

Isaiah 61:1-4
John 1:1-14
“All I Want for Christmas are Peace Ingredients”

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It's always the case, at least in the church, that we get to hear the opening lines of each of the four gospel writers at this time of year. It makes sense. The gospels give us a picture of the life and ministry of Jesus. They show us how he spent his time, where he traveled, who his friends were, who his enemies were. They give us a sense of what he was all about. They are not complete pictures of course. The fact that there are four gospels and that they don't all include the same details, tells us that each of the gospels is only a partially developed picture. This doesn't necessarily make what any of them says un-true. It just means that none of them—Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John—on their own, have all the truth about Jesus. We also know that even if you take them all together, the four gospels in the Bible still don't tell us everything there is to know about Jesus. You may know that there are other gospel accounts which didn't make it into the Bible, for instance the Gospel according to Thomas and the Gospel according to Mary Magdalene. My point is this, some 2,000 years ago, when the earliest accounts of Jesus were being poured over, the church leaders had to figure out which accounts were not only, by a certain definition, true, but also which accounts were going to be the most useful for building up the church and holding it together. For remember, in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries, the church was nothing more than numerous small communities of believers spread out over much of the Mediterranean, over what today is Northern Africa, Greece, Italy, the Middle East, and Turkey. Churches did not have hymnals or by-laws or denominations or Bibles in every pew that they could draw a sense of common ground from. At most they may have all known the Apostle's Creed or some version of it. What held the Christian churches together, however, was their commitment to live—in their own corner of the universe and as best they could—to live according to the Jesus Way. But who could say for sure what the way of Jesus looked like? Was it what Matthew had to say? Or maybe Mark? Or Thomas or Mary? At best, the first Christians knew only what their parents had told them and modeled for them about the Jesus Way, which was something they had probably gotten from their parents before them, which they had probably gotten from their parents before

them... But we all know how that goes. With each passing generation, who knows what is getting lost in translation.

So, when in the mid 4th century the church fathers got together and decided, no doubt after much prayer, that it was high time for the church to have a single, authorized account to go on, that it would help our unity and cause, they selected 66 books—39 from out of the tradition and experience of their Hebrew ancestors, or what we call the Old Testament, and 27 out of the Greek and Gentile experience, or what we call the New Testament. In hindsight, given how much we have used the Bible to divide and conquer one another, rather than to build unity and common cause with one another, I'm not sure those early church fathers didn't do us a disfavor.

Nonetheless, here we are. It's no longer the 4th century, but as a church we are once again at a beginning and pouring over the stories of Jesus. With every new season of Advent, we remember that Jesus didn't come just once. He comes again and again, and with each coming we try—here in our own corner of the universe and as best we can—to be in the way of his coming. I don't mean to be in his way, dear God no, but that we should go and be in the places where we believe Jesus is mostly likely to show up, to spend our time with the people he is mostly likely to come and be with, so that when he comes we ourselves will be with him.

But where will that be? What if all our Christmas preparations this year don't cause Jesus to show up as we think he will, when we think he will? My fear is that it's become too easy just to think about the Nativity story and what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. To point out in a few sermons in December how much harder the poor have it than me, and to feel some compassion and maybe drop more money than usual into the Salvation Army's kettle, because it's not like I don't have extra to give. To put up the tree and share a plate of cookies with my elderly neighbor. To sing Silent Night and feel an almost indescribable love in my heart as we light candles and talk about how this time it's going to be different, this time we're going to overtake the darkness. To do all this and think, in the words of Dickens, that I have somehow learned once and for all how to keep Christmas well. Maybe I'm being too hard on myself. I can't read the gospels, though, and not see that just when you think you've got a hold on Jesus,

just when you've got him right where you want him, all wrapped up tight in the manger, he slips away.

This is how Matthew tells it. He starts his account of the story talking about Joseph and what happens on the day he finds out that his wife-to-be is pregnant. Joseph knows that it spells scandal and that he has every right to drag Mary out into the middle of the town square and have her stoned to death, but being one of the good guys, he decides instead to dismiss her quietly. Yes, that's what I'll do, he thinks. And he lies down to sleep on it for a night. But during the night, an angel appears to tell him that Mary's baby will be born of the Holy Spirit, which sounds even more scandalous than her having had an affair. It couldn't have been an easy thing for Joseph to do, but he gets up the next day and takes Mary as his wife, except, we are told, he has no marital relations with her until after the child is born. Did you catch that? Joseph marries Mary and in this way, he saves her and her baby from public disgrace. Jesus will grow up thinking that he's Joseph's son. Jesus will grow up with everyone else thinking that he's Joseph's son. No one will know that he's not; no one, that is, except Joseph, who knows that he never did a thing with Mary. And don't you think this might have crossed Joseph's mind a time or two when Jesus was young, when Jesus was, oh, I don't know, between the ages of 2 and 18? When he and the neighborhood boys would get into it Jesus would come home with a shiner on one eye. Or when his grades slipped below passing. Don't you think Joseph might have thought about whose child he was actually raising? When Jesus was twelve and Joseph and Mary had to run back to Jerusalem to look for him because he wasn't in the backseat of the family station wagon like they thought he was, like he was supposed to be, and they find him in the temple and Jesus tells them, "Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?" don't you think Joseph might have wondered if Jesus had figured it out? Wondered if it wasn't Jesus's way of telling him, "I know you're not my real father." And Joseph might have thought to tell him, "You got that right kid."

Luke's gospel tells us that in the days after Jesus was born, after Mary had sung her song about this baby whose coming would lift up the lowly and fill the hungry, after the angels sang their hallelujah chorus to announce his arrival and the shepherds went away rejoicing, after things had calmed down a bit and Mary had worked out a feeding schedule, and she thought, I got this, that an old man named Simeon laid eyes on Jesus and

proclaimed, “This child is destined to look into the soul of the world and the world will hate him for calling out what he sees there,” that Mary thought, okay, maybe I don’t got this.

Where will Jesus be born this year? Is it possible that all our Christmas preparations won’t cause Jesus to show up as we think he will, when and where we think he will?

Of all the gospels, John’s reminds us that of all the preparations we can make for the coming of Jesus, of all the ingredients we can put in to making this season merry and bright, the most important ingredient of all is imagination. In laying the groundwork for the coming of Jesus John doesn’t do what Matthew, Mark, and Luke all do. He doesn’t name any names. There is no mention of Mary and Joseph. No Herod, no angels, no wise men. He says nothing about a location in Bethlehem. John places the beginning of the story before the story itself.

“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 do you mean all things came into being through him? That means this Word could be anywhere. Up a tree, deep in the ocean, on the far side of town, in the confusion of my thoughts, the hardness of my experiences, the touch of my grandmother’s wrinkly hand on my pimpled face? Could God really be in all things? “And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” You mean we’ll have to go looking for this Word even in the dark places, in the places of fear and mystery, in the places where the light has simply not broken in yet? “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not receive him.” So, if we want to receive this Word, this God, we may need to go and receive those who are not our own?

I have heard people say, “I don’t need to go to church or be with other people in order to be with God. Why bother myself with trying to get along with others? I can find God on the hiking trail or at the beach.” And that may very well be, but according to John’s gospel, those who would be with God alone are those who would be with only half-of-God, for the message of Christmas is one of incarnation, of a God who can only be known in the fullness of flesh. “And the Word became flesh, full of grace and truth.”

I don't know what you've put on your Christmas list this year, but if I could wish for anything it would be to wish for an imagination like God's. For the ability to see myself differently, not as some great and distant god but as a tiny, humble baby. And to see the people in my world differently. That God looked upon Mary and Joseph, scared, frightened, penniless refugees, and didn't say, "I'm not putting myself in their hands," but instead said, "I will gladly make my home with them."

I believe I saw some of this Word becoming flesh this past week. I was at the hospital visiting our dear friend Madeline. Madeline had a massive stroke on Monday and hasn't been the same since. Bill tells me that he doesn't know what to do. Most days he just sits beside her and tells her over and over again, I love you. So, when I was there on Wednesday, that's what we did. We sat there, not saying much at all. At one point, I asked her if she'd like to sing a Christmas carol. She said, yes, so long as I wasn't the one to sing it. After a while, I told her that I needed to be going, but I wasn't sure she understood what I was telling her. I leaned over her slightly, placed my hand on her forehead and offered what little prayer I had in that moment, and as I turned to walk out, she said, "I love you."

Bill, I want you to know that I believe she was talking to me when she said, I love you. But more than this, I believe with all my whole heart that she learned how to say it from you.

And the Word became flesh, full of grace and truth. If there's another way to hope, to love and joy, another way to peace in the world, I don't know what it is. And the word became flesh. Amen.