

## 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.

Good morning! We are here on Zoom together this morning for the first time after Christmas Day, which was just a couple of days ago, and we're now almost to the end of what has been a very strange and unforgettable year.

Even with our activities significantly limited by the pandemic we've been dealing with for most of this year, many of us still managed to have a very busy week or so leading up to Christmas Day, and an even busier day on Christmas Day itself. For many of us, it might not have been until late in the day on Christmas Day, or even yesterday, that we had the first real chance in weeks to enjoy the peace and the quiet that follows the Christmas celebration.

The time leading up to Christmas is a busy and exciting time. As a kid, I used to get so excited about Christmas. I still do. When I was small, I'd wake up early on Christmas morning like many kids do, when it was still dark out, and I'd usually wake up my brother and we'd run to the tree in the living room to see what might be there. It is hard to describe that kind of

excitement! And of course opening the presents was exciting, and then playing with them, and then getting dressed and going to the grandparents' houses, where there would be family - aunts and uncles, cousins and more - and more presents! It was always a great day, filled with family, food, candy and music and fun. But I remember I also used to especially enjoy the end of the day on Christmas Day, and the next day or so immediately after Christmas as well. Because after all the wrapping paper had been picked up and stuffed in a trash bag, after all the Christmas dinners had been served and eaten, and the tables cleared, and the candy had finally been put out of reach, we'd put our coats on, get in the car and head back home, where I'd get another chance for a while before bed to look again at all the gifts that had been given to me. Maybe some of you used to do something like this, too.

My brother and I had established invisible "lines of demarcation" under the tree: one area on one side of the tree where his presents would go, and on the other side of the tree, another area where mine would go. And before we'd go to bed, when the day had quieted down, we'd each sit on the floor in our respective "designated zone" and look at them all over again, much more closely and quietly than we did in the morning when we first opened them (well, except for school clothes, which for us, weren't terribly exciting to get, so at best they only got a passing second glance). I would take the Batman action figure out from under the tree, carefully looking over the box before taking it out, examining his costume, and then moving the arms and legs, standing him up and putting him in various crime-fighting poses. I would look at the comic book or the baseball magazine slowly, even looking over all the ads and other assorted features and insertions. I would hold up that HO-gauge model railroad engine, looking at it all around and admiring its detail in the paint scheme, the headlights, and the tiny handrails, and I would picture it pulling a line of freight cars on the track on the layout my father had made for me down in the

cellar of the house. I remember the feeling that the gifts were so wonderful, and that even though I didn't really consider myself a terrible kid, I also knew in my heart I was far from perfect and probably didn't really deserve so many wonderful presents. And I felt great gratitude toward my parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and others for thinking enough of me that they would give me such terrific gifts despite my shortcomings over the past year.

Well, at this point some of you may be thinking, “This is all very nice, but why exactly are we taking this stroll down memory lane?” Well, in the third reading this morning, we read the prologue to John's gospel. I'm sure most of you know that we read these same 18 verses on the First Sunday after Christmas pretty much every year. Unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke, John doesn't start his gospel account with the story of Jesus' birth. The opening verses of John's gospel don't mention anything about a census, or Bethlehem, or a manger, or shepherds, or angels. Instead, he gives us this prologue: 18 verses packed with deep meaning and mystery far beyond human comprehension, presenting profound truths about Jesus. In reading these verses a couple of weeks or so ago, it struck me that it almost seems like John is doing something similar to what my brother and I used to do (and countless others have undoubtedly done over the years) with our presents after the long-awaited celebration of Christmas Day had subsided, giving way to the quieter time of the evening, and the next few days of school vacation, when we would sit on the floor of the living room by the tree, and look at our gifts over and over. In this reading, there is a sense in which John is holding up Jesus, after the long-awaited burst of emotional Christmas joy and celebration has subsided, and is saying to us, “let us now take the opportunity to put our focus on him, to examine and admire him as the most wonderful gift that could ever be given by God to man. This is a gift like no other.”

First of all, this gift has existed from before the world existed - the gift was *always* with God. Imagine someone giving you a gift that he had kept with him for his entire life, especially something that is especially precious to him; think about how much that person must love you, as the recipient of the gift, to give it to you. Now try to imagine God, who has *always been* - even before the world existed, even before *time* existed - giving us his most precious gift, which has been with Him *always*. This gift is the Word of God - the thoughts and mind and heart of God fully expressed and revealed - given to us. And this is no ordinary expression of God's being; this isn't a journal of God's written thoughts and feelings. This is an *extraordinary* expression; this is the same Word through whom "all things" were created, and who has now been made man, like us, who would experience the same things we experience. He is eternal, he has always been with God, he is the one who expresses God's thoughts and nature, all creation came through him, and now he's a man, who is God, who has come to live with us. And that is just the start of what makes God's gift so wonderful!

John goes on to tell us that Jesus, as a gift to us from God, provides life and light to us. He provides it not only in the physical sense through creation (although he did that), but just as importantly, in the spiritual sense - real, spiritual, eternal life *in him*, and light that can't be overcome by the darkness - the light draws us out of the darkness to him so we can see and understand God's Word and actions in that light. There is no other gift that can provide this kind of life or this kind of light. But there's still more to this gift that we can discover and adore!

This incredible gift has been made available to everyone, but not everyone sees the value in it. For those who prefer to remain in the darkness, they won't be able to see the beauty or the value in the gift and will not accept it. But John tells us that for those who draw closer to the light, see and accept the gift from God, they're given the power to become God's children -

spiritually born of God. And not just some distant "adopted children" who are physically sustained by donations sent by some sponsor thousands of miles away.... By accepting this gift, "God comes down that we may rise, lifted by him to the skies... that we ever one may be with the Father and with thee." By accepting and embracing and knowing Jesus, we get to enjoy the fullness of the Father's grace and see His glory!

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, in Your Son, You have given us the greatest gift imaginable. As we find ourselves in moments of quiet after the joy and exuberance of the annual celebration of the birth of Your Son, and as we prepare to enter a new year, let us reflect back on how the light of his presence has withstood the darkness of this past unforgettable year. Let us also, with John, reflect deeply on the many facets of the magnificence of this most precious gift You have given to us out of Your love for us. Let us rest in the mystery of You as God who is revealed to us in the gift of Jesus. And in the year to come, help us to go daily into the quiet of our own hearts, to meet You there, in love and adoration; and through our acceptance of Your gift, enjoy the fullness of Your grace as Your own beloved children. In Jesus' name we pray,*

*Amen.*