

St. Mary's Episcopal Church
Christmas Day

The Word Became Flesh
Message by the Rev. Michael Burke¹



Merry Christmas.

Friends, here we are. Happy Christmas morning to you all.

Lat night, Christmas Eve, this sanctuary was filled with small little angels, shepherds, sheep. We heard the cry of a tiny babe, echoing through the passages of the Gospel according to St. Luke,

¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

¹²And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.²

The old folks smiled, thinking of the Peanuts character Linus, earnestly reading those lines in a Christmas pageant long ago.

The choir sang, the snow off the branches of the evergreens glistened and sparkled in the cold night air.

We closed in near darkness, our faces illuminated by soft candlelight as together we sang out our hearts with the hymn Silent Night.

It was beautiful. It was sacred. It was sentimental, all at the same time.

¹ Owed to Kirk Alan Kubicek, whose sermon this text message draws heavily from, and which can be found in its entirety at: <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/the-work-of-christmas-christmas-day-iii-2017/>

² Luke 2:11-12 KJV

But this morning, Christmas morning, it is all a bit different. Our message is shaped by the Gospel of John. There are no shepherds in the fields at night, but the scene is set by the same night sky, illuminated by a million stars shining down, light that took thousands of years to reach us here in this small blue marble of a world.

In the beginning.. says John... intentionally echoing the opening line of the Book of Genesis, "In the beginning, when God began to create..." which begins the telling of the sacred story of the people of God.

John says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

The stars twinkle and blink.

John takes the cosmic view, the wide-angle, the perspective of near infinity and timelessness. He is writing in the Greek language, the language of so many ancient philosophers and sages through the ages. When John proclaims, "in the beginning was the Word," know that in Greek it is "In the beginning was the Logos," a word we seldom use in English. The "Logos" to the philosophers was the organizing principle of the universe, the wisdom and logic and reason and heart that underlies the deep structure of reality itself. It was this Way and Wisdom, said the ancient rabbis, through which all creation came into being.

Slightly more than three decades ago, I had a friend who was a highly trained and educated astrophysicist. Long before such things became popular in science journals, she would speak to be about theories of physics involving dark matter and dark energy, which comprises 95% of the what makes up the universe, mysterious and mostly unknown to us. Curiously enough, I met her while at seminary, where she was studying the medieval Christian mystics, in search of language to describe what those at the far frontiers of Astro physics were also attempting to describe. Needless to say, she was drawn to the Gospel of John.

The Word, this Logos, says John, is *Life* and this life is *Light* to the world. Is his account of the Gospels, John says God is **Love** itself, and this logos, this Word, is an essential part of God.

And because God is Love itself, Love seeks relationship. God loved the world so much that God entered into the human story in the person of Jesus, born to us on that sacred night in a forgotten part of the world. Born not to experience the world of princes and Kings – though he was a type of King..

Born not only into the *best* of the human experience – the comfort, the joy, the celebration, but born into the hardest parts of what it means to be human: pain, suffering, hardship, and separation from others.

As John's Gospel tells us: "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him."

And for two thousand years that has been the case.

His name and image has been abused and misused, first upon the cross of Calvary, and ever since in the ongoing crucifixion of God's creation:

through the brutality of the misuse of power in all its forms: war, torture, mass killings, oppression, extreme poverty, the denial of the full personhood and humanity of group after group of people: those with disabilities, women and their bodies, sexual minorities, people whose politics and personhood and race and skin color do not fit the norm of the dominant order.

This abuse and misuse continue with destruction of rainforest and species and peoples and languages and cultures, each precious in the eyes of Love, in the eyes of God.

Among his closest friends and associates, Jesus sought out women, fishermen, tax collectors, and all sorts of people that the world kicked to the curb and forgot. All those troubled in body, mind, or spirit. All those that the world does not understand, found comfort and community in him.

He gathered them together in his name. He taught them to love one another, and honor and value themselves. He said: Love your God above all *things*, and love one another even as you love yourselves.

He called them from all circumstances and situations in life to follow in his Way, which is the Way of Love. The Way of a loving, liberating, and life-giving God. He said believe in me, and believe in a power far greater than the powers of this world. A light that shines in the dazzling darkness and that cannot be overcome.

He said we could take the false wisdom of this world, and leave it for the ones who think it all ends here.³

³ Actually, Bruce Cockburn said that, but I'm pretty sure he was paraphrasing Jesus. 😊

He preached that in the end, when all has passed away, Love alone will remain. Love alone will be. He called us to believe. To Believe, that is, to be the Beloved. To Be Love.

Jesus said that we are promised that all who do receive him in this way, to follow him in this Way of Love will come to know a different kind of light, a different kind of power than that which is the power of destruction, different from that which is the power of the Self turned in on itself, which he called "sin." He said in this new kind of power, the power of Love, we will come to understand ourselves as children of God, heirs of the reign and ways of God.

We will, he said, come to know ourselves as though for the first time, as who we really are and who we were meant to be.

For the Gospel writer John, and for his community, this is Christmas.

A long-ago colleague of mine, Kirk Kubichek, once shared this:

"A story is told about some Navy SEALs sent to free a group of hostages in one of the corners of the world. As they storm into the hiding place, they find the hostages huddled on the floor in a corner of the room. The SEALs tell them they are there to take them home. Get up and follow us. No one moves. They are so damaged by the experience of their captivity that they do not believe these are really people sent to set them free. So, one of these SEALs does something: he takes off his helmet, puts down his gun, gets down on the floor, softens his face, and huddles up next to the captives, putting his arms around a few of them. No guards would do this. He whispers, "We are like you. We are here to be with you and to rescue you. Let us take you home. Will you follow us?" One by one, the prisoners get up and are eventually taken to safety on an aircraft carrier and brought home."⁴

In a far away Palestinian hillside, long ago, a child was born into this world. "God in human skin," many have said. The ancients called him "Emmanuel," which in Hebrew means "God with us / God for us" The late Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of the Bible, translated John 1:14 as "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."

Friends, even on this Christmas morning, I'm not sure all my presents are yet wrapped. Just last night, I was still addressing some Christmas cards. But the wonderful thing about Christmas is that it comes whether you are ready for it or not.

It softly, gently, seeks us out and finds us in our various states of *un-readiness* and quietly whispers that we are loved. Deeply loved. And to come follow in the Way of Love, the way of the risen Christ.

⁴ From a Christmas sermon by the Rev Kirk Kubichek, entitled "The Work of Christmas" dated December 25, 2017, and can be found at: <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/the-work-of-christmas-christmas-day-iii-2017/>

Christmas does not end tonight. Christmas is just beginning.

It is time now, writes Howard Thurman, for the *work* of Christmas to begin.

He writes:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.”⁵

Friends, in our own very imperfect and faltering way, this is why we gather as the faith community of St. Mary's. This is our reason for being. Come join us.

Amen.

⁵ The Work of Christmas, in Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas & Other Celebrations*.

Christmas Day

Lessons Appointed for Use December 25, Selection III, RCL All Years



- [Isaiah 52:7-10](#)
- [Hebrews 1:1-4,\(5-12\)](#)
- [John 1:1-14](#)
- [Psalm 98](#)

The Collect

O God, you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son Jesus Christ: Grant that we, who joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

or this

O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

or this

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born [this day] of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament)

Isaiah 52:7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,

who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;

for in plain sight they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.

Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;

for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;

and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

The Psalm

Psalm 98

Cantate Domino

1 Sing to the Lord a new song, *
for he has done marvelous things.

2 With his right hand and his holy arm *
has he won for himself the victory.

3 The Lord has made known his victory; *
his righteousness has he openly shown in the sight of the nations.

4 He remembers his mercy and faithfulness to the house of Israel, *
and all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

5 Shout with joy to the Lord, all you lands; *
lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing.

6 Sing to the Lord with the harp, *
with the harp and the voice of song.

7 With trumpets and the sound of the horn *
shout with joy before the King, the Lord.

8 Let the sea make a noise and all that is in it, *
the lands and those who dwell therein.

9 Let the rivers clap their hands, *
and let the hills ring out with joy before the Lord,
when he comes to judge the earth.

10 In righteousness shall he judge the world *
and the peoples with equity.

The New Testament

Hebrews 1:1-4,(5-12)

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

[For to which of the angels did God ever say,

"You are my Son;
today I have begotten you"?

Or again,

"I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son"?

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,

"Let all God's angels worship him."

Of the angels he says,

"He makes his angels winds,
and his servants flames of fire."

But of the Son he says,

"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.

You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;

therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."

And,

"In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;

they will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like clothing;

like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed.

But you are the same,
and your years will never end."]

The Gospel

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

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.

Songfile

O Little Town of Bethlehem⁶

*How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heav'n.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him, still
The dear Christ enters in.*

*O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel*

Cry of a Tiny Babe

Songwriter: Bruce Cockburn

Mary grows a child without the help of a man
Joseph get upset because he doesn't understand
Angel comes to Joseph in a powerful dream
Says "God did this and you're part of his scheme"
Joseph comes to Mary with his hat in his hand
Says "forgive me I thought you'd been with some other man"
She says "what if I had been - but I wasn't anyway and guess what
I felt the baby kick today"

Like a stone on the surface of a still river
Driving the ripples on forever

⁶ O Little Town Of Bethlehem, Lyrics by Philips Brooks, melody by Lewis H. Redner, 1868.

Redemption rips through the surface of time
In the cry of a tiny babe

The child is born in the fullness of time
Three wise astrologers take note of the signs
Come to pay their respects to the fragile little king
Get pretty close to wrecking everything
'Cause the governing body of the whole [Holy] land
Is that of Herod, a paranoid man
Who when he hears there's a baby born King of the Jews
Sends death squads to kill all male children under two
But that same bright angel warns the parents in a dream
And they head out for the border and get away clean

Like a stone on the surface of a still river
Driving the ripples on forever
Redemption rips through the surface of time
In the cry of a tiny babe

There are others who know about this miracle birth
The humblest of people catch a glimpse of their worth
For it isn't to the palace that the Christ child comes
But to shepherds and street people, hookers and bums
And the message is clear if you've got [you have] ears to hear
That forgiveness is given for your guilt and your fear
It's a Christmas gift [that] you don't have to buy
There's a future shining in a baby's eyes

Like a stone on the surface of a still river
Driving the ripples on forever
Redemption rips through the surface of time
In the cry of a tiny babe

On to Bethlehem

Songwriter: Bill Mallonee

So, I'm at this wheel it's three am
waiting for the caffeine to come around
and life rears its ugly head again
they say your radio's cool and retail's way down

and I'd like to say I'm faithful
to the task at hand
speaking gospel to a handful
and others with their list of demands

it's cold this year and I'm late on my dues
it's cold in here ah but that's nothing new
my heart's electric with your love again
so it's on to Bethlehem

you might surmise that i ran there
but i really only crept
lead me to the place where love runs wild
and then it dogs your every step

you know how fickle my heart is
prone to wonder my Lord
yeah we talk but it's at arm's length
always got one eye on the door

God wraps Himself up in human skin
for those who want to touch
and God let them drive the nails in
for those of us who know way too much

You come bearing all our burdens
and take Your lovers for a ride
but we stay holed up in our cages
fashioned by our own design

so tell me what is your secret
what's on your blister soul
what is that one little secret
you know the one that has taken its toll

'cause daddy's banging on your gate again
yeah he won't leave you alone
got a whole lot of dry warm rooms
and the finest of homes

TO REACH OUT TO ME

words/music: Bill Mallonee

Mary had a baby boy
so she sang a song of grace
stars and angels started showing up
all over the place

it came with angel's voices
and with a star in the night
it came with kings and politicians
trying to crush out the light
Joseph was dreamer
sometimes he'd dream of God
sometimes his dreams told him to stay
sometimes they said: "get outta Dodge."

chorus:

*now, I hear you're in the business
of making all things new
that's some crazy kinda enterprise
just 'tween me & you
now, I hear you loved the good earth
I hear you loved the sea
I know you crossed a few of them
to reach out to me*

you opened up a clinic
when you came of age
healed the sick at no expense
ah, you were all the rage
you made the rounds at weddings
and you always brought the wine
you hung with the finest sinners
they thought you were divine

you took it to the highways
you took it to the streets
some called you a Savior
some called you a master thief
you came & sang a song of love
you came & preached of peace
you told the rich & powerful
their wars would one day cease

now, everybody lives in chains these days
all sad & mean & bored
living on a razor of despair
and by the edge of the sword
you saw where it was leading
you never held your breath
you delivered your own eulogy
ah, but You never really left

from CRIER (A Christmas EP) by Bill Mallonee & Muriah Rose, released December 20, 2012
Bill Mallonee: guitars, vocals, string & harp arrangement

CHRISTMAS IN BABYLON (Bourbon On Breath)

words/music: Bill Mallonee

it's Christmas in Babylon and what have we here?
 a planet groaning & driven to tears
 we've been hedging our bets and draggin' our feet
 but tonight your heart is a train and it's gathering steam

Chorus:

*all these clamoring voices about life & death
 we're all bell-ringers in parking lots w/ bourbon on breath
 now there's the strains of a hymn & a star in the sky
 and Love's showing up hard in a small Baby's cry*

even the animals smiled with delight
 at the child in the stable all ringed with light
 Mary & Joseph, they held Him close
 hope of the ages wrapped up in swaddling clothes

now suffering & wonder maybe all that you get
 on this side of the veil...lest you forget
 life is drifting & falling...and drifting again
 maybe you're coming home...to someplace you've never been

and there's a band of angels, they've tuned up and plugged in
 awaiting their cue. about to begin
 god sends us a gift this time every year
 Ah, it's Christmas in Babylon...and what have we here?

*from CRIER by Bill Mallonee & Muriah Rose (A Christmas EP 2012), released December 20, 2012
 Bill Mallonee: guitars, vocals, drum programming.*

To purchase online: <https://billmalloneemusic.bandcamp.com/album/star-light-over-high-desert-2013>