

St. Paul's Church, Healdsburg
The Rev. Sally Hanes Hubbell
Christmas Day, 2013

Merry Christmas! One of the things I'm most thankful for today is the fact that there is not one, but twelve days of Christmas! If I had to cram all of my enjoyment of Christmas into a single day, I would be a less happy camper than I am today, but fortunately that isn't the case. The irony is that the season of Advent is meant to be relatively quiet compared to Christmas, but the reality is that with the kids out of school and no parties on the horizon, no pageant and no music to rehearse, the next couple of weeks will be far quieter than all the rest of December, and I'm thankful for it. That's something of a Christmas gift in and of itself.

Today in our Scripture for Christmas morning, we finally get to the BIG PICTURE. This is the cosmic re-ordering of the universe in the light of God revealed in Jesus Christ. We have made our way to the beginning of the story – the real beginning, the creation of the world, which according to John's Gospel, is all of one piece with the birth of Jesus.

"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. ...

"He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; ... 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...."

Reading the Gospel of John can be a very heady experience, because his writing is so layered and rich with meaning. This passage is perhaps the best example of that. "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." John is saying here that the very life of the world was created by this light of God, and this same light is embedded in the life of all people.

Furthermore, he says that all who receive this light, "become children of God...born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." So even as John is affirming the original creation of the world by the Word of God in the beginning, he is saying that now there is a re-ordering of creation – a reorientation in which the family of man has been given an invitation of sorts, to become the family of God in a whole new way – because that all-powerful and all-creative Word of God which was the force behind the very creation of the universe, has taken on flesh and let itself be created anew in the form of the baby born to Mary and Joseph.

I know this is a lot to wrap one's mind around – But we wouldn't expect less from any BIG PICTURE explanation of the universe, would we?

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us." The verb "lived" here is from the Greek *skenoo* which means "to make a dwelling place." One commentator I read translated this passage as "The Word pitched its tent among us" (Holly Hearon, WorkingPreacher.org). The place where the Word, where God chose to live, chose

to pitch his tent, is no where other than “among us.” Imagine going on a camping trip and instead of choosing a camp sight based on a beautiful view or level ground without rocks, or good fishing nearby, your one and only criteria is who your neighbors will be. That is what John says Jesus is doing, when he pitches his tent “among us.” We are the neighbors, and Jesus has moved in for the sole purpose of proximity to us.

This is the perspective that is being offered to us by John. It’s the Christmas story on a cosmic scale: the baby born humbly and laid in the manger is none other than the creative Word of God at work in the origin of the world, now born in flesh and blood and living in a tent in our own back yard.

The point of all of this is that the fundamental creation of the universe is as it always has been and will be: all things came into being through the same loving God who created all of life and created us in God’s own image. And because the God of all creation loves us so, he has chosen to come and live among us so that we might come to know ourselves as more intimately God’s own.

Christmas always points us back to creation because ironically, in order to get across the point that we are indeed created in God’s image, God has taken on human flesh and made himself in our image. This is the ultimate irony of this holiday, and for some it’s biggest stumbling block. Why would this God, whom we call the creator and cause of the universe, the ruler of heaven and earth, choose to live here on earth along with us, and share our human experience of what it means to be frail and vulnerable? There is only one reason an all-powerful God would do such a thing: because he wants to. The only reason God would that is because God wants to live here among us and be known by us. The only reason is love.

And this leads to the last poem I’m going to give you for a while (I promise!). It’s a classic of English literature and of Anglican Spirituality, by the 17th century poet George Herbert:

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
 Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
 I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
 My dear, then I will serve.

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

Sit, eat, feast this Christmas on the love that is being offered to you.
Amen.

We go back to creation today because the birth of Jesus is really about the creation of the universe by a loving God – a God who created us human beings out of love, and who has shown his love by choosing to join us here on earth in ordinary human life.

Do you hear the language of hospitality in all of this? Those who receive Jesus into their lives, are then invited into a new relationship themselves with God. And the idea of acceptance and receiving as a form of hospitality is heightened even more in verse 14: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” The verb “lived” here is from the Greek *skenoo* which means “to make a dwelling place.” One commentator I read translated this passage as “The Word pitched its tent among us” (Holly Hearon, WorkingPreacher.org). The place where the Word, where God chose to live, chose to pitch his tent, is no where other than “among us.” Imagine going on a camping trip and instead of choosing a camp sight based on a beautiful view or level ground without rocks, or good fishing nearby, your one and only criteria is who your neighbors will be. That is what John says Jesus is doing, when he pitches his tent “among us.” We are the neighbors, and Jesus has moved in for the sole purpose of getting to know us better.

This is the perspective that is being offered to us by John: It is the Christmas story on a cosmic scale; the Big Picture view that the baby born humbly and laid in the manger is the creative word of God at work in the origin of the world, now born in flesh and blood and living in a tent in our own back yard.

John tells us that those who do receive God made flesh and living among us are invited by the author of all creation into a new creation, a re-creation or re-birth of themselves into a whole new family as God’s own children. Every Christmas is a reminder and reestablishment of the relationship that God wants to have with us when, in the birth of the baby Jesus, he “pitches his tent among us.” This is a relationship God has chosen to have with us, and an opportunity for us to choose again to have with God. And how do we do that, how do we make that choice? By hearing what Jesus says to us later in this Gospel: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this,” Jesus says, “everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:34-35).

This is the Big Picture, my Friends, and it all centers on God so loving the world that he chooses to join here in all of our messiness, all of our imperfections, disappointments, sorrows and joys. God has pitched his tent here with us, in the midst of it all.

The true gift of Christmas is always communion – God’s communion with us, loving us so much that he took the humble form of an infant born into the world under stressful circumstances, as all births are. And then the invitation for us to reach back to God in love as we learn to see God in all human beings.

The beauty of communion is that it makes us simultaneous givers and receivers – we can’t receive it without simultaneously returning it. Accepting God in our midst, as we do at Christmas, means that we’re all in this together, and we become the presence of God in the world together.

My prayer, my hope for all of us this Christmas is that we will cherish that gift together – this gift, this blessing that has come to us with the Christ Child, Emmanuel, God with us.

In the birth of Jesus we see the light of the world, that cannot be overcome by darkness. That is the Big Picture -- the sense that all is ultimately well despite our sadness, fear, anger and even our folly, is the ultimate and final Big Picture that is given to us in the birth of Jesus, God made flesh and living among us in this wondrously created world of ours. My prayer is that we will all find the grace to accept it this Christmas.

But, sometimes we lose sight of big pictures and get bogged down in the here and now

We go back to creation today because the birth of Jesus is really about the creation of the universe by a loving God – a God who created us human beings out of love, and who has shown his love by choosing to join us here on earth in ordinary human life. Christmas always points us back to creation because ironically, in order to get across the point that we are created in God’s image, God has taken on flesh and made himself in our image.

The beginning of the story is of course creation – our creation by a loving God and in the image of that loving God. Ironically, in order to get across the point that we are indeed created in God’s image, God made himself in our image.

For today, let’s just follow the example of Mary and Joseph’s and not be afraid to take on this gift God is giving us – this new child in our lives, this family, who ultimately will be God with us

Cosmic order of the universe leading to simple, communion, as with a baby and mother, barn yard animals, our own families, you and me.