

"God With Us"

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

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own,^[c] and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

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

(John 1:1-18)

When we typically hear this passage, the world around us looks a little different. We usually hear this when there is a peaceful quiet intermingled with the chill in the air, when everything seems cheery and bright in the glow of Christmas tree lights, Christmas pageants, and candles in the advent wreath. We hear this passage when we have heard the familiar stories of the nativity; journeying with the shepherds and the magi to meet the newborn baby Messiah in the manger. We would have gathered together singing Silent Night, O Come O Come Emmanuel, and Joy to the World. This passage, which usually is read on Christmas day or even the Sunday after Christmas, can feel a little disjointed to hear it today. It can feel a little like when you're driving along in the hot summer and Mariah Carey's All I Want for Christmas comes on through the shuffle and all of a sudden you're singing and dancing along and its Christmas in July, well for us today its Christmas in June. I think it is easier to be swept up into the poetry and theology of this scripture when we are surrounded by the sights and sounds of Christmas, the time in which we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the incarnation of God.

It is easier to remember that God came to be with us when the nativity set is on the mantle and the baby Jesus is there bringing the story to life, right in our own living rooms. Maybe we do ourselves a disservice when we pack up our nativity sets with all of our other decorations. Would we be more easily reminded that God is always with us if we had that physical reminder somewhere we could see it daily? Would we find ourselves more rooted and connected to this truth, that from the beginning of creation God was there and that same God is with us even today? Could we more easily trust that Emmanuel, God with us, moved out of the manger and into our lives?



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This passage from John, which speaks of the Word of God, states many major theological claims that teach us about the nature of God and God's presence in the world. There is something about John chapter one "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God" which is altogether different from the other three Gospels. Mark's Gospel starts with the baptism of Jesus, skipping his birth story altogether, and Matthew and Luke begin with the stories that what we have come to expect at Christmas pageants and living nativities. Those Gospels tell the story of Mary and Joseph, the birth of the baby Jesus, the wisemen traveling from afar, and the shepherds of the field who become the welcoming party for Christ. But, the Gospel of John is different, John goes to poetry to speak of the eternal nature of God. "In the beginning was the Word," all the way back to the beginning of time. The Gospel of John asks us not to only focus on the earthly stable, but also on the stars above the stable, and the whole universe that becomes the stage. It is a cosmic perspective saying "all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." The poetic opening words of John's Gospel move listeners and even the church to think theologically beyond the birth of Jesus, to the incarnation of God. John wastes no times in telling us just what God has been up to. John identifies Jesus as the incarnate Word of God. Using the term Word, or logos, which means both mind or rationality, and also speech and communication, John is saying that logos conveys what God is thinking, both as speech and as action. Essentially in the person of Jesus, God speaks God's mind.¹

And the identity of Jesus, according to John, is even wrapped up with the beginning of creation. The God that spoke the world into creation is the same God who decided to take on flesh, and live as a human among us. "And the Word became flesh" is not simply an incredible proclamation, but it could arguably be the most significant claim of the Christian faith. And here is the power in that statement. If Jesus is truly God, which is what this scripture proclaims, then God is not at all separate from our human existence, but rather God is profoundly and intimately present with us. If Jesus is truly God, then God knows every bit of the human experience, including joys, dreams, and hopes, and grief, anger, and sorrow. The God that we worship knows what it means to be human, because God became human in the person of Jesus. And that means that God is not far away, God is very present, bearing the pain that we carry and holding the things that make our hearts soar.

This prologue ends up being the summary for all of John's Gospel and there is one verse that sums up the entire prologue, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's son, full of grace and truth." Minister and writer Eugene Peterson, in his contemporary translation of the Bible called the Message, offers an alternative interpretation to this verse that I think brings it to life in a way that is concrete and tangible. He writes, "The Word was made flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish" What a powerful way to hear this. God moved not only into our world, but right into our neighborhood. Neighborhoods remind us of the place where we grew up, the place with our friends and family, the place we call home. Neighborhoods are the places where we have our roots, the places that form us and the place that grounds us.

This summer we will be together exploring what it means to be grounded in the book ***Grounded*** by Diana Butler Bass. Her book, which was read by our strategic visioning team when they began their work, is about finding God in the world and is built upon her claim that we and the world around us is in the midst of a spiritual revolution. Through our worship and through conversations and explorations in our summer enrichment hour, we will journey through the book

¹ Bartlett, David, L. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 1*. Westminster John Knox Press; Louisville. 2008, p 140.

and look to the ways that we are grounded in our faith. In the book, she is responding to the reality of the world around us; religion is on the decline in America, many people are leaving behind traditional religious practices, and we see more and more folks claiming to be spiritual, but not religious. This reality is the driving force behind much of the fear we hold onto in the church today. Holding tightly to the traditions that we know and love, we continue to do church the same way, yet we become more and more dismayed when we see the gaps in the pews growing wider and wider, and less people choosing to come through the doors. Of course there are many things that we could cite as the reason for declining interest and numbers, but Diana Butler Bass believes that the decline that we are witnessing actually signals a major transformation of how people understand and experience God.

For many people, the God of conventional religion feels distant, and people are now looking for a more intimate sense of the sacred that is with us in the world. Diana Butler Bass shows that the current spiritual revolution, that is begging for us to take notice, is marked by a shift from a vertical understanding of God to a God that is found on the horizontal plane of the world around us. This shift she sees is at the root of our shifting culture and faith. She describes the previous landscape of faith. That we believed we occupied a three-tiered universe, with heaven above, where God lived; the world below, where we lived; and the underworld, where we feared we might go after death. She says, “the church mediated the space between heaven and earth, acting as a kind of holy elevator, wherein God sent down divine directions and, if we obeyed the directives we would go up- eventually- to live in heaven forever and avoid the terrors below.”²

Often in difficult times and in times of tragedy, the questions asked are “why did God let this happen or what is God trying to teach us or even what does God want us to do in response?” But the question we should be asking is Where is God? Theologians and our scripture from today would answer that God is with us in and through everything. And this belief is what those who are claiming to be spiritual but not religious actually have been using holding on to. For many in the traditional expressions and institutions of church, more time is spent asking, “who is God” or “what must I do to be saved?” Instead we are all invited to ask the questions where is God and How does God’s presence enliven our actions in the world? This shift moves us from vertical theology- that elevator that only moves up and down, to horizontal theology, that calls us to engage differently with the world around us and with one another. And that is where we will find our grounding. And when we find that grounding our theology moves us out from the church and into the world, which is so desperately needed in these changing times. Because to relocate God, is to regroup our lives. And God is with us everywhere.

As Diana says, “I began to realize how beautifully God was everywhere: in nature and in my neighborhood, in considering the stars and by seeking my roots. The church is not the only sacred space; the world is profoundly sacred as well.” We are a people who are navigating the space between conventional understanding of God in an increasingly secularized world and the daily walk of our faith involves both the mundane and the sacred, and we can grow closer with God through a new awareness of the earth and in the lives of their neighbors. We encounter God in the reading and preaching of the Word; we meet God at this table and here in his body, the church. And if we are paying attention, we can also recognize that God is in the ordinary moments of life- in the making of lunches and the folding of laundry, in the weeding of a garden, and in our commute to work, in our conversations with friends and in our neighborhood walks.

And so here we are today, worshiping together in a new space, perhaps a little uncomfortable, maybe a little anxious without our usual pews and familiar seats. This church that

² Butler Bass, Diana. “Grounded” Harper Collins Publishers; New York: 2015, pg. 4.

has been home for many of us feels a little upheaved at the moment and now our orientation in how we are together in our worship has changed. Literally it has changed! But if we take seriously the words from John's Gospel, we know that God is here with us. God is with us in the places that feel comfortable and like home, and God is with us in the places that feel disorienting and scary. God is with us in the times and places that break our hearts and in the times and places that fill our hearts with joy and peace. God is with us, made known to us through the person of Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit. God is with us at this table when we share this family meal together. God is with us when we go out from this place to the places that we work and learn. God is with us in our community and in our neighborhoods. And not just our neighborhood, but every neighborhood. As preacher Frank Thomas writes, "The beauty of this text from John is that Jesus moves into every neighborhood; from barrio street corners to Gold Coast condos, from ghetto projects to suburban mansions, from the streets of South Central to the affluence of Palm Springs, from war-torn Africa to the extravagance of Dubai. The Word, Jesus, dwells with us all, in all of our neighborhoods."³

And the Word became flesh and lived among us. May these words from John give you courage and hope as you move through your days. And let us find new ways to feel and to be grounded, as we discover and embrace God with us, in the soil that is holy ground, in the water that gives us life, in the sky that opens our imagination, in our homes and neighborhoods in our lives that are linked with others, and in the world around us. Thanks be to God for such gifts.

³ Bartlett, David, L. *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol. 1*. Westminster John Knox Press; Louisville. 2008, p 191.