

First Sunday after Christmas

Year C

RCL



Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7
Psalm 147:13-21
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.*

Psalm 147:13-21

Laudate Dominum

13 Worship the LORD, O Jerusalem; *
praise your God, O Zion;

14 For he has strengthened the bars of your gates; *
he has blessed your children within you.

15 He has established peace on your borders; *
he satisfies you with the finest wheat.

16 He sends out his command to the earth, *
and his word runs very swiftly.

17 He gives snow like wool; *
he scatters hoarfrost like ashes.

18 He scatters his hail like bread crumbs; *
who can stand against his cold?

19 He sends forth his word and melts them; *
he blows with his wind, and the waters flow.

20 He declares his word to Jacob, *
his statutes and his judgments to Israel.

21 He has not done so to any other nation; *
to them he has not revealed his judgments.
Hallelujah!

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

Every Christmas, just when everybody around me is getting into the “happiest time of the year”, I get glum. The air is filled with beloved carols, the kids are excited, Santa is everywhere, the to-do lists are overflowing, but I’m bedeviled by the 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 an amalgam of traditions and Scripture that often serves only to confuse and distract us. Everyone likes babies, so we feel great about this wonderful story of the child offered to

us each year as the true meaning of Christmas. In fact, we get so carried away by the birth of this baby that we can't see the burden He carries. This babe has come to offer His life for the salvation of the world. You simply cannot carve out the fun parts of the Christmas story from the harrowing parts of the Easter story. They form one story. How are we to understand it? The truth is, we can't. We don't have the language for it and perhaps that's why we have covered this child, the Savior of the world, with Santa and Christmas trees, so that we need not consider what is to come. The thundering words of John's great Gospel try to bring clarity to the burden this child bears.

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.

No lowing cattle. No romanticized manger. None of the things that make Christmas the happiest time of the year. In their place is a tender child, burdened with the future of the world, but more than that for this child is the creative Word.

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.

Even John's Gospel – the latest and some would say most nuanced – of the Gospels, ultimately fails to convey the burden this child carries, even apart from the traditions we pile onto him to hide the horror of the

cross from our fearful imaginations. We sew ourselves into a shroud constructed of our own human limitations and imagine from that warm darkness that nothing outside our shroud has any meaning or reality. We are a lot more comfortable with a vulnerable and innocent child, however burdened He may be, than we are with the awesome reality of the Word through whom all things came into being. In our arrogance, we have lost the ability to be astonished and resent it when it is suggested. 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 by the miracle of the Incarnation.

What might be a more honest approach to these wonders? National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* once interviewed British musician Nick Lowe and he said some-

thing 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 senses “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. It is unquestionably more agreeable to stick to what “I’ve always been taught” than it is to forge a real relationship with a God too wondrous for our understanding but such an approach is ultimately dishonest. The only honest way to approach the Incarnation is by first humbly confessing our inability to do so. We can only stand in awe at that beyond our humanity.

Of course, even if we acknowledge that we can't understand God's ways, 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, how differently we might react to this story, but alas! the world in which we live has lost its emotional connection to the story. We can't see for looking.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.
He was in the world, and the world came into be-

ing 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 identifica-

tion with any spiritual creed.

No, I don't want to be the Grinch this Christmas. I had a great time watching Vivie and Holden open their 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 give us His son 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 burdened child's cry this year?

AMEN

BENEDICTION

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.

The salvation of the world is burden enough for the child. Show forth His story always. Try not to bury it in human traditions, however well-loved.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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

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