

Sermon

“Keep Your Eyes Open and Your Heart Ready”

January 5th, 2020 ~ First Presbyterian Church

2nd Sunday after Christmas

Based on Genesis 1:1-5 and John 1:1-18

SCRIPTURES:

Genesis 1:1-5

¹ In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. [NRSV]

John 1:1-18

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ (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.’”) ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ 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. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray; and let all God's people say ... Amen.

2nd Sunday after Christmas

Calendars are a really big deal this time of year. You may have recently received a new 2020 calendar or planner or purchased one if necessary. We were talking about this around the office this past week, and Kimmy even mentioned it in her Youth News email this past week, too—about how exciting the beginning of a new year is and how people habitually get out the colored pens and markers to scribble or circle important dates throughout the year—birthdays, anniversaries, Spring Break, the start of summer vacation from school, graduation, maybe a family vacation—and hopefully a youth conference, or some other fun summer activity!

We don't always talk about it explicitly, but the church follows a calendar, too. We follow a liturgical calendar that includes a series of themes, Bible passages, and even includes different colors depending on the particular church season (as reflected by the pastors' stoles and the paraments around the chancel). In fact, our "new year" was at the beginning of Advent way back at the start of December. Sometimes it's hard to fathom that we've already plowed through six weeks of Advent and Christmas, and today is the 2nd Sunday after Christmas on the liturgical calendar. Tomorrow is Epiphany, and then we will launch ourselves into a brisk, almost four-month long journey through the life, ministry, and death of Jesus. That is what awaits us tomorrow and after—but *today* is an important day all by itself. You see, the "2nd Sunday after Christmas" doesn't happen every year. In fact, it hasn't happened in four years. And, when just such a Sunday does come around, we are provided a wonderful chance to receive God's Word from the beginning of the gospel of John!

John's Gospel

John's gospel is my favorite gospel. Of the four gospels in our New Testament, John's gospel was the last one written. It wasn't written until late in

the 1st century—around the year 95-100 A.D.—some 70 years or more after the death of Jesus. And, not only was it last, it's very different from the other three. Where Matthew, Mark, and Luke seem more interested in chronicling the history of how Jesus lived and what he did, John's gospel is much more interested in persuasion—as in, persuading it's hearers and readers of who Jesus was and why it was so critically important to understand him as God.

And, it's very important to understand that John's gospel was written for a Greek audience because by the time John's gospel was written, the majority of Christian believers were of Greek and Roman origin and not Jewish. And, the Greco-Roman worldview didn't provide a basis for understanding the concept of the Jewish Messiah—they just didn't get the language and the significance. And, in addition, their worldview didn't provide a basis for comprehending how a god—*our* God—*the* God could be real in human form. If you think back to Greek or Roman mythology, they believed in a pantheon of gods, who at the most, only interacted with humans to create demi-gods—humans who were half human and half god. They just couldn't get how Jesus was *the* God who lived on the earth as a human. So John set about to explain the who and the why about Jesus. And, it took John writing an entirely new thing to accomplish the task.

A 3rd Creation Story

Writers of scripture had already captured God's good and creative intentions in two separate creation stories in the first three chapters of Genesis. But, those stories were written at a different point in history for a different audience with a different understanding and with a different worldview. So John provides us with a third creation story—a *new* creation story ... starting with the same familiar words, "In the beginning," just as in Genesis chapter 1. Only this time John doesn't spend time trying to describe how God *did* the creating. Instead, John valuably spends time establishing the basic idea that both God and Jesus were together since the whole thing began. John's first two verses state that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." As a result, we know they created everything *together*. And, the vocabulary and language John uses spoke with clarity to his

new Christian, Greco-Roman audience, setting the stage for them to understand how an eternal and divine being like our God—*the* God—can be known personally in such a very real way.

A 3rd Birth Story

In addition, the writers of Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels had already captured the earthly birth of God, the very Messiah promised in Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament). But, those birth stories were written for an audience who understood, and were familiar, with Jewish prophecies about a Jewish Messiah king. The Greco-Romans recognized an emperor, a Caesar, and they had a profoundly difficult time accepting how a god could cross completely over into their world and become a human person. So John also provides us with a third birth story—a *new* birth story ... tying Jesus the Christ and God together, and Jesus as God, since the beginning of creation and time and eternity, explaining from the perspective of Greco-Roman wisdom how the essence of God is more than mere speech and myth; how the essence of God is God in action—creating, revealing, guiding, and redeeming. And, once again, the vocabulary and language John uses spoke with clarity to his new Christian, Greco-Roman audience, allowing them to see how Jesus was like God and God was like Jesus, and that from the very beginning, Jesus opened a window for us to see the unchanging love and grace of God; that from the beginning, John lays it out that in Jesus, and in him alone, there is revealed all that God always was and always will be.

The Foundation of our Faith

As I said earlier, John’s gospel is my favorite, and for reasons more than just its beginning verses. And, I realize that if we only had John’s gospel, then we would have no Christmas pageants, no yard decorations, no Christmas carols, no shepherds, and no magi—in fact, there would be no manger. But, what a loss it would be if we lacked John’s awesome, new, and refreshing perspective—if we lacked his grander vision of the essence of God—of God in action—creating, revealing, guiding, and redeeming—coming among us as Emmanuel, “God with us”; coming among us as the man, Jesus ... the very framework and foundation of our theology and our faith!

And, what a loss it would have been had John stopped right there—stopped with the idea of God cosmically jumping through time and dimensions to be among us. Thankfully, John went a lot further than that and not only explained the who and the why about Jesus, but he also explained the *where*, and that’s the best part of John’s new thing that he wrote.

God Moved Into the Neighborhood

John writes in verse 14, “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.” Presbyterian pastor and author, Eugene Peterson, captures this sentiment in *The Message* translation as “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.” And, one of the 20th century’s most renowned biblical scholars, William Barclay, once said that this John 1:14 verse is “the sentence for the sake of which John wrote his gospel,” and that it was “the greatest single verse in the New Testament.” I think I agree with that!

Because, folks, God has moved into the neighborhood. God has come to our homes, within our own neighborhoods and communities, among the places where we grow up and play and have fun and learn and work and experience life—to what is both local and far away, to what is familiar and strange—God has come and “pitched his tent” with ours (as the Greek words literally state). God has moved into the neighborhood—my neighborhood, your neighborhood, *our* neighborhood! Wherever you are, God is next door, God is across the street, God is out front and out back and God is there. Jesus Christ *is God*, flesh and blood and living—the very essence of God in action—creating, revealing, guiding, redeeming, and moving into every neighborhood, dwelling with us all.

God is Doing a New Thing

Yes, indeed, John wrote an entirely new thing because our God is a God who is constantly doing a new thing. In Isaiah 43:19 God says, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” In this New Year time period of 2020, when we scribble on new calendars and ponder new resolutions, we must be mindful of what God is doing among us. In this new year time period of this church, when we install new elders to lead us, anticipate a new Senior

Pastor and new partnerships and ideas within the staff, and prayerfully consider new and fresh ways each of us is called to serve, we must be mindful of what God is doing among us. And, as we continue to live into the new future for First Presbyterian Church—together—we must be mindful of what God is doing among us!

Because God is truly in action here at FPC. God is creating, revealing, guiding, and redeeming this church, this community, and this world. This is such an exciting time my friends!

In this new year, God is indeed doing a new thing ... it springs forth ... do you not perceive it? Hopefully you do! But, either way, we must keep our eyes open and our hearts ready to take part in all that God is doing!

Thanks be to God for moving into our neighborhood! Amen.