

Christmas According to John

John 1:1-5

December 24, 2023

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The Word was in the beginning with God.

³All things came into being through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being.

What has come into being ⁴in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The good news of Christmas is particularly *fragile*. Fragile isn't a good word in our culture. Something that's fragile is easily broken. We like things that are strong. Fragile things demand carefulness. Christmas is fragile.

It's fragile, for one, because we put so much into it and on it. It takes a lot of work to make Christmas. It's not bad work—the socializing, the gifts, the cooking—but the business is always out of sync with the simplicity of the story: a newborn child laid in a feeding trough. We work hard to make Christmas meaningful, yet the theological message of the night is that there is nothing we need to do—God does the work; God comes to us. Our work is receiving—open-handed and open-hearted—the gifts of God.

At Christmas, we're an elephant balancing on a ball. That's one part of Christmas' fragility.

Another fragility goes deeper. As you get older, you might begin to wonder if our accumulated Christmas celebrations make a difference. Jesus' birth is the beginning of God's reign of love and justice in the world... but look around--where is that reign? Our world feels poignantly unredeemed. Gaza, Israel, Ukraine, Sudan, guns, authoritarianism, no housing, we are often anxious and lonely, we don't fully trust one other.

What good is Christmas if its message never quite makes it into our shared reality? The British poet Thomas Hardy wrote cynically about Christmas just after watching the horror of WW I:

"Peace upon earth!" was said. We sing it,
And pay a million priests to bring it.
After two thousand years of mass
We've got as far as poison-gas.

Maybe you have wondered, quietly, the same thing. What is our caroling and candle-lighting and 2000 years of homilies by stiffs in clerical collars for if we can't embody what the angels sang to the shepherds—that this birth brings “peace on earth and good will among all people?”

This holiday is fragile. I have come to believe that the fragility of Christmas is part of its design, part of its beauty. The fragility of Christmas is not a problem, it's the point. Here's what I mean.

God had a hard challenge when it came to us human beings. God had to figure out “how can I possibly get these people to grasp that their purpose is to live with moral freedom—with free will and choice—and still, at every meaningful point in their lives, choose the path of love?”

God’s answer to the challenge of us is *incarnation*. God becomes one of us. Christ is the Word, the ancient Wisdom of God, John’s gospel says. The Word has always been coursing through the creation since the very beginning of time. But we treat the creation—and even other people—as objects to control, not subjects to love. So, this ancient Wisdom, the Word, becomes a person. In every way, one of us.

On Christmas, we look with fresh eyes on the breathtaking fragility of this divine decision. There’s a baby in front of all our eyes. Every newly born human is so fragile. We all come into the world with tiny limbs, wrinkled skin, closing our eyes against the brightness. We can’t move, we can’t speak, we can’t feed ourselves. Everything must be given to us, everything must be learned. To hold an infant is to hold an impossible fragility. This, our Christmas story says, is God.

God is fragile. Not just as a baby. Jesus’ whole life is fragile. From that first night forward, Jesus must become himself. Everything about who he is must be brought out, nurtured, developed. At every moment of Jesus’ life, he relies others to bring out his gifts—he needs his mother’s breast, her deep faith; his father’s kind eyes and capable hands; he depends on friends and teachers; he depends even on the powers and principalities of the world to shape his sense of justice. Even the hurts he experiences lead to his eventual insistence on mercy.

Jesus, as he grows, must figure out how to be a person who will show us what it looks like to live in freedom and choose love at every step. Even at the very end of his life, Jesus knelt in a garden at night and begged, “Father take this cup from me—let me live.” It was never a certainty that Jesus would choose the path of love. But he did.

Jesus chose love fully and freely. We, who, in Jesus, are children of God—so might we.

Tonight, you hear again this old, old story. The good news of God comes to you. Not as a bolt of lightning or an earthquake. Our salvation appears, like a single flame flickering in the darkness. Like a cup of water offered to someone who is thirsty. Like a loaf of bread for one who hasn’t eaten in too long. God comes as an infant, asking to be nursed and held.

The salvation of the world—peace for all people, the reign of God’s love and justice, reconciliation for all who have been at odds—it comes in tiny limbs and wrinkled skin, as fragile as could be.

Part of the beautiful fragility of God’s decision to come to us in this way is that you are free to respond. You could refuse the light, put the cup to your own lips, put the bread in your own pocket, let someone else care for the child. But you might, tonight, see the beautiful, vulnerable, fragile gift of God that awaits your response—and you might open your arms, open your spirit, and say “yes.”