



North Shore  
**Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

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**“Other Christmas Stories”**  
**Rev. Julie Sheridan-Smith – Preaching**  
***Galatians 4:4-7, John 1:1-8***  
*December 27, 2020*  
*First Sunday of Christmas*

**In the Fullness of Time      Galatians 4:4-7**

Illuminating God,

As we approach Your Word this morning, inspire in us the ability to hear your desire and intention for us today. Help us to receive, through your Holy Spirit, understanding of your word. Amen

The Apostle Paul offers us a Christmas Story in Galatian’s chapter 4: 4-7 saying...

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 Word Became Flesh      John 1: 1-18**

And we hear again of the beginning - yet always present God from the first chapter of John’s Gospel, verses 1-18, the Christmas story of The Word Became Flesh. Listen for God’s Word,

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup> The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup> He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who received him,

who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> (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.'") <sup>16</sup> From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup> The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> 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.

Amen

### Other Christmas Stories

In other years we may have probably joked more about how the Christmas stories from Matthew and Luke get mashed together in children's pageants, or for that matter in our own memories. Matthew's gospel jumps from Joseph's concern about what to do about Mary and her pregnancy...answered by an Angel's two point go ahead:

1. This is meant to be, and

2. "you are to name him Jesus."

Which he does, following a succinct mention that Mary gave birth to a son. Matthew's gospel then leaps to the visit of the Wise Men *sometime* after Jesus' birth.

Luke's gospel fills in beautifully, telling of the journey to Bethlehem, the lack of housing for Mary and Joseph, the child's manger bed, the Angels filling the air with glory and peace, and the Shepherds, overcome with awe, being the first to tell the story of what they saw... and then Mary's heart, listening in as it was told to others.

There is a fullness to the story of Jesus' birth that comes from drawing both of these Christmas stories together. The vulnerability of all of the people in them speaks to us; both Mary and Joseph risking reputations and expectations, shepherds standing in fear confronted by an angel, yet willing to go, see, and then tell others.

And perhaps, because they are *people* it is *possible* to see something of ourselves in their actions. Although, probably a lot harder for us to imagine ourselves as angels though.

Yet I think the image of vulnerability that strikes us most is that of the child. I have thought a bit about that lately, and commented on it with you a few weeks ago. That there is something about a vulnerable baby that must be cared for by others that opens the way for us to love God back.

We are so familiar with the Christmas stories from Matthew and Luke, but most of the New Testament *does not* talk about Jesus' birth, either at all, or at least not in this way. And so, lately I have also been particularly aware of the other and *combined* Christmas stories. Of course, in the Bible Studies and Book Group we have certainly talked about the different beginnings Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John start with, and why each author told it in the way

that they did. But the combined stories have stirred my heart again to wonder about, not only in a studied way, but more like a child asking, “Why did the Word – or God - *become* flesh” And why then in the form of a child? God did not *need* to do *that*...but maybe God did?

It is certainly ok to be awed by God. How can we not be...when we see something in God’s creation that takes our breath away and causes us to wonder. And it does *seem* a little scandalous to think of God as *needing* anything. But when those moments come when God seems distant, even to the point of not noticing or caring...when God has slipped from *our* grasp, these Christmas stories, these Christmas *truths*, remind us of the lengths God does go to save us from *not* knowing him.

I draw on these two readings this morning, one from Paul’s letter to the Church and the other from John’s gospel as “Other Christmas Stories.”

We don’t know what, if any birth stories Paul knew. None of the Gospels had yet to be written when Paul was traveling and writing. This small portion - from his letter to the Galatian church is Paul’s Christmas story which simply says something about - in the, “fullness of time, God sent his son, born of woman...” Which isn’t meant to put a date or specific time marker on it, but indicates that this is the beginning of a new era marked by a tangible, relatable closeness to God wrapped up in the name or title Abba...a name for Father that *we* would recognize more as daddy or papa, spoken with love and familiarity. And according to Paul this is now ours to use. *We* are the children who know God this well.

And then John’s gospel both telescopes out beyond time, before creation, to a *beginning* which is wrapped up with unquenchable hope. The light that will *not be* overcome. John then brings us back to earth with, the Word became Flesh.

As Adam Hamilton wrote, as I noted in our Call to Meditation in the order of worship, “Light shines in the darkness; the Word became flesh. The One who once shouted, ‘Let there be light!’ came to us in Jesus. This is the Incarnation!” This is the Christmas story.

If you were with us on Christmas Eve, you heard the reading from John’s gospel, or part of it as it was read leading into the darkening of lights and hands raised holding candles as Silent Night was sung. It is a culminating moment for Christmas Eve that I think many of us find moving for a variety of reasons; a sense of being one, raising our lights together, a feeling of peace as words and music wrap around us, a hope for memories we want to create for our children. And all in all, it is a tangible declaration that we make in response to the Christmas message, as we light our candles saying yes!, God’s love for us is *more*.

But I wanted to return to it for today, because that stirring of love we feel in the midst of Christmas with all the trappings we usually place around it; the music, lights, decorations, cards, gifts, the Giving Tree, the child in the manger...these things that we hold onto as containers for our love and hope, are meant for so much more than a *season* of Advent or a couple weeks of Christmas.

John's gospel- The Word became flesh and lived among us, folds together in that small phrase, the full scope of the Christmas story. The vulnerable child who we can so easily give our heart to, the man who lived among us, that we trust - who feels what we feel, who experiences what we are up against. And because we believe this, we look to him for leading, teaching, healing, guiding, redirecting...And then of course, there is the man that became flesh, taking on injustice, pain, and love *so large* that at times we want to look away from that image of the cross. And yet by that "grace upon grace" - that we simply need to receive, we *know* God, because God chose to be known! That is the Christmas story.

Last year I also preached on this Sunday, the Sunday directly after Christmas and before the New Year. And I read this poem by Howard Thurman called, *The Work of Christmas* that Sunday too, but like the beginning of John's gospel, I feel it is worth repeating and heard again as we come the close of 2020 and begin a New Year - with the reminder that not only is God's light living among us, but that same light said to us, "*You are the light of the world...*"

Thurman wrote:

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 flocks,  
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 the people,  
To make music in the heart.

We know that especially this year, so many *have* stepped in - even more fully, to the work of Christmas; reaching out though cards and phone calls, stopping by for visits while standing outside in the cold in order to do so.

And I believe God's heart is beating through so many who stretch beyond their capacity to support healing health in extraordinary circumstances. We see the food bin outside *repeatedly* filled by people of the church and this neighborhood, and the bags of lunches prepared to be given away... and we know there are so many more, creative ways that people of good heart are finding to offer.

Adam Hamilton also said, "*We are God's plan for changing the world...we are not passive recipients of God's love and grace.*"

Yes, there are so many things about this year that we want to get past, and move on from - to begin the next part of *our* story, but the fact is that this "Work of Christmas" is very much a part of how we get there.

Let us live *all* these Christmas stories *all* year long.            Amen