

John 1: [1-9]10-18 - *1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.] ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴And 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.'") ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Jeremiah 31:7-14 - *⁷For thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel." ⁸See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. ⁹With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.*

¹⁰Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." ¹¹For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. ¹²They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. ¹³Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. ¹⁴I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father who has blessed us with the light of the world, his only Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, who came among us as a tiny baby and continues to make his presence known through the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Faith Hill has a beautiful song called, '*A Baby Changes Everything*,' that was released in 2008 both as a single and on her album, '*Joy to the World*.' In musical lyrics it tells the Christmas story – the birth of a baby to a young girl alone with her fiancé far away from home. At the end she sings 'Hallelujahs' and the final verse, '*My whole life is turned around. I was lost but now I'm found. A baby changes everything.*'

Whether you have your own children, have adopted a child or just observed as family or friends welcomed a child into their home, most of us would agree that a baby changes everything. One may plan, prepare, fix up the nursery, attend classes and all sorts of things to get ready for the birth of a child, but when that tiny little bundle appears, one realizes nothing prepared our hearts for what we feel in that moment. Our world shifts. Nothing will ever be quite the same again.

Last week with Christmas Day barely past and many of our hearts still focused on the manger, shepherds and baby Jesus, our gospel took us to the Jerusalem temple with Mary, Joseph and 12-year-old Jesus where Jesus sat '*in his father's house*' with the teachers, learning and teaching. This quick move from baby Jesus to pre-teen, especially when it falls right after Christmas Day always strikes me as out of place. I want to say – 'wait!' let's just soak up Christmas a bit longer. It's much like all the radio stations shutting off the Christmas carols at midnight on Christmas Eve.

But today in this the darkest time of the year in upstate New York, when the busyness of holiday preparation is behind us, after holiday guests have headed home, we may feel less than excited, even downright sad and unenthused about much of anything. Christmas dreams we had that maybe didn't come to fruition and happier memories from past Christmases may have left aches in our hearts. Maybe a little change is just what we need. Into this space John takes us back to creation – to the beginning and reminds us that the Word has always been and always will be. Baby Jesus didn't just change Mary and Joseph's lives, no Jesus has initiated change through all of time and still does.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word, the pre-incarnate Jesus not yet come to earth as a baby, was with God and was God – was part of creating the world. '*All things came into being through him; and*

without him not one thing made came into being. This same Word came to us as a baby on Christmas. But Christmas doesn't end there for through his life Jesus taught God's will for us. Then he took on our sins, and suffered death on the cross for them, that we might have life. This is the same Word incarnate – the Word made flesh, who says in Matthew's gospel, as he commissions his disciples, "...remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The Word made flesh is "*the light of all people – the light that shines in darkness,*" even still.

That light changes everything! It is stronger than darkness. It is stronger than the darkness of going into a third year of COVID, it is stronger than winter's dismal gloominess, stronger than sickness, lost jobs, raging fires in Colorado or tornadoes in Kentucky. John says the Light came into the world, "*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.*" Jesus didn't just send a text message or an email. The Greek verb that translates 'lived' as used here is *skeenoo* [skay-no'-o] which literally means, 'pitched his tent.' God came and 'dwelt' among us. When my children were growing up our family went camping. I loved the cozy feeling of all of us sitting around a campfire, wrapped in a blanket with stars above and the quiet of the night. No matter what had transpired in the days before, a quiet peace would come over me. When I think of Jesus dwelling among us, that is the image that comes into my mind. Peace and tranquility despite the messiness and pain of our lives and of the world around us.

I suspect it's the image of God dwelling among us that most of us prefer to see. But God's love is complex. God provides both law and grace and truth. In his commentary on today's Jeremiah lesson, Rev. Karl Jacobson looks at the question: "*Is God a lion or a shepherd?*" When one thinks of the beauty of a *well-watered garden*' as Jeremiah describes the life of God's people becoming, it's easy to see the majesty and wonderfulness of God, a shepherd. However, when we look around us at all the devastation and awfulness that seems to happen every day; it is hard to see God as any other than a lion on the prowl. Likewise, we can focus on God's justice and faithfulness spoken by the prophets – Jeremiah's words that God will bring the people back. Yet Jeremiah and other prophets also spoke of God's judgment and wrath. It is hard to reconcile these opposites. God understood this, therefore *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us* so we could truly understand God's great love and compassion. The Word came as a helpless little baby – a baby that would bring a smile to our face and open our hearts to love.

Jeremiah prophesied during the reigns of Josiah and succeeding kings up to the Babylonian exile. It was a time of storms and stress when the doom of entire nations was impending. Jeremiah's life was often in danger from both political and religious leaders who didn't like what he was saying. Yet God protected Jeremiah and despite the exile God watched over his people. And so we find Jeremiah sharing God's message, *'save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel.'* Jerusalem's destruction, the people exiled in a foreign land wasn't enough to destroy all God's people. A remnant was left. God has kept his covenant promise even during the darkest times and the people are to give praise.

God brings those he has scattered back home to their land; all of them – from the farthest parts of the earth, the blind, lame, a great company will return. It doesn't sound like it will be easy as Jeremiah writes, *'with weeping they shall come, and with consolations.'* One in the same God scattered them into exile AND now brings them home. The people weep because there has been and will still be loss and sadness. But there is also joy in anticipation of what is to come. Haven't we all been in that place? A young high school graduate sad to be leaving his friends is also filled with excitement and anticipation as he heads off to college. The loss of a loved one fills us with heartache and yet we trust in God's promise of eternal life for them and the joy of knowing they will rest in Jesus heavenly arms.

A baby changes everything not just when born. They grow and their lives intertwine with our own and change us all over time. Those lives are filled with joys and sorrows, successes and defeats over the years as it has been since Adam and Eve. But, the baby Jesus isn't just any baby. He is the Christ, the living Son of God. This baby is a gift that keeps on giving always and reflects our own lives. It is the reason God sent his Son to live among us – that we might know we are understood. Jesus came here, lived in the world – he understands the hurts and pains of life for he lived them, too.

Christmas isn't just two Sundays in the lectionary calendar. Christmas keeps on giving. That first Christmas didn't just happen like the flip of the switch on Christmas Eve when we turn out the electric lights to sit in candlelight singing Silent Night or as we flip them back on singing Joy to the World. Christmas won't end next week with the Baptism of Our Lord, or even when we arrive in Lent. Pr. Jordan Miller-Stubbendick writes in her article, *'Christmas at the Cemetery, in the Jan-February issue of the Gather magazine, 'Christmas doesn't just happen all at once: it becomes over time...Christmas took time to blossom.'* Just as a baby grows from infant into toddler, young child to teenager and

adult, we grow into Christmas. From the time of our baptism throughout our whole lives we grow into God's love. Last week's gospel ended with the words, '*His mother (Mary) treasured all these things in her heart.*' Don't we too keep or treasure our faith experiences in our hearts, pondering them over time, allowing them to help our faith grow? Think for a moment how your prayer life may have changed over the years – from that first childhood prayer at meal-time, 'God is Great, God is Good,' to today maybe being able to craft your own prayer from your heart.

Through Jesus' birth God gifts us with the power to become '*children of God*' if we but open our hearts and believe. In the Word become flesh and dwelling among us, we – you and I – have received '*grace upon grace.*' We can see God's fullness – the amazing glory of God, the Father's love – love that is '*full of grace and truth.*' This gift of grace – the undeserved love of God embodied in Jesus Christ, that has turned the world upside down isn't just a gift to those who witnessed it thousands of years ago – it is our gift too. It is a gift for all people from God who loves us so much he would gift his only Son. It isn't just the baby in the manger. As Bishop Elizabeth Eaton writes in her December *Living Lutheran* column, the true gift of Christmas is the cross. God's amazing sacrifice of His Son, on the cross; a death that atones the sins of all people forever. It is this gift that provides reconciliation and healing and promise of eternal life.

It isn't just a gift for good times. God's love is here sustaining us throughout life's ups and downs. The incarnation unfolds the mystery of God's plan to redeem the human race. Through Christ, God lavishes us with grace, a grace that keeps on giving. In these days of winter dismalness, we can rest assured that God is always with us. Christ is the ultimate gift – the gift that doesn't break but knows our brokenness; the gift that can put us back together without Elmer's glue; the gift of Jesus Christ who holds us, wipes our tears, shares our joys, and gave His life that we might have life. This baby born on Christmas truly changes everything! Hallelujah! Amen.