

CHRISTMAS EVE HOMILY

John 1:1-14

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on Christmas Eve at the 8 PM service of Lessons and Carols, December 24, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that light, but was sent to bear witness of that light. That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.

But as many as received him, to them gave the power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

As I did this past Sunday, I turn again this evening to the reading my wife and I have recently been doing of the Scriptures, one chapter at a time, each evening. What strikes me about our fresh, un-scholared reading of the King James Version is how, in the earliest days of the creation of humanity, God is committed to making sure that the human creature survives despite our habitually misguided attempts to wrest power from God himself.

- The first man and first woman seek to acquire knowledge reserved only for God¹ as they partake from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.² God responds by, among other things, instituting the pain of labor both in childbearing and in tilling the soil,³ while still re-issuing his call that the human race “be fruitful and multiply,”⁴ a command God repeats four more times in Genesis.
- When their offspring Cain kills his brother Abel in an argument over whose offering to God is superior,⁵ God banishes Cain to the land of Nod, east of Eden. God then places a mark on Cain’s forehead, not so that Cain will be forever branded with a “A Scarlet M,” but so that no one will come upon him and take his life. In an action we can only call merciful, an action that lies beyond what we

¹ Genesis 3:6-7.

² This had been prohibited in Genesis 2:16-17.

³ Genesis 3:15-19.

⁴ This is first introduced before the Fall in Genesis 1:28; it is repeated after the Flood in Genesis 8:17, 9:1, and 9:7; and it is repeated to Jacob in Genesis 35:11.

⁵ This first act of violence in the Bible occurs in Genesis 4:1-8; in Genesis 4:4-5, the narrator gives no reason for God’s choice of Abel’s offering over Cain’s.

human beings would normally be willing to do, God protects Cain from the fate that Cain has inflicted on his brother Abel.⁶

- A few chapters later, Abraham, now pushing 86, is eleven years⁷ into the promise of an offspring that has still not been produced with his wife Sarah. Abraham takes to heart Sarah's suggestion that he father a child by her servant Hagar.⁸ The narrator of Genesis fills more parchment pages covering the early life and fate of the half-foreign child born to that union – Ishmael – and of Hagar than the narrator later spends describing the birth and early life of Isaac, the heir.⁹ “Ishmael shall be a *great* nation,” God says, “*though* Isaac shall be the heir.”¹⁰ God's commitment extends to the entirety of the human race, not simply the people of Israel God has called to be his own through Abraham and Sarah.¹¹

In the fits and starts of human faithfulness and unfaithfulness, noble aspiration and ignoble cowardice, reaching toward God and fleeing from God, more often than not it is God who take the steps to ensure that humanity *survive* into the future, to place us in a position to inherit and claim the promises God has given us, and to respond to those promises by being fruitful and multiplying, by spreading out over the face of the earth, by exercising dominion over all creation with the work of our hands and minds, and by serving as a catalyst to pass God's blessing on to all people and nations generation to generation.

As theologically challenging as God's action toward the human race appears at times – with the violence God seems to condone and the suffering God seems not to intervene to end – the overall witness of scripture reflects a long-standing and never-ending commitment on the part of God to human flourishing under the *sun* that rises above our heads every day and the *stars* that illumine the night sky and serve as our points of aspiration and our tools of navigation.

This is the God who emerges from a reading of the 39 chapters of the Old Testament.

II.

And it is this short background that leads us to *this night* – the night in which God continues his unfailing commitment that the human race and the entire created order in which we reside be *redeemed*, that the pain and injustice we experience be *rectified*, that we be *restored* to *reflect* the beauty God has bestowed upon us as created in his image, and that we *exercise* the honored responsibility with which God has charged us as *bearers of that image* in and into the world.

God's commitment culminates in his holy and undivided Self – Father, Son, Holy Spirit – “becoming flesh and dwelling among us... full of grace and truth,” in the person of Jesus Christ, “the Word made flesh.”

This fullness of grace and truth extends

- *From Christ's pre-existence as Word with God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”*

⁶ Genesis 4:15-16.

⁷ In Genesis 12:4, Abraham is said to be 75 years old (at the time of his call); in 16:15, when Ishmael is born, Abraham is 86.

⁸ Genesis 16.

⁹ The fate of Hagar and Ishmael are described in Genesis 16:1-6 and 21:8-21; while Isaac's birth is announced in Genesis 21:1-7.

¹⁰ This is my paraphrase of Genesis 21:12-13.

¹¹ Genesis 12:1-4.

- To his final word on the cross – “It is finished”¹²
- To his gift of the Holy Spirit to us as Comforter, Advocate, Counselor, and Witness
- To his promised return in glory when God will “make all things new”¹³ and “God shall wipe away all tears from [our] eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”¹⁴

Christ’s

- Pre-existence with God as Word
- Birth
- Life
- Death
- Resurrection
- Gift of the Spirit
- Ascension
- And Promised Return

Are all part of what theologian Fleming Rutledge calls

...God’s *new creative* act,
[God’s] *great reclamation* project
That is *even greater* than the Creation itself,
Because whereas we are “wonderfully *created*,”
We are “yet more wonderfully *restored*.”¹⁵

That is what we celebrate this night.

III.

Restoration is something I have been sensing and feeling almost every day at Westminster this Fall, as we have finally emerged from COVID about as much as we ever are going to emerge.

- I felt restoration the first Sunday of our full schedule in September when, as some of you who follow Facebook saw, I laid out my clothes for church the night before, like a child excited about the start of school the next day.
- I have felt it nearly every time I have seen one of you for the first time in a long time, coming into the Sanctuary back from COVID, an experience of reunion (and hopefully memory of name) that continues to happen as people long away come back to a worship service this season.

¹² John 19:30.

¹³ Revelation 21:5.

¹⁴ Revelation 21:4.

¹⁵ Fleming Rutledge, *Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 18-19.

- I have felt it in the tremendous stewardship challenge you have accepted to invest in the future of our church with our current staff, and the results we are receiving of that commitment so far.
- I felt it a few weeks ago in an energetic, almost raucous meeting at a home on a Friday morning with some terrific people who were fired up about their discovery and involvement in Westminster, and who peppered me with questions about what I think about heaven and hell and almost everything in between!
- I have felt it when a twelve-year-old boy whose parents I have known at Westminster since long before his and his twin sister's birth, played a postlude on the organ during one of our services this Fall, and was not deterred when the organ sort of "belched" just as he was getting started.
- I have felt it in the baptisms of infants we have been able to re-institute in this chancel, and in an adult baptism last week, special in the Presbyterian Church because of its infrequency in our tradition.
- I have felt it as I have witnessed many of you make hard decisions in your vocation, in your marriages, in your immediate or extended families, in your rearing of children and youth or in your being children and youth. I have seen it in decisions some of you have had to make which sometimes involve *welcome*, sometimes involve extending *support* or *rescue*, and sometimes involve *the setting of boundaries*, a gentle but firm "no" that always involves both *courage* and a difficult *commitment* to the long-term well-being of someone we love.
- And I have felt it we witness people around the world standing up with courage and heroism, for the freedom and equality and dignity and self-governance we so value in our own ideals – women in Iran, protestors in China, citizens and soldiers of Ukraine, capped by the courage of their President, one of the most heroic public figures in recent memory.

IV.

At a recent Sunday morning service, a member of the church, who from previous conversations I know struggles with the state of the world in ways many of us do, stopped suddenly as he was going quickly into worship, turned around, and pivoted toward me as I stood down near the elevator greeting people. It was the first time I had seen him in six months, other than to wave across the Sanctuary his first Sunday back from the home in the woods he built with his hands where he and his family spend their summers.

As he stopped and pivoted, he said he had just come back from Colorado with several men who before COVID gathered each year to hunt, fish, camp, explore the mountains. One of their number has developed memory issues, and they wanted to take him back to the mountains when it would still be safe and he still might remember the trip.

We were driving through Wolf Creek Pass, 11,000 feet altitude. From the highway we saw something I had never seen before: a tight funnel shaped cloud of fog, moving slowly up and down, and slowly across the mountain. As we moved toward it, it would expand and contract, expand and contract. When we got closer, we at first thought it was the frozen breath of a herd of cattle, but when we got within 100 yards, we realized it was a heard of elk, breathing in, breathing out, expanding, contracting. It was beautiful.

And then he got his bulletin and went into worship.

What would prompt a person to stop suddenly and – almost dead in his tracks – and share with one of his ministers his experience of sight he had seen on a mountain for the first time, even though he had spent decades of his life in the mountains? What would make him remember that experience as he was racing to catch up with his family and enter the Sanctuary in which he worships?

*And we beheld his glory [says John],
The glory as of the only-begotten of the Father...*

Was it a sense of glory he and his friends had beheld that led this man to anticipate glory as he entered the Sanctuary where he worships and turn and share the story with the first available minister he saw?

*And the Word was made flesh,
And dwelt among us,
And we beheld his glory,
The glory as of the only-begotten of the Father,
Full of grace and truth.*

Glory. Grace. Truth.

That is what this evening is about.