

2nd Sunday after Christmas Day (Year C)

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.

Words are powerful things. Whoever said "sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me," was a complete moron. Words hold within them the power to build up and to break down, to save and to oppress, to create and to destroy. When words stay on a sheet of paper or do nothing except stay inside the mind, they are (for the most part) empty and powerless, like a church that preaches the Gospel but does not act it out in the real world. But when words become enfleshed and embodied, they take on a life of their own. They can very easily snowball into powerful waves of actions, either "good" or "bad" or otherwise.

Today, on this second Sunday after Christmas Day and this first Sunday of the new year, we celebrate a powerful Word (with a capital "W"). This Word was in the beginning. This Word was with God. And this Word *was* God. All things came into being through this Word, we are told in today's poem. What has come into being in this Word was life, and the life was the light of all people. This light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The poet, who we might call "John," is theologically connecting the sweet baby Jesus, helpless and infantile, to the cosmic Word that ushered in creation's fruition with a single phrase: "let there be light." Simply put, this baby Jesus is both the youngest and oldest person in the room. This Jesus, who is now incarnate in our very arms, is both "new" and "eternal." Jesus is "new" in the sense that God is now embodied as a human being. Jesus is "eternal" in that this Word-now-made-flesh has been with God and *has been God* since, well, the beginning.

If you are trying to figure this out “mathematically,” good luck! It doesn’t make sense. About the best way I can “explain” it to you is to say that the person of Jesus comes to us within a particular period in time but, nevertheless, is in no way “bound” within the confines of time. While we do celebrate Jesus as a particular human being in a particular time and place, there has been no time when Jesus was not!

What is new to us, what we celebrate in this season of Christmas (yes, it is *still* Christmas!), is that the Word is no longer a mere theoretical prophecy for which we are waiting. Jesus Christ, the Word, is now enfleshed! As we have said, words that are not embodied are powerless. But words that are enfleshed and enacted are the most powerful things in all of creation. In this case, *the* Word is no less than the Creator himself!

It is through this Word-made-flesh that the words we preach in this room become concrete acts of discipleship outside of it.

It is through the Word-made-flesh that the word “grace” becomes more than a word and becomes a transformative process through which we share redemption with others.

It is through the Word-made-flesh, this human incarnation of eternal divinity, that the word “resurrection” becomes more than a Sunday we celebrate every spring and becomes a way of life to be embraced and loosed into the world.

It is through the Word-made-flesh, this “fleshy God,” that the word “welcome” becomes more than simply saying “hello” and “how are you?” to become a culture of hospitality in which each and every person feels understood and valued.

What words will *the Word* bring to us in 2016? As we begin this new year, today’s text invites us to ponder the ways in which the reality of God-with-us will inspire us to embody words that we are called to preach in word and in deed.

Through the incarnation of the newborn King, Jesus Christ, you and I are invited to be people of the Word. As we live into this, here are a few “words” that I pray we will continue to embody in the coming year.

The first word is “serve.” I hope that 2016 will be a year in which we continue to grow into our identity of being an outwardly focused congregation. KIVA, Maureen’s Haven, the work of the Deacons and the UPW, the maintenance of a building used widely by different organizations on this island - all of these keep us outwardly focused and remind us that the moment we exist only for ourselves and “our” interests is the moment we cease to be the church.

The second word is “welcome.” I hope that 2016 will be a year in which we are humbly reminded that we can and should be more of a welcoming community. I am going to be very pastorally blunt here. The majority, though not all, of people who tell me that they feel welcomed at Shelter Island Presbyterian Church are the people of Shelter Island Presbyterian Church. When the majority of people who say we are welcoming are the strangers among us, *then* we will truly be an inclusive welcoming community. May we be reminded that welcome as just a word means “come to me where I am comfortable and you will be welcomed.” Welcome as an enfleshed reality means “I’ll come to you where you are and there we will be welcomed together.”

The third word is “preach.” I hope that 2016 will be a year in which each of you embraces the reality that we are *all* preachers of the Word. The truth, whether we realize it or not, is that right now I

am one preacher among a entire congregations of preachers. To preach the gospel is to transform faith-filled words (lower-case "w") into faithful acts of discipleship in service of, and response to, *the* Word (upper case "W").

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, may 2016 be a year in which we serve, welcome, and preach. And may we speak these words not as empty rhetoric, but as overflowing embodiments of grace that carry us out to meet Christ in the world. For Christ will not remain in the manger; Christ will grow up in truth and grace and dine with the tax collector, and speak with the prostitute, and fellowship with the leper. Christ will meet the marginalized where they are and not leave them as they were. May we, as a congregation of the Word, be the light that shines in the darkness. And with a healthy dosage of help from the Word-made-flesh, the darkness will not overcome.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.