

Christmas in the Gospels *John's Vision*

John 1:1-14

December 24, 2023

Our waiting is almost over. The day is here. It is nearly time to light the candles and sing Silent Night and receive the gift of Christmas. In our Advent sermon series, only John's Christmas story remains. We have spent time in the wilderness with Mark, gathered around the family tree with Matthew, listening with Luke to Mary sing God's praise. And John seems to understand that we are here now only to celebrate. He doesn't take the time to describe the details of Jesus' birth or consider the complexities of its context. No, John begins his gospel in the mind of God. He starts "in the beginning," at the creation of the cosmos. He echoes the opening words of the Hebrew scriptures, "In the beginning..." Genesis and now John frame the story of creation. "In the beginning was the Word." And so, we wonder, *which word? What did God say?*

And we don't have to wait for long. John's Christmas "story" comes in verse fourteen: **"And the Word became flesh and lived among us."** In John's typical fashion, it is dramatic, succinct, and comprehensive. "The Word became flesh and lived among us." Everything we need to know about Christmas, contained in one simple sentence.

I've been reflecting on that phrase this season as we we've explored each gospel writer's Christmas story. Mark's wilderness message. Matthew's beautiful and complicated story. Luke's poetic praise. What John gives us is a vision. He sees the miraculous coming true, and he paints a picture of that truth.

God chose life with us. There is something central to the very being of God that could not abide the distance between Creator and creation. And so, God lived among us. Not as a conquering warrior but as a vulnerable infant. Flesh and blood.

This year especially, I think we need a reminder of the reality that God did not wait until everything was right with the world to show up. Instead, God's love arrives in human form when we need it most. In all our weariness and wandering and wondering.

Yes, our world is weary. Exhausted. Fed up. Undone by the unraveling of community, the senselessness and cruelty of violence, the deep sadness and grief of inexplicable loss. Our world is weary, and words often fail. When we do not know what to say, we remember that our silence carries the prayers too deep for words. We give expression to God's own tears and compassion. We remember that it was into our world of darkness that the Word of God became flesh. We remember that God spanned the distance of time and space to be in relationship and redeem not the world as it might be, but the real world, the world as it is.

This week as I have walked with those in our own community experiencing unimaginable loss, I have been thinking of Nicholas Wolterstorff's book *Lament for A Son*. The theologian wrote the book following the tragic death of his twenty-five-year-old son. He struggles to understand God in light of such a horrific loss. As a father, he reflects on the comfort he eventually found.

Wolterstorff writes: "The history of our world is the history of our suffering. Every act of evil extracts a tear from God, every plunge into anguish extracts a sob from God. But the history of our world is also the history of our deliverance together. God's work to release himself from his suffering is his work to deliver the world from its agony; our struggle for joy is our struggle to relieve God's sorrow. When God's cup of suffering is full, our world's redemption is fulfilled. Until justice and peace embrace, God's dance of joy is delayed."ⁱ

Today we remember. We remember the heart of the gospel: that God could not keep distant from human pain. Not then, and not now. As my teacher Shirley Guthrie wrote, "The birth stories of Jesus remind us that God is with us not in the sense of a beautiful idea or an abstract truth. It *happened* at a particular time, in a particular place, in connection with a particular mother: 'In the days of King Herod' 'In Bethlehem' 'of Mary.'"ⁱⁱ The glory of the real presence of God on earth is the heart and soul of the Christian story.

God's glory, John sings out, has been embodied. Not distant, but close. In Jesus, we are given a permanent picture of God. This is the truth of incarnation: that God comes close enough to touch and hold. No otherworldly, disembodied, abstract, remote idea, but a flesh and blood picture of the God who is with us now.

Eleven years ago, I tucked a prayer into one of my Advent books, and each year, when I open that book, the prayer falls out. It is a prayer of lament and hope written just days after the horrific shooting at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, just eleven days before Christmas in 2012.

"Your world seems a bit darker this Christmas. But you were born in the dark, right? You came at night. The shepherds were nightshift workers. The Wise Men followed a star. Your first cries were heard in shadow. To see your face, Mary and Joseph needed a candle flame. It was dark. Dark with Herod's jealousy. Dark with Roman oppression. Dark with poverty. Dark with violence. Herod went on a rampage, killing babies. Oh, Lord Jesus, you entered the dark of your day. Won't you enter ours?"ⁱⁱⁱ

Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not—cannot—overcome it.

This final day of the waiting season of Advent, John's vision has an important truth for us. God shows up in human form. The light shines in the darkness of a broken world.

Each year, I read again W. H. Auden's powerful Christmas Oratorio titled *For the Time Being*. I'm particularly drawn to his words of poetry. Auden writes:

To those who have seen The Child, however dimly, however incredulously, the Time Being is, [in a sense] the most trying time of all.

Remembering the stable, where for once in our lives everything became a You and nothing was an It.

That's the vision. That's the light shining. We know the destructive force of evil in our world, but John calls us to remember the vision we have seen of God's glory, full of grace and truth, embodied in a vulnerable innocent infant child. Immanuel. Born for us into a broken creation still waiting, still waiting for redemption. Having seen his glory, we now live in its light. Because of this vision, you and I can find the courage and the strength to claim our identity as God's children and extend that grace to all. This morning, take hold of a vision of God's love. The Word becomes flesh and lives among us. And so, Christmas comes again. Amen.

ⁱ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for A Son*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987. p. 91

ⁱⁱ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, John Knox Press, 1968. p. 227-228.

ⁱⁱⁱ Max Lucado, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/max-lucados-prayer-in-response-to-conn-school-shooting-86681/>