

Christmas Day Sermon 2020
John 1.1-14
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Grace and peace to you from the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I love John 1. It begins with God and God's Word, way out there in the expanse of the heavens, eternal and infinite. From and through God and God's Word all things are given substance, and beginning, and life! And this life that is given, is the light of the world. This light is not just for some people; Scripture's witness is that it's for all people.

And there's something else about this light ... it shines in the darkest of places, and the darkness does not overcome it.

This is how the incarnation story begins, vast and pretty much incomprehensible. It's like standing on the prairie in South Dakota, where you look up at the night sky and can see Venus with the naked eye, knowing it's another planet in our galaxy among many other galaxies. How can we even begin to imagine the source all of life, which we in faith, claim to be the "I AM" ... God?

Well, we can't ... not until we read further into story. For when we do, the heavens focus in on the world ... our world, in which the Word of God takes on flesh among us and walks, teaches, eats, heals, loves, dies, and rises from the grave.

The audacity of the Christmas story, and Christian faith, claims and believes that the source of all life became a human being. Theologian and author, Fred Craddock, writes in his commentary on *John*: "No higher compliment could come to the human community than that the Word had joined it, in flesh ... that is to say, the Word came in a particular time and place, subject to all the conditions of human life; a person among persons, Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee (P. 13)."

So our Christmas story, although starts out expansive and big, culminates once again, in a less than 10 pound bundle in his mother's arms, totally dependent on her in every way. That's what happens even when the Word becomes flesh. Yet even in this tiny babe, there is enough life and light and grace and truth for all.

Everyday we need what Christ offers us. There have been some really dark moments this past year. I don't know about you, but I've never lived through a global pandemic. I've never had to be afraid to gather with my family for significant life events and holidays. I've never had to worry about whether or not there would be a hospital bed for me, or others, if there was a need for urgent medical care.

I visit with many of our pastors throughout the Synod who are having to bury person after person. For numerous people in our country, more than ever because of the pandemic, this Christmas will be the first without their loved one.

As I was reflecting on this reality, I recalled a story I heard a few years ago on a Rick Steves podcast about a small village called, Reutte (Royte). Reutte is located in the western part of Austria, nestled in the European Alps. It is a predominantly Catholic village, which continues many longstanding, rich traditions on the eve and day of Christmas.

In Reutte, on Christmas Eve families begin celebrating by sharing a simple, evening meal. At 11:30pm each family makes their way from their homes to the large church building in the center of town, where they gather together to begin the vigil of Christmas. The church is filled with people and song.

The worship liturgy begins at the stroke of midnight, and culminates with the reading of the “*Euangelion*”, “The Good News” of the birth of Jesus Christ according to the Gospel of Luke.

More songs are sung, and then those gathered exit the church building for fellowship out of doors, on the front steps of the village church. Then together, they travel by foot a short distance through the streets to the place of burial. The people enter the village cemetery, which is itself aglow.

The cemetery is illuminated with hundreds of candles, each marking an individual grave, to remember the saints. The people bring Christmas greetings to those who have gone before them: the ones who no longer sit beside them in the pew at the festive, Christmas worship.

A bell then tolls. It is the “Christmas bell”. The village-wide gathering ends as they go their respective living rooms, where the families sing more Christmas songs, and where the good news of Jesus’ birth, is read for a second time.

Finally, (at least for the eager, young children) the Christmas gifts are shared and opened, still in the dark of night; thus satisfying the anticipation in the very early hours of Christmas Day.

Following the opening of gifts, sleep comes. Yet, it is only a short night’s rests before waking to the Christmas dawn; itself a day filled with continuous breakfast, culminating with a dinner feast in the evening of Christmas Day.

What strikes me about this tradition is that the people go to a cemetery to be with and remember those who have died. It can seem a little out of place to talk about going to a cemetery on Christmas, but it's a powerful witness to what the good news (the *Euangelion*) of the Christmas story really is.

The Christmas story is about hope for people who know and experience loss, for people who know what it's like to sit in darkness. It's for people who sit alone at night and wonder whether or not God is real or even cares.

The incarnation of the Word made flesh is for people who sit at graves wondering what is beyond the great chasm of death, wondering whether or not they will ever see their loved one again.

The Christmas story is about God, the Creator and Sustainer of all that is, being born into a world that is both beautiful and broken. Jesus is born into this world in order that you and I can know hope and joy, light and life, grace and truth, even and especially in the midst of a pandemic. For many this Christmas, not all is merry and bright, yet, a flicker of light remains that refuses to be snuffed out.

Christmas is about the good news of God for all the world. We need to hear the story again and again and again. We need the light that shines in the darkness of our lives, promising us hope and the very presence of God.

It may not feel true, but Christmas is not about who you are with, or even where you are. It is about God always coming to us no matter where we are, no matter the situation in which we find ourselves, no matter who we have lost, or how we are feeling on this day. It is about the Word of God made flesh, born for you and for me.

Jesus was and is born so God would become touchable, present, and real...not just 2000 years ago, but everyday and always. Emmanuel means, "God is with us," and that is what the Christmas story is all about. And God being with us is very good news indeed. Thanks be to God!