’t comprehend. You can only feel and touch this kind. There, in the place where you feel rejected, you can be touched by God. There, in the places you feel small, you can touch God. He came in the flesh... That is the message of Christmas. We need a Messiah. ”

Today is Christmas day, the waiting of Advent is over, for now, and the message is simple: God’s love is for you. GOD is for you. God’s love is for the world, for your neighbor and family and friend, for the lovely person and the annoying person and even your enemy too. We are called to extend such a gift. But first we must receive the wild, all-encompassing, transformative love of a God who comes directly to us, to be one with us. Yes, it’s a wonder and a mystery and often it can be difficult, but it is never impossible. The difficulty of love is what enables it to be so powerful. Perhaps it is best to stop waiting for what we think is the perfect feeling or condition to choose love. While we can’t choose the people we will love, we can choose to love the people we have. And in doing so, we reflect the love of God, the one who chose to love us in the very beginning.

And what is even more mysterious, wonder-filled, and amazing about this love story given to us this morning, is there is nothing we can do to stop it. Light shines into the darkness, and the darkness can never put love out.

Let the church say, Amen!