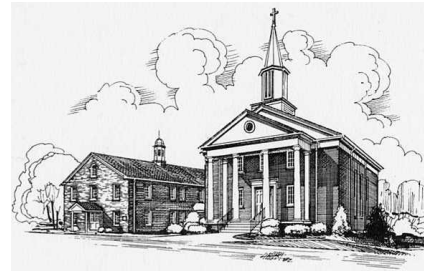


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
First Sunday after Christmas

All Years



Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Psalm 8

John 1:1-18

The Collect

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring
up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.
For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.
The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the
LORD,

and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Psalm 8

8:1 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

8:2 Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

8:3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

8:4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

8:5 Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

8:6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

8:7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

8:8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

8:9 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

John 1:1-18

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. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

SERMON

I really don't mean to be Brother Buzzkill, but when Christmas time comes around, I'm bedeviled by a mental image of the Christ Child, wrapped in swaddling clothes, struggling to walk into his destiny while on his shoulders are balanced Santa Claus and eight tiny reindeer, a sled, the Grinch, countless Whos down in Whoville, the entire fourth quarter economy of this country and several others, and a metric ton of television programs offering “the true meaning of Christmas”.

Christmas, and our response to it, is this awful amalgam of traditions and Scripture that so often serves just to confuse and distract us. Everybody likes babies, and everybody is touched by babies in harrowing circumstances, so we have this wonderful story, offered to us

each year as the true meaning of Christmas, and we feel great about it. One of my Methodist colleagues at the Chapel of St. Arbuck's reminded me this week that Christmas isn't about a feeling. It's about the beginning of a totally unprecedented story. This babe has come to offer His life for the salvation of the world. You simply cannot carve out the good parts of the Christmas story from the harrowing parts of the Easter story. It is one story, the one we exist to tell. How are we to understand it?

The truth is, we can't. We don't have the language for it. The thundering words of the opening of John's great Gospel certainly gave it a shot.

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.

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.

But, even this – the latest and some would say most nuanced – of the Gospels, ultimately fails. The Incarnation, like the Resurrection to come, is a mystery, unavailable to human reason. How in the world are we to put into human language something that is unavailable to human reason? Our sin is that we think human reason can, given enough time, understand everything and that our human language can explain everything. We actually sew ourselves into a shroud constructed of our own human limitations and imagine from that warm dark-

ness that nothing outside our shroud has any meaning or reality. Until we get over that by confession and prayer, we're going to be adrift in a Christmas sea.

As we discussed last week, we are much more comfortable with the thought that God “lives” in the church house than we are with the idea that He will go about in His creation as He wills. In the same way, we are a lot more comfortable with the God that our language describes than with the awesome reality of the Word through whom all things came into being. We have nailed God in the church house and confined Him within our thoughts and will thank Him to stay there. Not to put too fine a point on it, our world has lost the ability to be astonished and resents it when it is suggested.

Of course, things go seriously awry when my image of God is different from your image of God. One of us

must be a heretic! And since it is unthinkable that I might arrogantly be trying to appropriate God for my own ends, the heretic must be you! How many of you have received emails or Facebook posts or been part of conversations in which someone explains to you that Allah is a different God and that those who worship Allah are devil worshipers? Allah is Arabic for “God” and neither “Allah” nor “God” is God’s name. The Jews are more honest about it and refer to God as “haShem” which literally means “the Name”, refusing to pronounce it for it is too holy to be used in common speech. We need a little – alright a lot – more humility when it comes to speaking about things we do not and can not understand, things too wonderful for us. We need to regain the ability to be astonished and rendered speechless by the miracle of the Incarnation.

What might be a more honest approach to these wonders? National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* interviewed British musician Nick Lowe this week, and he said something that has really stuck with me. It's a little shocking, so try to listen to what he is saying, even through your shock at the words he used. He was asked if church going and the religious parts of Christmas formed a part of his childhood. He answered:

I have a rather complicated relation to it. I have all the equipment to make me rather devout, I would almost say. I'm very interested in religion and different religions. I know quite a lot about it. I love gospel music, and I love going to churches, but the one drawback is that I don't actually believe in God. It is quite a handicap. As Craig Brown ... said, "I'm the sort of person that can be reduced to tears in an empty church and feel like I'm the CEO of the devil's organization in a full one." I tend to feel like that, as well.

I love empty churches and going into them and looking around, but I'm not a churchgoer at all. I've got something going on, but ... I don't know what it is.

He's got "something going on" but he doesn't "know what it is". Church, that is the most honest confession I have ever heard. He hasn't the language to express what is going on, and freely admits it. As a consequence, he cannot relate to those who have sewn themselves into a shroud made of their own understanding of God's reality. I'm reminded of a Presbyterian pastor that tried to explain to me why people wishing to join his church must apply through Session by telling me that otherwise, "You'd wind up with a lot of sinners in the Congregation." It is unquestionably more agreeable to stick to what "everybody knows" than it is to forge a real relationship with a God too wondrous for our understand-

ing but it is ultimately dishonest.

Of course, even if we acknowledge that we can't understand God's ways, that won't stop us from imagining all sorts of alternate explanations which are comfortably tangible and understandable. Nevertheless, right in the middle of the muddle human reason has made of this singular, unprecedented event, there is a real, honest-to-goodness, factual baby born to a woman from a village nobody of any consequence had ever heard of somewhere in Roman fly-over country and suddenly, the world is no longer as it was. Right in the middle of our muddle, foreign kings will arrive knowing nothing of Jewish practices or prophecy and inexplicably confirm that something is going on. They don't know quite what it is but it has so overwhelmed them that they have come to see and offer precious gifts.

If our world had retained, or could recapture, its ability to be astonished, it would be floored by the Epiphany – the visit of the Magi – but alas! we tell the story truly, but the world in which we live has lost its emotional connection to it. We of the modern world are too soon smart, and too late wise!

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.

The ancient story we tell celebrates the birth of a child who entered the world in a stable, whose parents were impoverished nobodies, and who grew up to serve the

poor, heal the sick, and comfort the outcast. It is a tale 2,000 years old, yet never dated – bearing a powerful message of humility and compassion that our world has yet to comprehend even dimly, no matter how often it professes to worship its teacher. It is a tale whose impact upon those who confess that it is too wonderful for human reason is immeasurable and we know this because those so confessing have upheld its compelling essence over the centuries, regardless of their identification with any spiritual creed.

No, I don't want to be Brother Buzzkill or some other variety of Grinch this Christmas. I had a great time watching Vivie open her presents. What I do want to do is to emphasize that as great as all our traditions around Christmas are, there is only one story, and this is only the opening scene. The story we will walk through from

now until Resurrection Sunday is of a piece, indivisible. It is a story of the greatest love imaginable, that the Creator would take on flesh even as a tiny baby, and walk among us so that we would see that our way of doing things leads only to death and destruction.

Can we hear the child's cry this year?

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Return to [The Lectionary Page.](#)