

A Sermon preached on the 1st Sunday after Christmas, December 31, 2023
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT, by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

Isaiah 61:10-62:3. Psalm 147. Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7. John 1:1-18

Sometimes we think we know the Christmas story very well, since we've been hearing it all our lives. Yet I've found that I am always discovering new lenses with which to look at the familiar Bible stories about Christmas. For example, have you ever noticed how each of the Gospel writers tell the story of the birth of Jesus from a different perspective? Let's briefly explore the differences.

Mark, the earliest Gospel, says nothing about the birth of Jesus. Apparently, he didn't think that talking about the birth of Jesus was necessary to telling the story of Jesus.

Matthew tells the story to a Jewish audience from the perspective of Joseph. He begins by listing the genealogy of Joseph and Jesus, beginning with Abraham. Then he tells the story of an angel visiting Joseph and telling him to take pregnant Mary as his wife because the child she is carrying is from God. Matthew says, Joseph did what the angel told him to do, and Mary bore a son and named him Jesus. That's all Matthew says about the birth of Jesus. He is the only writer who tells about the coming of the Wisemen and after their visit, how the angel told Joseph to take Mary and the baby Jesus and flee immediately as refugees to Egypt, to escape the cruel edict of Herod to kill all the baby boys born in Bethlehem under two years of age. Again, Joseph did what the angel told him to do.

Luke writes to an audience of Greeks and Romans and tells the story of Christ's birth from Mary's perspective. An angel visits Mary, telling her that she was going to bear God's son, Jesus. That seemed impossible to Mary, but after a brief conversation, she was willing to say yes to the Angel, "I belong to God, let it be as you say." When Mary had questioned how all this could be true, the angel said, "your relative Elizabeth, in her old age is also pregnant, for with God, nothing is impossible." So soon after the angel left, Mary went to visit Elizabeth so they could talk about their shared experience of unexpected, impossible pregnancies. Mary returned to Nazareth and though she was nearing the birth of her child, she travels with Joseph on the long journey to Bethlehem. They find no room in the inn, so Mary gives birth to her first-born son, Jesus, in an animal stall. Angels visit shepherds in the fields, who come to the stable to see the baby they heard about from the angels.

We all value these stories of Christ's birth which we hear every year. And, in stark contrast, in today's gospel we hear John's very different way of telling the same story. John was the last of the Gospel's to be written, so most Christians of that first generation had heard the way Matthew and Luke told the story. John might have had a different perspective because he was one of the disciples who was closest to Jesus. Also, he is writing to the next generation of Greek and Roman people who might be curious to know about Jesus and what he came to do and teach all of humanity. So, John uses a cosmic context and poetic language to tell the story of Christ's coming. Please take out the Scripture insert so you can follow along as we unpack John's poetry and perspective.

John begins at the beginning of the cosmos, when the big bang ignited the first nano seconds of the entire universe. "In the beginning was the Word." Notice Word is capitalized. Like a good poet, John uses this capital W Word because it has several levels of meaning. In the book of Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew bible, the story of the beginning of the universe is told. The first words are: "In the Beginning", or "As God was beginning to create something out of the primordial chaos", God **said**, "Let there be light, and there was light, and God saw that the light was good." Genesis says that it

was the powerful capital W-Word **spoken** by God that ignited the cosmos and all creation into existence.

There is also another level of meaning to the capital W Word. The Greek word used here is Logos, a concept in Greek philosophy, which means deep, divine wisdom and power that gives order to the universe and links the human heart/mind to the heart/mind of God.

John says that the capital W Word that was there at the very beginning of the creation, was with God and actually was God. What do these poetic words mean? John begins to bring clarity by saying “**he** was in the beginning with God.” Somehow this Capital W Word, the logos, was a person, who was with God and was God. Do you hear echoes of the Trinity here? “All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being.” So, this Logos, this being which is God, is the creative source of everything in the entire universe. And John says this Logos, this life energy from God not only brought light to the ever-expanding cosmos, but also brings the light of God’s wisdom, God’s love, God’s energy of peace to every person that has ever existed. Do you begin to see that John is writing this poem about Jesus, who is the cosmic capital W Word who came into this planet in flesh and blood to live alongside us?

Then John speaks briefly about a historical person, John the Baptist, who was sent by God to tell people who Jesus is in the context of the universe. He said, Jesus Christ is the Light, the Logos, sent from God, so that all people on the planet can trust, hope, and find life through living in a loving relationship with God in Christ and with all their neighbors.

John then points out the deep sadness of God and human beings. Christ, the Word of God, was in the world in Jesus. The world had come into being through this Christ...yet, sadly for God and humans, the world did not recognize Christ as the one who Created them and everything in love, for love. It was like children not recognizing their own loving parents. Both parent and child were bereft of each other even though they were living alongside each other on this planet. But to those who recognized the Light of God’s presence in the life, words, and actions of Jesus, to those who lived in harmony with his way of love, Christ gave power to actually live as beloved children of God, loving and being loved by God. These persons were not born primarily from the flesh and blood of their biological parents. They were more deeply born from the creative loving Life and Light of God that was implanted in the DNA of each person God created.

Then John says something obvious: no one has ever seen the capital W Word, who is God, the ultimate Logos and source of the universe. Yet, what might not always be so obvious, is the reality that in seeing Jesus, who came to live among us on this planet, we have seen what the heart of our Cosmic Creator God is like. John could say this from experience, because John had personally known and followed Jesus every day for three years. He saw with his own eyes that this divine/human integration we call Jesus Christ, came to help all of us become the kind of people God created us to become, to be people through whom the Light and love and wisdom of God still shines into the darkness of this world.

Do you begin to see the expansive, poetic power of John’s way of telling the story of the Cosmic Christ coming into this world?

Now, let’s move from the cosmic perspective on Jesus to the contemporary world in which we live. Let me ask, have you seen any recent evidence of the loving Cosmic Christ still being alive and at work among us in the darkness and suffering of the world... and the dark, suffering places in your life?

This month I've been deeply moved by seeing how Palestinian Christians who live in Bethlehem, in West Bank, in the middle of the Israeli/Palestinian war, have found Christ in the middle of their suffering and devastation.

Normally, at this time of year, Bethlehem is crowded with Christian pilgrims who want to celebrate the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, where Christ was born. This year there are no pilgrims. The war has shut down the city. But the Christians of Bethlehem, in the depth of their grief and loss, are not giving in to despair and they are not choosing to retaliate with weapons. Instead, they have chosen to follow the example of a Lutheran Church in Bethlehem who normally had a manger scene in their worship space, as we do in the front of our altar. This year, they felt the need to create a different symbol of Christ's coming to Bethlehem. So they gathered some rubble from buildings destroyed by bombs, and placed the shattered pieces of concrete in the place where they formerly put the animal enclosure where Christ was born. There they placed a baby Jesus, wrapped in Palestinian baby clothes, lying alone in the rubble.

Do you see the revolutionary power of that image? Picking up on John's vision of the Cosmic Christ coming among us, they see Christ there with them, in their suffering, in the rubble, in the hopelessness and powerlessness of their situation. Seeing Christ, present there with them in the rubble reminds them that military power and terrorist power do not have the last word in God's creation. They and we follow a Christ who is still at work to bring light into darkness, hope into despair, to bring a new Creation on Earth as it is in heaven, to restore the DNA of God's love into the lives of people and nations. So, those Bethlehem followers of Jesus weep and fear for their lives and their future. **And at the same time**, they dare to trust that Jesus Christ is still there with them, in the rubble. They seek to keep living in love and hope and trust that Christ is ultimately more powerful than all the devastation they see and feel around them. They weep as they pray for God's justice, healing and peace to come on earth, in Israel/Palestine, in Ukraine and to every place and person who is suffering.

At time, in our deeply troubled world, we are all tempted to live in despair, to live in anger and hopelessness, perhaps to try and ignore the evil, violence, injustice and suffering of the world around us. But Jesus tells us, "as the Father send me, so I send you into the world", to bring light into the darkness, to embody the love of God in the flesh and blood of your daily lives. We can't save or change the world. But we can keep living with an awareness of God's powerful Cosmic love at the heart of the universe. We can live with a constant awareness of Christ's loving Spirit who is always present with us, in our bodies seeking to guide us, seeking to guide every person, so that God's love flows through us, through people all around the world, into the lives of our neighbors in need, even into the dark, violent, evil tragedies of the world, through our counter cultural prayers and thoughts, through our God guided words and actions.

I invite you to take home the Scripture insert and read John's Gospel every day this week to keep expanding your awareness of Christ's presence and work among us in this whole cosmos. John invites us to see the beauty and love of God in all creation and in the lives of so many good people. And John, alongside our Palestinian sisters and brothers, invites us to also look for the Cosmic Loving Christ in the rubble, the darkness, the violence, what feels like the dead ends in the world and in our personal lives...and to let Christ be born again into the suffering people and places of this earth, through our little vulnerable lives.

Let us close our eyes and be aware of God who is right here with us now...

As you have heard and reflected on John's gospel this morning...have you found yourself becoming aware that Christ might be more significant in the context of the troubles of this world and of the whole universe than you usually imagine?...

Could Christ be inviting you to focus, not so much on the problems of the world and in your life, but to focus more on how Christ might be inviting you, every day, to share loving connections with God and with others in need, so that you can be part of how God's cosmic love is still working to overcome the evil of this world with good?...

At this time in your life, as we begin a new year, let's dare to ask Christ, in what specific ways are you asking me to become more aware of your love in me and for me, so that I can be a little spark of your Love-Light shining into the darkness and suffering of the world and the people around me this coming week, this coming year?...

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our heart, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN. (BCP p. 213)