

John 1:1-18
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What on Earth?

This morning, on the fourth and final Sunday of Advent, we move from our journey through the Old Testament that took us through creation to exile and return to the story of Jesus, as told through the gospel of John. We will be with John through Easter doing our faithful best to listen for good news in his rich and often perplexing words. First, however, we begin at the beginning. [Read John 1:1-18]

More than one scholar has referred to this passage as an overture, the opening of a symphony that highlights different themes which will reappear in fuller ways in the rest of the piece. And it's true. In grand and lovely poetry, John speaks of light and darkness and life and grace and truth. We hear a snippet about John the Baptist, and we are told in passing that not everyone will welcome Jesus. These themes will unfold in rich and complex ways over the next 21 chapters as we encounter numerous additional characters including Jesus' mother Mary, Nicodemus, the disciples, the woman at the well, and Pilate. And that is all well and good and interesting, but it is December 21. To state the all-too-obvious fact, Christmas is just days away. There are lists to be checked off, meals to be prepared, presents to be wrapped, bills to be worried over, guests to be hosted, and families to be welcomed and even managed. Weariness, grief, despair about the state of the world, and the promise or threat of more, long, dark nights ahead for us and for our neighbors also tug at our hearts and tap on our windows insisting that we pay attention to them, too. We do not live in a place of pristine poetry or lofty ideals any more than we live in a Hallmark movie, so what on earth could John's lofty language have to do

with failing furnaces, unexpected health scares, tensions with the in-laws, or a world on fire?

Quite simply, everything.

While John's gospel follows a different timeline and sounds much different than Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it helps to remember that the author is writing in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple and the entirety of Jerusalem by the Romans, just as the other three were. The first hearers of this gospel were likely Jews who were followers of Jesus and who had been banned from their synagogues for their belief. In other words, Jesus is not born on the set of a Hallmark movie either. The setting for that Holy Night was an occupied land under a brutal empire. John does not mention the birth itself. There are no shepherds, no angels, no mention of no room in the inn. Instead, John tells us that the Word of God, who was with God from the beginning and was God became flesh and lived among them, among us.

History tells us that the artist Caravaggio was more than a bit rough around the edges. Born in 1571, he fled his hometown after a bar brawl where he wounded a police officer. He went to Rome to study classical techniques, where a Roman Catholic cardinal took him in, but not everyone appreciated his gifts. He became famous or infamous for his "brutal realism," which is on full display in one of his last paintings, "The Adoration of the Shepherds." The painting depicts a closeup of the Nativity. The scene shows an exhausted Mary on the floor with baby Jesus nestled against her chest. A weary Joseph with a furrowed brow and calloused feet leans in, as do the shepherds. There are no angels. The only gold in sight are Mary and Joseph's very faint halos. Critics in Caravaggio's time declared the painting vulgar, taken aback by the

stark portrayal of the Nativity.¹ Mary is not sitting pristinely on a throne. The child does not wear a shiny halo. All may be calm enough, but very little is bright. Mary looks like a mother who has just gone through labor. Joseph looks like a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders, a very human man who is far from home and worried about his wife and newborn child. The shepherds look world-worn and more than a bit rough around the edges. One shepherd even dares to reach out to try and touch the mother of Jesus. What on earth was Caravaggio thinking?

He was thinking, it seems, of John's words about God's Word becoming flesh and living among us, and all that that living entails. His own world was plagued by disease, divisions, and brutality. Perhaps Caravaggio was moved by God's Word made flesh choosing to become flesh and live alongside rough-around-the-edges people like him and in a rough-around-the-edges world like his.

This December I am clinging fiercely to John's words about light and life and abundant grace and to his conviction that the darkness does not and cannot win. And like Caravaggio, I am hungry to be reminded that the One who gives us light, life, and grace upon grace "moves into the neighborhood" as one translation reads, *our* neighborhood in fact.² The neighborhood into which Jesus moves includes not only the beautiful well-tended homes sparkling with Christmas lights, but also bomb shelters and bunkers, cardboard boxes tucked between buildings, emergency rooms and detention centers, and every nook and cranny where heartbreak, death, and despair claim to have cornered the market. In Jesus God shows us God's love up close, in

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoration_of_the_Shepherds_\(Caravaggio\)#/media/File:Caravaggio_-_Adorazione_dei_pastori.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoration_of_the_Shepherds_(Caravaggio)#/media/File:Caravaggio_-_Adorazione_dei_pastori.jpg) and <https://www.instagram.com/artlectio/>

² John 1:14, The Message

the person of this One who is the Father's beloved son, "close to the Father's heart." That translation soft-pedals it a bit. The Greek language has another word for *heart*. John instead is telling us that Jesus is intimately connected to the Father, tucked in and held close like a nursing child, much like an infant worn snug against a mother's chest in a sling. Jesus does not live among us as a tourist staying only in the nicest hotels far removed from the stench and struggles of real life, nor does Jesus simply observe us from a safe distance. In Jesus God becomes human and lives a human life, where women labor in childbirth, where fathers grow weary with worry, where children are fragile, where the scene is not always beautiful, where life is more brutal than we often want to admit. And John insists that God chooses to *live* here, not simply to wag a divine finger and scold us for all the ways we get it wrong, but to give us life, to redeem and recreate us and the entirety of creation, to teach us the way of justice, hope, peace, compassion, truth, and joy. And, to show us face to face just how deeply God loves us, how urgently God wants to clutch us close, too.

Throughout the fall we heard the winding story of God's love for humanity from the beginning. Every time God chose a king, every time God called a prophet, every time God gave the people another chance after they turned their backs on God and the covenant, God remained astoundingly faithful and reached out to draw them back, all because of love. And somehow because that faithfulness was not enough, God chooses to show up in person, in *a* person, Jesus. In Jesus, God embodies that love by becoming one of us and living in this brutal and beautiful world with us. God does not choose a perfect world in which to become flesh, but this one, the same world where furnaces fail and relationships do, too, a world where children are fragile, as are adults, a world where life can be brutal and beautiful and cruel and rich and

joyful, too. This world has been God's beloved from the beginning, filled with rough-around-the-edges human beings, the same human beings God created in God's own image, the same human beings God has adored all along.

What on earth was God thinking? I am not God, so I cannot know fully for sure. I have a hunch, however, that God was thinking that here *on earth*—brutal and embattled as it may be—is exactly where God's Word needed to become flesh, exactly where God's Word needed to live, because this is where God's heart has been from the very beginning and still is, even now.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.