

Sermon: January 14, 2024 – John 1: 1-18
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

If you were telling the life story of Jesus Christ, where would you start?

Matthew starts with the genealogy of Jesus, tracing a stylized path from Abraham to King David that eventually arrives at Joseph, and then the phrase, “this is how Jesus Christ was born” at verse 18 of the first chapter.

After four verses of preamble, **Luke** first tells the story of the birth of John the Baptist, then by verse 26 gets around to the visitation of Mary by the angel Gabriel.

Mark, who uses the word “immediately” a lot, skips the birth narrative and heads straight to the ministries of John the Baptist and his cousin, Jesus, both at approximately age thirty.

Then in today’s reading, the first words of the gospel of **John**, the entire Jesus story is set in a much larger framework: global, even cosmic: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.... Everything came into being through the Word.... The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” From there, John tells us how John the Baptist announced the arrival of Jesus, this Word Made Flesh, and by verse 37 of the first chapter Jesus had called his first disciples.

What an amazing, perplexing way to start a gospel! As with the gospel of Mark, the *details* of Jesus’ birth are not of particular interest to John, but he paints the *implications* of Christ’s incarnation on the largest possible canvas. In saying that “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” John creates an awe-inspiring connection between Jesus and existence itself. In John’s first chapter the creative impulse of the Holy, the Word (or “Logos”) through whom the whole notion of life moved from concept to reality, is carried by the Christ.

As we start a new year, in a service where the sacrament of communion will be shared, these words call us to think big when we think about Jesus Christ, and the call of Jesus on our lives; and they challenge us, I believe, to a mode of thought that goes beyond the small, binary thinking that dominates and desecrates so much of our world these days. These first few words of John’s gospel convey a continuity between the very origins of the cosmos, and the entire story of Jesus Christ.

Is that too big for our human minds, even for our creative imaginations? Yes, likely. But I’d like to give it a try, for anything that gets us beyond right-or-wrong, yes-or-no, sacred-or-secular, we-or-they, saved-or-damned thinking is a good thing, and anything that intimately connects our religious beliefs and practices with our hopes for the survival of this planet may well be the most important thing we can embrace as disciples of Jesus, the Christ.

I hope that these words of John, which broaden our understanding of who Jesus is, might unify our thinking between the Jesus who in the final hours before crucifixion broke bread with his closest companions, and the Christ who at the beginning of time was responsible for bringing life itself into being. When we come alongside Jesus, whether he was at table with all manner of guests, or preaching about a new realm in which the dignity of all persons is upheld, or delivering God’s highest intention for a

person through acts of healing, or engaging in debate with those who held institutional power, we intermingle our lives with the very heart of God.

Some of us have signed up to receive daily or weekly emails from Fr. Richard Rohr and the Center for Action and Contemplation. Last year, at the end of April, each daily reflection for a full week spoke of the “sacramental reality” of life. One of the readings was quoted this past Wednesday at Evensong, which caused me to revisit these reflections, and I’d like to share from them this morning, without analysis, without comment, just letting their wisdom wash over us in ways that connect the grace-bearing sacrament of communion we will share this morning, with John’s sense that Christ intimately connects us with God’s creative urgings which fill the universe.

The late Christian columnist Rachel Held Evans, whose young life brought such wisdom wrote, “the word *sacrament* is derived from a Latin phrase which means ‘to make holy.’ **When hit with the glint of love’s light, even ordinary things become holy.**

“This is the purpose of the sacraments, [and the purpose] of the church” she continues, “to point to the bread and wine, the orchids and the food pantries, the post-funeral potlucks and say: pay attention, this stuff matters; these things are holy... [for] God is in the business of transforming ordinary things into holy things.”

Father Richard Rohr writes, “The core message of the incarnation of God in Jesus is that **the Divine Presence is here, in us and in all of creation, and not only ‘over there’ in some far-off realm....**When Jesus spoke the words ‘This is my Body,’ I believe he was speaking not just about the bread right in front of him, but about the whole universe, about every thing that is physical, material, and yet also spirit-filled.”

Greek Orthodox Archbishop John Chryssavgis writes, “Were God not present in the density of a city, or in the beauty of a forest, or in the sand of a desert, then God would not be present in heaven either.... Everything” he continues, “is in some way sacramental. All depends on the receptiveness and openness of our hearts.... **Nothing is secular or profane; nothing is pagan or foreign.... Were God not tangibly accessible in the very earthliness of this world, then [God] would not be the loving, albeit transcendent author of the universe.** This is surely the implication of the basis of the Christian faith, namely, that ‘the Word [became] flesh (Jn 1:14).’”

And contemplative author and artist Christine Valters Paintner writes, “One of the classic definitions of a sacrament is something that is an outward, visible sign of an inward, invisible grace.... **Everything [in all creation] can be a sacrament, meaning every person, creature, plant, and object can be an opportunity to encounter something of the Divine Presence in the world.** Sacramentality is a quality present in creation that opens us up to the Sacred Presence in all things. Sacraments reveal grace.

“The more we cultivate intimacy with the natural world” she writes, “the more we discover about God’s presence. All of our interactions with nature can be sacramental, and all the ways nature extends herself to us are sacramental as well... Every creature and every created thing can be a window of revelation into the divine nature; [this] is an invitation to fall more and more in love with the world. **To see that teachers of grace exist everywhere ... brings a sense of reverence to the way we walk in the world.**”

In what we do as Church, when we gather for word and sacrament, when we discuss ways to connect even more with the community around us, when we dive deep into the beautiful creation that surrounds us in Banff and Canmore, we touch God and are touched by God. The creative Word, with God and in God at the origins of time, is with us and renewed in us each breath of our lives. This morning, at this moment and as Christ invites us to the table, we take in that beautiful, awe-inspiring, heady notion. Christ comes alive in us, the Word continues to become flesh each time we honour the gift of life and preserve the health of the natural world, each time we uphold the dignity of another, each time we allow inclusive and expansive love to replace the human tendency to fear and judge and label others. May this year 2024 be a time when God's grace and light and love make their presence known in our Church life, and in the fullness of how we approach and experience life in all its challenges and beauty. Amen, and Amen.

References cited:

Chryssavgis, John. <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-cosmic-icon-2022-04-29/>

Held Evans, Rachel. <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/where-god-meets-us-2022-04-27/>

Rohr, Richard. <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/real-presence-2022-04-25/>

Valters Paintner, Christine. <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/sacramental-vision-2022-04-28/>

© 2024 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church.