

Nativity of the Lord, Year A, 2022
December 25, 2022
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Nearly fifty years ago, the astronauts on board the Apollo 17 space craft
took a photograph known as “the Blue Marble.”

You know this picture — it was for a time the image
of the environmental movement, reproduced on posters,
t-shirts, flags, coffee mugs.

This was the first clear image of the planet Earth floating
in the inky black vastness of space.

“The Blue Marble” forever changed the way we conceive of our planet and our place
in the universe. All these years later the photo is still haunting,
humbling, and awe-inspiring —
the same qualities many of us ascribe to the beginning of the gospel of John.

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was *with* God
and the Word was God. He was in the beginning *with God*.”

John does not look to people or events to begin the story of the incarnation,
he doesn’t tell of a young pregnant woman and her fiancé,
he doesn’t paint a picture of shepherds in a field, serenaded by angels,
or magi following an unusually bright star.

John’s beginning is not confined by time or space or location;

John’s beginning is about *the* beginning — the beginning of the beginning,

the beginning of the universe, the beginning of all there is.
And what John tells us is that the very first beginning, and every beginning since,
has been and always will be about God who is not only creator
of all that is, but who has chosen to be **with** God's creation
in a profoundly tangible way — as a flesh and blood
human being, subject to the ecstasy and agony of human life.

In a Christmas article solicited by the *New York Times* years ago,
but ultimately deemed too theological to run in the paper,

Frederick Buechner asks the question “**How** is God with us?”

Yes, Christmas is the celebration of Emmanuel, God-with-us.

But *how* is this God with us and what does it all mean?

According to Buechner, “the claim that Christianity makes for Christmas
is that at a particular time and place God came to be with us himself.

When Quirinius was governor of Syria, in a town called Bethlehem,
a child was born...The One who inhabits eternity comes to dwell
in time. The One whom none can look upon and live
is delivered in a stable under the soft, indifferent gaze of cattle.

The Father of all mercies puts himself at our mercy.”

Buechner goes on, “For those who believe in the transcendence and total otherness
of God, it radically diminishes him. For those who do not believe in God,

it is the ultimate absurdity. For those who stand somewhere between
belief and unbelief, it challenges credulity in a new way...

[testing] humankind's whole view of what is possible and real.

Year after year the ancient tale of what happened is told —

raw, preposterous, holy —

and year after year the world in some measure stops to listen.”¹

It is one of the most remarkable things about the seasons of Advent and Christmas —

and the scriptures that go with them: they invite us to stop and listen.

Even if we only stop after a flurry of activity as we try to meet

the cultural demands of the season,

even if by the time we get to Christmas we are too tired to do anything **but** listen,

there is something about this time that causes humanity to hold still,

if just for a moment.

This is what we sing about in so many of our carols:

silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright;

O little town of Bethlehem, how **still** we see thee lie!;

Let all mortal flesh keep **silence...**

Christmas awakens in us an inclination to hold still, to listen.

For a moment we might actually look and feel like that blue marble of a planet

hanging in space, appearing for all the universe like a world

utterly quiet and calm and peaceful.

¹ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2019/12/16/weekly-sermon-illustration-emmanuel>

Even now, on Christmas Day,
in the midst of all the disorienting and discouraging news of the world,
we can hold still, take a breath, and listen
to the haunting, humbling, awe-inspiring mystery
of the beginning of John's gospel:

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...
and the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth."

To understand just how extraordinary a claim John is making,
right here at the start of his gospel, we first must understand what he meant
by the Word.

This is an English translation of the Greek word "logos" and,
not unlike Luke, John is building a bridge
between his Jewish and Gentile readers.

John's Jewish readers would have heard those words

"In the beginning, the Word..." and thought immediately
of the book of Genesis, the first line of their sacred scriptures:

"In the beginning, God created heaven and earth..."

They would have known that God created, not by waving a magic wand
or cooking up a brew of universe soup, but by speaking light into existence
with words, "Let there be light."

In the beginning, was the Word.

John's Gentile readers understood "Logos" to mean
the logic that permeates and structures the universe,
the divine reason that orders and gives meaning to everything that is.
Jews and Gentiles alike would have surely marveled at the claim John makes,
that in the birth of Jesus, the one, true God, the creator of all the universe,
who gives reason and order and meaning to all,
this God came to be with us, and not just to be with us,
but to be flesh and blood with us,
to live and work and love and suffer alongside us.

In a Christmas special of the British drama "Call the Midwife,"
set in London in the 1950s and 60s,
a young couple about to have their first baby is less concerned about the baby
and more about the father-to-be, who fought for the British in Korea
and came home afflicted with what we now call
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
He suffered terrible nightmares and flashbacks, and loud, unexpected noises
could send him into episodes of severe anxiety that would last for days.
After his young wife goes into labor, one of the midwives,
perhaps trying to distract her from her labor pains,
asks the mother-to-be about her husband's episodes.
"It gets him like this every now and then," the young wife says.
"Malaria brings it on...or bad things happening. We manage."

“You really understand him, don’t you,” says the midwife.

“He understands me,” the wife responds. “We do nice things together,
always did, ever since [we met] dancing.

Except when he went to Korea.

I always think if I could have gone, if it had been me too...

I could have shared the things that hurt him,
and then I could share the things that hurt him now.

The pain would be halved.

That’s what sharing does.

That’s what love does.”

Whatever else John’s beginning teaches us, may it first be this:

in every moment, in every circumstance, God is with us,
whether we reject it or accept, whether we ignore it,
or take the time to stop and notice.

God is with us:

sharing our pain that it may be just a fraction easier to bear;
sharing our joy too, that it may be a fraction more joyful.

As mundane as it can seem, we need Christmas again, every year.

We need the reminder that the miracle of a God-with-us is a subtle thing.

It looks like this:

an unusually bright star, a pinprick of light in the night sky;

shepherds in the field and wise ones on a journey
a pregnant young woman, tired and waiting;
a baby, sleeping the deep sleep of a newborn
tired out after his journey from womb to world;
a world suspended in space,
held in love by a creator who goes to extraordinary
lengths to reveal love and grace and truth.

The incarnation is the promise us that God is with us in all these things —
and in ALL things — from the mundane to the extraordinary.

To experience this with-us-God, we hold still, honor silence,
sit with the darkness long enough to see the tiniest pinprick of light.

We practice the presence of God,

whose Word is born anew within us and among us and for us in every moment.

To practice that presence, all we have to do today is to hold still just for a moment
— to allow ourselves to rest in the inky black darkness of space,

And then light the Christ candle as we

marvel and wonder at the good news of the gospel:

That Jesus is how much God loves us,

Jesus is how God comes to us to be with us

then, now, always.

Amen.

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