

John 1:1-18

The power of celebration, thankfulness and the acknowledgement of the blessings God has poured on us is the focus of today's Gospel – which offers us opportunities for both celebration and confession – celebration of God's goodness and grace – and confession of our failure to recognise the goodness we enjoy.

John's Gospel offers us the joyous promise of blessing and grace. In the prologue to John's Gospel we are reminded of our birth as children of God in Christ – and of the gracious blessings which we receive through Christ. There is no question that this is meant to be a time for celebration – a time for remembering the grace and life we enjoy in Christ, and opening our hearts to God's blessings and wisdom which are assured and sustaining – no matter what we may face in this world.

This morning, we mark the fourth Sunday of Advent, the final hours of preparation that lead to the celebration of Jesus' birth.

But we all need a reminder that Christmas is more than just a holiday or festival. Christmas witnesses to a reality that permeates our whole life. And there could be no better passage from John, as John invites us to contemplate a non-sentimental Christmas that fills us with hope and joy three hundred and sixty-five days a year – and not just the twelve days from the twenty-fifth of December to the fifth of January.

Notice that John's "Christmas Story" does not dally with angels or shepherds and seems to know nothing of a young mother or magi. John's story is hardly about the birth of Jesus at all. Instead it focusses on the difference that Jesus' birth makes for all of us.

John starts his prologue with "in the beginning." In the beginning ... the roar of white-hot full-throated argument erupts at the word "beginning." The trail of this argument has been marked with the tears of science teachers denied tenure and the rage of preachers and parents demanding that creationism be taught in public schools. We shatter the peace to which Christ called us, in order to make war over a beginning that we do not know but can only begin to imagine.

Paleontologist Stephen Gould, a devoted and brilliant interpreter of Darwin, summarized Darwin's wisdom with the phrase - *no vantage of a beginning – no prospect of an end*. In other words, the world has not marched along for eons according to an Administrative Plan, and that Jesus did not arrive among us at a pre-assigned moment that is now leading us toward the end of time.

John who began his gospel with the words "*in the beginning*" would embrace paleontologist Gould in affirming the mystery of this world. John's gospel, written later than the others, tries to get beyond the stalemated arguments of his own time, arguments over where Jesus came from, arguments over how he came to be, arguments over mutterings about Mary and the angel.

John throws the questions of origin into the vastness of a time before all times.

He was always in the world, John says – and is in everything in the world. And became flesh **when the time was right**.

Nothing in John's words denies the roles of chaos and chance, in creation, in history, in the evolution of cultures and nations and religions. John's assertion of the presence of Christ in darkness, and unseen is so much more a wonder when the eons are chance-ridden and chaotic, than if time ran like clock-work. The moment of Christ's birth, in this wisdom, becomes one of God's moments of Punctuated Equilibrium, when the convergence of force brings about a change in which new life is suddenly and amazingly possible, and the world is greatly changed.

Gould used the scientific discoveries of preserved life forms in the Burgess Shale in Canada to prove this theory. In a single unpredictable event, some that had been powerful became extinct, and a few that had been lowly before, became the best survivors in the new world. Gould wrote about this in his book, *Wonderful Life*, – the title taken from the classic film, "*It's a Wonderful Life*" – in which the hero is helped to wisdom about his own life by an angel-in-training, and the wisdom learned is the significance of chance and adaptation, two of Darwin's great themes.

Yet, there are those who insist that the image of God must be a Great Administrator, who has issued Billion Year Plans and severely oversees the implementation. How far from the image in Genesis of God as Artist, as Creator, who brings forth what he has only partly imagined, each tree, bird, fish, person – like each potter's pot, taking on a form that is and is not intended, as form that owes its life to

its origins and yet becomes something new.

It is the newness in each that keeps the potter excitedly bent over the wheel, which is not, after all, an assembly line kind of creation. Each day, each generation, each child is a new being. And in the act of creation, the potter is also being born, more and more with each clay creation. This is true as well for composers, painters, parents. And it is true for God – who is becoming while calling forth. And this is given in the only name God has owned: **I am who I am becoming** – the correct translation from the Hebrew.

John points us to the skies, where we will see stars. And John points us to a star-lit world, urging us to see epiphanies. Life is filled with possibility and foreboding. We are beckoned to discoveries, which will open our eyes, hearts, and minds and allow us to see God, not in a single moment of beginning, but in endless beginnings in which God will again and again be born in us.

There are, on the whole, just two crucial lines in John's gospel that actually deal with Jesus' birth and what is referred to as the Incarnation. The first – "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." and the second, "And the Word" – that was with God and is God – "became a human being and lived here on earth among us."

There it is: John's Christmas story, the story of God becoming human, taking on our lot and our life that we might live and love and struggle and die with hope. But, that's not all John offers. While he sums up the Christmas story in just two lines, he

spends more time on the significance of Christmas by shifting attention from Jesus' birth to ours. John is less interested in the birth of a babe at Bethlehem than he is in the birth of you and me as children of God.

Listen again to the verses that are often skipped over in our hurry to get to the close of his two-verse Christmas story: *"He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn — not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God."*

Jesus came that we might become children of God. Children that is, who are not dominated by the circumstance in which we find ourselves, not defined by our limitations or hurts, and whose destinies are not controlled by others. Rather, we are those individuals who know ourselves to be God's own beloved children. God has called us God's own children – individuals who hold infinite worth in God's eyes, deserve love and respect, and will be used by God to care for God's beloved world.

Imagine – Jesus came and was born, lived, died, and was raised again, not simply to pay some obscure "penalty for sin," but rather to remind us and even convince us that God loves us more than anything. How can we believe this? It's not easy. One way to learn to believe or accept this as true is to look into a mirror and say to ourselves, "I am God's child, deserving of love and respect, and God will use me to change the world."

Sounds simple, doesn't it? But, these words are actually rather hard to say and even harder to believe, as the little voices in our heads and negative messages can often bring doubts – “You, a child of God? But what about your failed marriage? What about when you disappointed your parents or children? And don't forget about all the missteps and mistakes you've made. Yeah, maybe God loves you, but you don't really deserve that love, and you're certainly not in a position to change yourself, let alone change the world.

That is why John's unsentimental Christmas message is so important. Because in the face of all these negative messages – many of which are rooted in something that is descriptively true – we have made mistakes, disappointed ourselves and others, and all the rest – John asserts that what is true about each and everyone of us is that Jesus gives each of us the “power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or human will, but of God.” And nothing can change that. Let's try saying it together – “I am God's child, deserving of love and respect, and God will use me to change the world.” Try saying it once a day for a month.

The often forgotten or dismissed task which we are evidently called to as followers of Christ is that of celebration and life-giving. As we challenge injustice and work to bring healing and restoration to our world, celebration can feel like indulgence, and worship can seem like impractical introspection.

However, there is tremendous power in recognising goodness and life, in celebrating blessings and wisdom, wherever we may find it – even in those with whom we may generally disagree. And so, as we continue to celebrate the incarnation of Christ, we live this incarnation by acknowledging and affirming the wisdom that is at work in our world, in our leaders and thought-leaders. We live the incarnation by enjoying the blessings we see and experience, and by enabling others to find joy and reason to celebrate even in their struggle.

We live the incarnation by embracing all people and welcoming them into the family of God into which we have ourselves been welcomed. As we draw attention to goodness and grace around us, and as we enable ourselves and others to embrace this goodness and grace, our world is gently transformed into a more secure, more blessed and more whole place. This is truly a work of justice – this is without question, a work of God’s reign!

It is all too easy in our Churches and faith communities to define ourselves by what we resist, what we denounce, or what we stand against. It is all too easy to make celebration, blessing and enjoyment something that we view as evil and to be shunned, but this is not Gospel living. In every person, in every community, there is goodness, grace and blessing to be found – no matter how tough or painful or unjust our lives may be.

This is why slaves could sing of their hope and joy in Christ, and why artists in every oppressive regime have continued to perform, to sing and dance and create.

It is a prophetic and liberating act to celebrate in the midst of grief and darkness. It is a prophetic and liberating act to enable people to recognize and embrace the goodness hidden even in their pain. It is a prophetic and liberating act to affirm goodness and wisdom wherever we may find it, and to welcome all people into the celebration.

Theologian, poet, author, John van de Laar, wrote “The Healing Power of Celebration.” He writes:

In the midst of grief we choose to celebrate,
because it reminds us of hope,
and brings comfort to our broken hearts;
In the midst of poverty we choose to celebrate,
because it speaks of wealth beyond material things,
and gives dignity to our humbled hearts;
In the midst of conflict we choose to celebrate,
because it turns us to peace,
and restores humanity to our angry hearts;
In the midst of suffering we choose to celebrate,
because it lightens our darkness,
and inspires strength in our fragile hearts;
In the midst of injustice we choose to celebrate,
because it defies evil,
and renews determination in our compassionate hearts;
Though crosses may loom, and opponents gather,
though cynics may scoff at the extravagance
of our devotion to you, Jesus,
we still choose to embrace and enjoy
for our own sake, and that of the least,
the healing power of celebration.

As God’s family, as followers of the incarnate, light-bringing Christ, let us be

known for our joy, our hope, our wisdom, our celebration and our enjoyment of whatever blessings we may be able to receive and give. This is a Christ-like and healing response that comes from the children of God. Remember – “You are God’s child, deserving of love and respect, and God will use you to change the world.” Believe it and live it – by sharing your faith, hope, peace, love, wisdom, and joy – as you change the world.

Amen.