

**The Church of the Good Shepherd**

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Christmas Day 2017

John 1: 1-14

*May God, who sent his angels to proclaim the glad news of the Savior's birth, fill us with joy, and make us heralds of the Gospel; in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*

As a child, my family went to the beach every summer, and I especially loved to vacation on Pawley's Island in South Carolina. If you've been there, then you know that it is a small island and, at least in the 70's and early 80's, once you crossed over the bridge, pretty much all you would see were humble beach cottages on a sleepy, quiet strip of land. The only grocery store to be found was a small Red & White back on the mainland. And there were only two "hotels" then and they were low-slung modest clapboard structures, the Tip Top Inn being the best known. The beaches were clean, expansive, and un-crowded. I remember summer days when if there was another person on the beach within 50 yards, the beach was considered crowded.

At night, it was dark, and I mean dark. As there were very few streetlights on the island, no commercial district to speak of, and the cottages were set apart from each other; light pollution was not an issue. When you sat up on one of the dunes or in a rocking chair on your beach-front porch looking at the night sky, it seemed like you could see all the stars. Sometimes, it seemed like you could see forever into the galaxy.

One night, I was sitting on a sand dune by myself in the dark. Staring into the star-filled night sky, I was mesmerized by the expansive enormity of it. It seemed like I could get lost in it. I remember thinking about all those stars, trying to comprehend how far away they must be from me – how far away they must be from each other. I puzzled about how there must be a beginning and an end to it all, but how could there be? And, if there was an end, then what was on the other side of this end?

As I stared and contemplated, it felt as though I was being absorbed by the night sky – and I began to feel frightened. It was so big, so much, and I was so small and inconsequential in the face of it. My immediate reality of the sand, water, wind, and sea grass that was around me started to seem unreal and I remember feeling this scary sense of vertigo, like I was tipping and falling into this vast expanse of the heavens. I had to pull back and shake my head to clear my mind, and return from this cosmic contemplation to the more mundane and fleshy existence here in this body on this beach, and rejoin my family inside.

This is a bit like how I've feel moving from last night's Christmas Gospel lesson – Luke's detailed time- and space-bound account of the birth of Jesus – to this morning's lesson from John – his cosmic story of the eternal Word through whom all of creation came into being. Luke's account is situated in a very specific location – Bethlehem within the Roman Empire – and time – during the reign of Emperor Augustus. While John, however, sets the work of God in Christ within the cosmic context of creation.

These are radical shifts in perspective. It makes me feel a bit dizzy and disoriented – like watching a movie where the vantage point starts on a very specific human-level tableau and then pans out and out and out, and keeps panning out until all is lost within the enormity of the cosmos. Like when staring too deeply into the night sky, I feel a need to return to our earthly here and now – to this particular scope of reality. This radical change in perspective shocks me

into a new way of thinking and seeing life and my place within it. But, I can only stay there so long before it is too uncomfortable and I must shake my head and return to a reality that I can touch and feel.

John's gospel begins with this beautiful prologue that we heard a few minutes ago, that sets the entire story of creation, and God's work through Christ within his creation, in a cosmic context. This is John's Christmas story, minus the manger, Mary and Joseph, angels singing, shepherds adoring, or even the baby Jesus for that matter. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." You can tell from this very first verse that John's Jesus is painted with bigger brushstrokes, and that this "beginning" of the story of Jesus starts well before Luke's nativity account.

John's prologue brings us the cosmic perspective of the Creator and his creation, and gives us the broader and encompassing field within which we may then set our human time- and space-bound nativity account. John situates the story of Jesus not only within human history but also within creation's and God's history. In 18 verses, John's prologue summarizes the entire story of Jesus. And in it, John writes of God as the eternal Word coming to dwell with his own creation and of their rejection of him. And it promises power to be children of God and grace upon grace for those who receive and believe.

I think we need both of these perspectives – both the cosmic and eternal Word that is of God and was with God from the beginning, as well as the fleshy Jesus, born of an unmarried young woman in a desperate and difficult time in human history. I think we need both the spiritualized self-expression of God through whom all things were made and the defenseless human baby, whose birth brought angels to trumpet and shepherds to witness and adore. The truth that the story of Jesus points to is a paradox – a paradox that, if we wish to understand it, requires us to embrace both of these stories. It is through the difficult and somewhat disorienting work of holding these two perspectives together that we gain a fuller picture of what has happened and why God's act in Christ through the incarnation of Jesus is important.

If we leave ourselves with only one of these perspectives, we are left with something incomplete. If we only treasure the fleshy and human-scale account of the nativity story, then we may be tempted into an overly humanized and diminished understanding of God – and which may lead to worshipping God made in our own image. If we grasp only the immensely transcendent and wholly-other cosmic-scale account of the eternal Word of God, then we may be tempted into an understanding of God that is so distant that we lose any sense of intimacy with a God who knows and loves us. *We need both the particularity of Jesus and the enormity of God's eternal Word.*

This Christmas season, we rejoice not only in the birth of the fleshy Jesus, our Savior and Messiah born on a specific day, in a specific city, to specific people. We rejoice also in the incarnation of the eternal Word of God, through whom all things came into being; God's own self-expression who has descended to Earth, taken on flesh, and come among his creation to give us the power to become children of God, and to give us life, light, grace, and truth.

So, let us do this hard work of holding both of these perspectives together as we journey through this Christmas season and the mystery of the incarnation. Let us bear both of these perspectives of God's work in Christ – the earthly and the cosmic – by keeping our feet in the sand and our faces in the wind while we gaze into the night sky and lose ourselves in the wonders of the cosmos.

Amen.