

December 31, 2023
The First Sunday after Christmas
Grace, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Psalms 147

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

John 1:1-18

In the name of the Incarnate God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One Christmas morning many years ago, I made my way through the streets of San Francisco to the inner-city parish of St. John the Evangelist, where I was the Director of Music and Liturgy. After the late night before with all the excitement of Christmas Eve, children, food and drink, and the elaborate midnight service, I was tired to my bones, yet I looked forward to the smaller, simpler morning service.

As usual, the streets that Christmas morning were nearly deserted. Most families were at home, still asleep or sitting around in their pajamas, opening presents. My normal drive to church took me under a freeway overpass. As I approached the freeway, an odd sight caught my attention; and it made me look again.

It was a pink aluminum Christmas tree. About three feet high, it was set up on a small patch of weedy grass between the bridge and the onramp to the freeway. There amid the blown trash and dirt and grime of an inner-city overpass was this strange, glittering piece of brightness. It made me smile, and it filled my heart.

As is too typical in urban areas, under that bridge where the steel girders meet the slope of the concrete, out of the wind and rain, several people had made their home. From a variety of backgrounds and for a variety of reasons, they had found themselves living as best they could on the streets. Clearly, someone had repurposed that pink aluminum Christmas tree from somewhere and planted it there as their own celebration of Christmas joy.

A garish pink metallic sermon: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Today is the first Sunday after Christmas Day. It is also the Seventh Day of Christmas – you know, the day with the swimming swans. Last Monday, on Christmas Day, I heard a radio news reader say, "Now that the Christmas Season is coming to a close..." And I thought, well ... actually, we've only just begun.

Despite the fact that the Magi are getting closer, today we don't hear any of what we generally think of as Christmas stories. No Mary or Joseph, angels, shepherds, or

Wise Men. Come to think of it, where is that sweet little baby? This morning, we just have “In the beginning...” Ho, ho, ho-hum. It feels a little anticlimactic.

But, what if? What if we could hear John’s prologue not as something egg-headed and airy-fairy? What if we heard it as something, well, unexpected? Like a pink aluminum Christmas tree? Surprising, maybe even tilting a little, but shining in the darkness. What if?

So, let’s go back to the beginning. In the Beginning, John says, the Word of God was present when everything was created. Here’s a little demo of how God went about things. (*Pencil demo*) God didn’t create, say, a pencil by thinking about a pencil, with a nice pink eraser on the end; God simply said, “pencil.”

Genesis tells us that God *said*, “Let there be . . .” and there was. God spoke day and night, heaven and earth, land and sea, plants and animals, and humanity into being. Jesus, the Word of God, is God’s say-ing, God’s utterance. Jesus is God’s eternal speech, which existed before anything else and called everything into being.

Already in the late 4th century, a poet named Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348-413), was making a singable version of John’s Prologue. We just sang it, “Of the Father’s Love Begotten.” One of the stanzas that was omitted from our Hymnal reads:

*At his word the words were framèd;
he commanded; it was done:
heaven and earth and depths of ocean
in their threefold order one;
all that grows beneath the shining
of the moon and burning sun,
evermore and evermore!*

John the Evangelist then turns to the role of John the Baptist as a witness to the Light that had been prophesied and sung about since the beginning of time. Again, Prudentius:

*This is he whom seers in old time
chanted of with one accord;
whom the voices of the prophets
promised in their faithful word;
now he shines, the long expected,
let creation praise its Lord,
evermore and evermore!*

In the Incarnation, God’s eternal Word was spoken into our world and within human history in a particular person. In other words, Jesus is God’s sermon preached to

us in the living out of a human life. In becoming flesh, God dignified *us* – our flesh, as frail as it is. Jesus became the enfleshment of what God has been trying to get us to hear since the beginning of time.

And what is God saying to us? First, God says, “This is who I am!” God speaks in Jesus as in no other way; not as in the Bible, not as in nature, not as by human reason or accomplishment, not as by listening to inner voices. Jesus tells us who God is. Second, in Jesus, God tells us who we were created to be.

In Jesus we hear that God heals, forgives, embraces outcasts, and prays for those who hurt him. In Jesus we hear that God understands betrayal and denial, suffering and pain, humiliation and death. In Jesus we hear that God brings victory over despair, defeat, destruction, and death; and that God wills to share that victory with us – with humanity and with creation.

God the Creator takes on flesh, our flesh, and becomes one of us, lives among us. In the midst of our darkness, in the midst of the chaos of our lives, Jesus comes announcing life and not death. Later in John’s gospel, we will hear Jesus say, “I come that you may have life and have it abundantly.” In and through Jesus, we are shown how we are meant to be, full of life, full of hope, full of joy. God has poured upon us the new light of God’s incarnate Word -- and we are called to let this light shine forth in our lives.

The God who takes on our flesh does not ignore the darkness but shines in the very midst of it. And sometimes that shining light looks a great deal like a pink aluminum Christmas tree!

But the Christmas spirit will fade – maybe it has already for you. What then? Do you have to wait until the 2024 shopping season cranks up to remember the stories and the meaning of Christmas? How do you remember that you are a beloved Child of God throughout the year? How do you remember that Jesus is the mirror of the best that God has dreamed for you? Where do you look for the light? How will you recognize it when you see it?

To help with these questions, let us turn to the wisdom of Howard Thurman (1899-1981). Thurman was an author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader. A prominent Black religious figure, he served as chaplain at both Howard and Boston Universities. In 1944, in partnership with Alfred Fisk, he founded the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco. Thurman's theology of radical nonviolence influenced and shaped a generation of civil rights activists, including Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Work of Christmas¹

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 teach the nations,
 To bring Christ to all,
 To make music in the heart.

"To make music in the heart..." Howard Thurman thought that we should always hold some space in our lives for the singing of angels...[that] life is saved by the singing of angels.²

In the coming months, if you want to find the Light of Christmas, if you are looking for the Light of Christ, you will find it if you search among those for whom Christ came. And in doing so, that same Light of Christ, which has been kindled in your heart, like the song of angels, will shine forth for others. Just imagine, you might be someone else's pink aluminum Christmas tree.

And the Word became Flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Amen.

¹ Found in *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations* (Harper & Row 1st Edition, 1973), p. 28.

² "The Singing of Angels," in *The Mood of Christmas*, p. 8.