

God Gets Local

John 1:1-14

Second Sunday of Christmas, (January 3) 2021

Kyle Childress

Here is perhaps the central verse of the Christian faith: “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” (John 1:14).

- Samuel Wells

Perhaps you’ve heard of Christian Peacemaker Teams around the world. I’ve talked about them from time to time over the years. They go wherever there is violence and conflict and move in and live with the local people. They don’t do demonstrations. They don’t carry signs. They simply be among the people and bind up the wounds of those hurt. They pray, they serve, and they even give their lives. Time and time again – from Baghdad to Kabul to Columbia to Juarez to Bethlehem to Gaza – they simply move in and live with and among the local people and when they eventually leave, the local people say “Thank you for coming and being with us. Thank you for standing with us. You encourage us by your very presence.”

When I was a brand-new pastor in my first congregation, I regularly visited an elderly woman named Olga Blair. Ms. Blair never missed church but didn’t get out much of the rest of the week. She lived in a very simple, one-bedroom house. Her son, known around the area as “Cowboy Blair,” was a kind of traveling

evangelist who preached, sang Cowboy style gospel songs, wore Porter Wagoner style fancy fringe jackets, and wore Grecian-Formula hair coloring on his hair. Cowboy Blair was louder and holier and than any of us mere pastors.

I went to see Ms. Blair one day right after Christmas and she had a big, expensive, new color television set. She proudly told me that her son had given her the TV as a Christmas present.

I said, “How nice of him to give you the television.”

She said, “Yes, I’m thankful. But I’d gladly return it in exchange for just one day’s visit with him. I hardly ever see him.”

Here he was living in the same town but never went to see her.

You can guess where I’m going with this message for Christmas. We’re toward the end of this season for great gift giving and I hope that you gave and received some wonderful gifts. But there is a greater giving than even our greatest gifts. It is giving that is personal, the present that is presence, a giving that gets involved and participates over time. Our presence with one another is a challenge during this pandemic, but that’s not to say we do not make efforts, as best as we can, to connect with one another.

Our God is a giver of many good gifts. We owe our lives, our families, our homes, our food, our good earth, each and every breath we take – we owe to this

living God. Yet today we are in worship – itself a gift of God – to wonder at the greatest gifts – God.

The Gospel stories we've been hearing these last several days tell us how it happened. A teenage couple, undocumented, with the young mother-to-be ready to give birth, make their way to Bethlehem in order to get their papers, and while there she has her baby. They stay in a cow shed, out on the edge of town because there was no room for them in the Inn. Emmanuel, God with Us. Our Gospel lesson today, from John, uses poetry rather than a story: The Word, the eternal Word of God – God from God, Light of all Light, the One who cast the stars in their courses at creation and flung the planets into being – this God has “become flesh” and moved in with us. John does not say that Jesus was a messenger from God, or that Christ was an ordained representative from God; rather, John says that he was God (John 1::1). The Word was God.

This is what we wanted, even though we did not know that's what we wanted. All of our restless striving, our rushing here and there, our grabbing and getting, our buying and accumulating, all was an attempt to find what we need to have – the God of Light and Life. There has been something just a bit too frenetic, a bit too driven and relentless about all of our preparations for the season. We have expected too much of the holiday.

Yet this day, as John announces to us in majestic cadences, “In him was life and the light was the light of all people... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world,” we realize that what we need and desire the

most is God. What we need is a gift. What we need is not that which we can order online or save up money and buy. What we need is that which must come to us as pure gift.

For these twelve days we celebrate and give thanks for the gift. God comes to us. The Word who was with God, and who is God, coming to everyone, enlightening a darkened world.

That's what John's gospel says. God came to dwell with us, literally in the Greek, "tented among us" (Jn. 1:14). This is the wondrous opening poem or hymn of John's gospel. God with us.

Have you ever thought how strange, odd, and counter-cultural is this movement of God to come to us, to move in among us? It is the opposite of the modern self, where we seek to "grow up" and move beyond this particular time and place.

Wendell Berry says that the dominant theme in Western and American history is this one of always moving on and looking for something else. For example, it is seen in what he calls the flaw of one of our greatest American novels, *Huckleberry Finn*, which ends with Huck's determination to "light out for the Territory" to escape being adopted and "sivilized" by Tom's Aunt Sally. Huck seeks to escape where he can remain free, do whatever he wants to do; where he has power but no responsibility, individual freedom but no commitments to anyone else, and instead of staying and participating in society, he keeps everyone at a

distance and can keep moving on.

Berry calls this the difference in being a “boomer” from being a “sticker.” Boomers are always on the lookout for the next boom, the next opportunity to make money, the next place that will bring success, so we never put down roots, never build relationships, but are always exploiting and extracting whatever we can and then moving on. Stickers, on the other hand, put down roots, build relationships and community over time. Stickers move in and stay.

This is the gospel. God chose responsibility over power, commitment to others over the freedom to do whatever one wishes at the time (REPEAT THIS). God became flesh, entered into this particular time and place and people. We want to move away, find ourselves, make a difference somewhere else. God, moves in, gives up self, and makes a difference here. We seek to escape; God enters into. We want to be different. God becomes like us. We want liberty from everyone and everything else. God chooses commitment to be with.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, one of the premier theologians in the world, writes of how we must respond to our crisis of climate change, racism, and violence saying that all that represents a deeper sickness in the human condition. Williams says we may or may not escape the climate crisis and the other breakdowns going on, “but we can escape the toxicity of the mindset that has brought us here. And in so doing we can recover a humanity that is capable of real resilience... That’s why the creation of panic, with its inevitable accompaniment of self-protection and withdrawal, is useless in addressing the

challenge.” Williams goes on to say, instead, “we can sow seeds of the future that will offer life – not success, but life, and this means settling to inhabit where we are and who we are” (quoted in Alastair McIntosh, *Riders on the Storm: The Climate Crisis and the Survival of Being*, p. 185).

That is our calling. This is the calling of the church – to be God’s presence in a town, a neighborhood, a place over a long time. Not move in for a couple of years and then move on but to stay and participate. To incarnate ourselves with those in need. As we look ahead toward our post-Covid life we want to be attentive to ways to be with, to be present with those in need – to not be in a hurry but to be, to not give a present but to be present, to not “face-book” but be face-to-face, to not simply communicate information, but be in communion.

Environmental writer and activist and scholar of Buddhism, Joanna Macy says we are to do “the work that reconnects” (see Macy and Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*). That is also the Christian work of the gospel: God reconnects with us and with creation and in turn, we heal, reconnect, and make whole around us.

There is a basic rule in writing, “Don’t tell; show.” Don’t tell us what happens or explain to us; show us what happens. That’s what John does. Here, in these first verses of chapter one he tells us of the Word but does not use the term “Word” for the rest of his Gospel. What he does is show us throughout the rest of his story what the Word is, who God is, and what God does. Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, walks among us, speaks to us, guides us, forgives us, calls us, raises us.

Not everyone likes God among us or understands. John the Baptist, the prophet is beheaded. And opposition grows by those in Power against Jesus. Yet Christ Jesus keeps on and leads us down a path we could not and would not take by ourselves. Even then, after killing him, God sends Christ Jesus back to be with us.

But even that is not the end of the story. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, in the next to last chapter, hears the hosts of heaven sing, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them . . .” (Rev. 21:3).

The Revelation to John depicts the last scene of this story as God redeeming the world. This is not about getting to heaven or some other-worldly place. Here, at the end of it all, is a picture of the world made right, justice finally served, peace and reconciliation, reparation, redemption and healing – of persons, and of the earth. Creation at last completed as God has willed from the beginning of Genesis.

At the end, in Revelation, the story ends, not with our being moved to some other world, but rather with the Reign of God, the heavenly City coming down to this world, with this world renewed and made whole.

I don't know about you, but I find this to be remarkable. The gospel is not a story about how we escaped this life in order to be in heaven with God. It is the reverse. It is the story of how God comes to us. Our destiny, our calling is not that we should ascend to some ethereal heavenly place, but that God should descend, and by descending, redeem and make new and whole, with God's full shining

presence in Christ.

When Revelation says that God's "home" will be with us. It is the exact same word that is used in John chapter 1 to describe the coming of Christ. God will be at home with us, will tent with us, will tabernacle among us. God with us.

This is the Good News! And this is why we sing for twelve days the most loved and most joyous music. We sing, we give, and we live in anticipation and hope of being with one another just as God is with us, now.

We have had a dark year but hear the gospel! There is light! Hallelujah!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.