

This message was prepared by Rev. Pamela Graf Short for the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church for Christmas Sunday, December thirtieth, in the year of our LORD two thousand and eighteen. It is based on the texts below:

Isaiah 52:7-10

52:7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

52:8 Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion.

52:9 Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

52:10 The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Psalm 98

98:1 O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.

98:2 The LORD has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

98:3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

98:4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

98:5 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody.

98:6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.

98:7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it.

98:8 Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy

98:9 at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12)

1:1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,

1:2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.

1:3 He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

1:4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

1:5 For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"?

1:6 And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."

1:7 Of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire."

1:8 But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.

1:9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."

1:10 And, "In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands;

1:11 they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing;

1:12 like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end."

John 1:1-14

1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

1:2 He was in the beginning with God.

1:3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being

1:4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

1:5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

1:6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

1:7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

1:8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

1:9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

1:10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

1:11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

1:12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,

1:13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

1:14 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.

Our Bible story for today, is a rich and inviting poem that calls us into light and texts us an invitation to be receive an inheritance of glory and grace.

The story precedes even Genesis 1:1 where we hear

“in the beginning God created...”

Before even that happens, John tells us

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

Before all that is, is God.

This God choses to be identified as Word—

or in Greek: Logos.

Logos is where we get the word “logo”:

A simple and clear representation;

something meant to get your attention and draw you in;

something that summaries in a single picture your person or organization or vision.

According to the Gospel of John,

if you want to know God, take a look at Jesus.

Take a look at The Word.

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

Something about the very nature of God involves speech, language, communication.

In the beginning was the Communicator

and the Communicator was with God

and the Communicator was God.

The God described in the Gospel of John flies in the face of our notions of a god who is silent,

distant,

disconnected from our world.

No.

This God is chatty,

taking up conversations with whoever will listen; speaking truth to whomever will receive it.

Not quite hearing God? God comes a little closer.

In John 1:14 we are told

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

The word “dwelt” means “tent”.

The Word became flesh

and pitched a tent right here in the middle of creation.

The tent was a human body

and the human body became the logo of a God who wants to be seen and heard and known and loved.

God takes on skin and bones and eyes and ears.

God takes on a heart of flesh that beats along with your heart;

a respiratory system that breathes the same air you breathe;

a stomach that gets hungry like your stomach

and toes that wiggle like your toes.

God could have arrived as a fully grown human, but no.
God comes as we all come:
through the womb of a woman.
God shows up as a babe in a barn, naked and in need of being held.
I beg you not to rush to the grown up God,
but to dwell in Christmastide beside the God of the manger.
Consider for a moment the infant Christ as the logo of God.
What does this logo tell you about who God is?

The Communicator comes and the first thing that is communicated is a newborn baby's cry; a wail.
How do we understand God differently if we hear:
In the beginning was the Wailing and the Wailing was with God and the Wailing was God.
In the beginning was the Cry and the Cry was with God and the Cry was God.
The Wailing One reveals a God whose power is held in the capacity to pierce the night with a birthing cry.

God chooses a logo that is totally dependent on human affection in order to thrive.
In Isaiah we read "The LORD has bared God's holy arm before the eyes of all the nations".
And what do these arms look like?
Infant arms reaching toward the face of humanity.
God, the risk taker, places stakes that there will be at least one or two humans in the world
that will hold God close and nurture what is needed in order for this logo to survive and be seen and heard so
that "all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God."
(Isaiah 52:10)

And of course the God of the manger insists on a logo that holds God's passions:
Surely at the manger we see a God close to the poor and the lowly.
If King Herod or Governor Quirinius or Caesar Augustus would have arrived at the inn,
surely the innkeeper would have made room for them.
But God sneaks in among the poor and no one moves aside to make a place for this tiny holy family.
Likewise the God of the manger chooses stable animals to be the first witnesses of the incarnation.
By doing so, God communicates that God has arrived not only for humanity, but for all of creation.

Rudyard Kipling was very much aware of this when he wrote a Christmas Eve poem.

EDDI, priest of St. Wilfrid
In his chapel at Manhood End,
Ordered a midnight service
For such as cared to attend.

But the Saxons were keeping Christmas,
And the night was stormy as well.
Nobody came to service,
Though Eddi rang the bell.

'Wicked weather for walking,'
Said Eddi of Manhood End.
'But I must go on with the service
For such as care to attend.

The altar-lamps were lighted, –
An old marsh-donkey came,
Bold as a guest invited,
And stared at the guttering flame.

The storm beat on at the windows,
The water splashed on the floor,
And a wet, yoke-weary bullock
Pushed in through the open door.

'How do I know what is greatest,
How do I know what is least?
That is My Father's business,'
Said Eddi, Wilfrid's priest.

'But – three are gathered together –
Listen to me and attend.
I bring good news, my brethren!'
Said Eddi of Manhood End.

And he told the Ox of a Manger
And a Stall in Bethlehem,
And he spoke to the Ass of a Rider,
That rode to Jerusalem.

They steamed and dripped in the chancel,
They listened and never stirred,
While, just as though they were Bishops,
Eddi preached them The Word,

Till the gale blew off on the marshes
And the windows showed the day,
And the Ox and the Ass together
Wheeled and clattered away.

And when the Saxons mocked him,
Said Eddi of Manhood End,
'I dare not shut His chapel
On such as care to attend.'

Yes, the God of the manger speaks humility into a world where arrogance lives and reigns and has its being. Too often I want to meet condescension with condescension or haughtiness with haughtiness, but the God of the manger comes with a confidence so sure that no outward trappings are necessary and no inward swagger is present.

Like Eddi of Manhood End,
the God of the manger comes with a humility that appears very odd to the cultural elite.
Foolish even.
But humility cares little about appearances,
rather it is very curious about the other and ready to seek understanding from the earthiest of all creatures.

Thomas Brodie offers this reflection: “To inquire about John’s theology is like asking about the meaning of a symphony. The meaning, Beethoven would say, is not in talking about it, but in listening to it. In the case of the gospel, the meaning lies in living it.”

And so it is with the God of the manger,
the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us.
Apparently for God to understand the human symphony, God decided to live it.
For us to understand the divine symphony,
for us to see the glory of it,
to receive the grace of it,
to give it a standing ovation clapping in holy service
we must stay for a while at the manger;
we must live into the Truth that is still crying out to be held.

Now may the God of the manger
The One who wails for our world
Reach for you
with arms of holy love
Pierce your heart
with cries of grace
And clap for you in
wonder, glory, light and joy
Now and forevermore.
Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Amen

http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_eddi.htm

Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John, A Literary and Theological Commentary*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 55.