

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor William R. White

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — JOHN 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 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.

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

SERMON

In the beginning, before anything-- before the hills, before the oceans, before taxes, before anything, the Son of God existed. The Son was present for the creation when God took light, gathered it into a shining ball and flung it against the darkness, spangling the night with the moon and the stars. The Son was present when God, like a mammy bending over her baby, knelt down in the dust toiling over a lump of clay until he shaped it in His own image. Then God blew into it the breath of life, and created a living soul. The Son was present for all of this because the Son was, and is, God.

John tells us that God's plan for the world—from the beginning, was to share in human life. In 1965, my first year as a pastor, my dad, a milk inspector, came to the church I served in Hollandale. Dad loved farmers and he loved the farming community, so he sat on the lawn outside the church and talked with the men in the congregation. That night, before he went back home to Viroqua, the man

who thought it was a waste of time for his son to become a pastor, said, "Son, you are doing well. The men I talked to today paid you the highest compliment you can receive from them about someone who has gone to school eight years after high school. They said, "He is a good person. He is down-to-earth."

That is what we can say about God. God is a down-to-earth God. God has left the high places, the place of privilege, and decided to share in our world. The eternal Word, the one who existed from the foundations of the earth, has become a human being.

John tells us that God, the creator of light, was the true light that shone in the darkness. It was an eternal light, a light that the darkness could not overcome. In spite of this John says, here is what is amazing. He came to his own people and his own people DID NOT RECEIVE HIM. At the heart of the Christmas story then is two amazing things: God gave a fabulous gift to the world, and the world rejected it. The greatest symbol in the Christmas story for that rejection is the king, Herod.

Herod saw the baby not as a gift, but a threat. He made plans to destroy the new child, the new king, before the child could come into his power. It was probably instinctive, because as Mary said, this child will put down the mighty from their thrones. If you follow the course of human history you know that is true. Over and over again the mighty, particularly the despots have fallen at the hands of the baby from Bethlehem.

But to those who did receive him, who believed in him, he gave the power to become children of God. He has the ability to bring people together and to make enemies into friends. It can happen for a brief period of time, or if we will follow him, it can totally change our way of life.

On Christmas Eve, in 1914, the first year of World War I, a group of lonely English soldiers were fighting a trench war against the Germans. The guns were silent that night and the English lads began to think about home. One of them, from Ely, said, "I can almost hear the church bells. My whole family will soon be walking out the door to hear the concert of the boy's choir at the cathedral."

Another man said, "Strange, I think I can hear singing now." Then the troops realized that they indeed were hearing music and it was coming from far away,

where the enemy was located. They scrambled to the edge of the trenches, and listened carefully. Sure enough a few sturdy German voices were singing Martin Luther's Christmas song, Vom Himmel Hoch, "From heaven above to earth I come to bear good news to everyone. Glad tidings of great joy I bring, to all the world, and gladly sing."

When the singing ended the English soldiers sat frozen in silence before a large soldier with a powerful voice broke into the chorus of, "God rest ye merry gentlemen." Before he had sung three bars a dozen voices joined with him. By the time the song was finished the entire regiment was singing.

Once again there was an interlude of silence until a German tenor began to sing, "Stille Nacht." This time the song was sung in two languages, a chorus of nearly a hundred voices echoing back and forth between the trenches, "Silent Night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright." All was calm.

Moments later the sentry shouted, "Someone is approaching!" All attention focused on a single German soldier who walked slowly waving a white cloth in one hand and holding several bars of chocolate in the other. The men eased out into the neutral zone and began to greet one another. In the next golden moments each soldier shared what he had with others, candy, cigarettes, and a bit of Christmas brandy. The soldiers showed the battered, but treasured pictures of loved ones that they carried.

No one knows whose idea it was to start a football match (what we call soccer), but with the help of flares the field was lit and the German and British soldiers played until they and the lights were exhausted. Then, as quietly as they came together, the men returned to their earthen homes.

On Christmas day men from both sides again joined together, even visiting the other's trenches. The German soldiers, wishing to avenge the previous night's loss, organized another game.

In a few days the cannons once again boomed across "no man's land" and the whine of rifles was heard in the trenches. For some, however, it was never the same. The enemy was no longer faceless. War had lost its appeal. The Christ of Christmas had turned enemies into friends.

The promise of John 1:12 had come true, "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God..."

If we but trust in God to guide us, he can turn enemies into friends. He did that on earth when he was walking among us, and he can do it now. When we see the world through the prism of Christmas it is never quite the same again. Nor do we see the rest of the

material universe the same again. The best way to say this is to tell another story. It is a story I told you several years ago. The name is *The Juggler of God*. It was written by Anatole France, made into an opera and is a marvelous children's book illustrated and retold by Tommy DePaola. It is the story of Barnaby, an old juggler who at one time was a vaudeville performer. His concluding act was to keep several balls in the air with his feet, a feat he had not accomplished as he grew older. In his later years this devout old man came to live at a monastery, where he washed dishes and cleaned floors. He loved the monastery, occupied by a number of artists. He was, however, troubled by a statue of the Holy Mother and the Baby Jesus, because the two of them looked so sad.

As Christmas approached Barnaby realized that he was the only person in the monastery, a monastery full of artists, who did not have a special Christmas gift. A musician was completing a new cantata, an artist had prepared a sculpture and still another new picture. Even the cook was busy preparing a feast. Only Barnaby had nothing to provide the Christ child on the night of his birth. The cook reminded him that clean floors and pots were like great frescos in the eyes of God, but Barnaby wasn't buying it.

Then he had an idea. He would rehearse so that he could perform in front of the troubling statue of Madonna (Mother) and Christ child on Christmas Eve.

He prepared, performed and finished with his famous foot trick. He had never done it better. When he finished the statue in the chapel came alive, and the Christ child clapped his hands and the Blessed Mother smiled.

The prior, who witnessed the event from the shadows declared: "Everything sings of the glory of God." In the coming of the Christ the division between sacred and secular has been torn down. If God, who is Spirit, has come in the flesh, then everything of the flesh, can lead us to God. You can offer the Christ child gold, frankincense or myrrh, or you can offer music, painting or juggling. If you are a banker, businessmen or police officer you can make honest work your offering. If you are a receptionist, you can greet people with warmth and help make their day. It all is godly, because, "Everything sings of the glory of God," everything is of God.

At the heart of Christmas is a gift, a wonderful gift from God that demands a response. We cannot be passive in its presence. We can reject it or receive it. If we receive it, if we allow it to shape us, if we walk in his name, he gives us power to become children of God, and teaches us to find meaning in all we have and all we do. Merry Christmas. Amen. © 2010