



University Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Austin, Texas

University Christian Church – Austin

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In the Beginning

Advent 4, b, Dec. 21, 2008

John 1:1-10

This morning our Scripture lesson completes the logic of our Advent 2008 worship planning. Our first Sunday was a marvelous Hanging Of The Greens describing for us the relevance and meaning of all of the adornments of our sanctuary.

The next week we heard and discussed the good news of the coming of Jesus into the world in the Gospel of Mark through the proclamation of John the Baptist.

The following week, last week, the 3rd Sunday in Advent, we looked at how the Gospel of Luke talks about Jesus coming into the world, especially through the eyes of his mother Mary.

This week, in the concluding Sunday of Advent, if we want to move from the most earthly to the most spiritual, the most flesh and blood Jesus towards the most Divine Christ, then we have this progression along the continuum completed this morning by taking a look at the beginning of the Gospel of John.

The Gospel of John is often called the “church’s gospel” because it has been for nearly 2000 years the most beloved. Whereas Mark wants us to see the powerful working of God in the very human Jesus, the Gospel of John presents to us a Jesus who is God, who barely touches down to earth, who sees and knows and understands what no human ever could. And so we should not be surprised as

begin this morning at the beginning of the Gospel of John with the most dramatic statement about the nature of Jesus Christ that we find in the Bible.

“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.

Here in the writings of the Gospel of John the growing tradition around the man Jesus of Nazareth has reached a new level, an apotheosis, finally here reaching a new claim that Jesus the Christ was the logos, as the Word, the founding logic and order of the universe “was in the beginning with God,” preexistent and eternal, what would become the bedrock claim upon which all discussions of the Trinity would later be founded.¹

For those who could and can accept this perspective, the amazing story has a thoroughly satisfying sound. John Shea tells the story of one such recipient of the news:

"She was five, sure of the facts, and recited them with slow solemnity, convinced every word was revelation. She said, "They were so poor they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat and they went a long way from home without getting lost. The lady rode a donkey, the man walked, and the baby was inside the lady. They had to stay in a stable with an ox and an ass (hee-hee), but the Three Rich Men found them because a star lighted the roof. Shepherds came and you could pet the sheep but not feed them. Then the baby was borned. And do you know who he was?" Her quarter eyes inflated to silver dollars. "The baby was God." And she jumped in the

air, whirled around, dove into the sofa and buried her head under the cushion"ⁱⁱⁱ which for those who can believe the news may be the only proper response the incarnation of the Word in Jesus.

But there are many, including many Christians, and a growing number in our age, for whom such an exalted claim for Jesus seems both ridiculous and highly problematic. "Who could believe such a thing?," they say. "Perhaps," they go on,"in a very metaphorical way I could buy that, but that only if we aren't making a literal claim of Christ's identity with God." The majority of respected Biblical scholars in our age would agree with them that even Jesus, himself, never held himself in anything near that high regard.

Another practical trouble with this perspective is that it can elevate Jesus Christ right out of the reality in which you and I must live. If we take the humanity out of Jesus, we can end up with a theology that tends to denigrate the earthy as base and unworthy. It can lead to an elevated, almost escapist spirituality, that would rather hunt for God experiences in hours of meditation and shun spending similar hours of service to the poor,

that separates worship from work,

that honors belief more than being and making visible Christ's gracious presence in the world. If we follow that spiritual path we run the risk of becoming, as the old saw puts it, "so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good."

Let me give a very present example. As one of your ministers I am keenly aware of the need to develop and sustain a worshipful atmosphere in the midst of our time together on Sunday mornings. Mary Lu and Roslyn and I have talked on numbers of occasions about how it is that we can maintain that worshipful spirit as we flow through the service, recognizing that there are some aspects of the service that have a propensity to breaking that worshipful sense.

What might come to your mind is the sermon. Sermons are calling you out of a direct worshipful experience into a listening, hopefully learning, and sometimes inspiring experience, but not worshipful in the same way that your communion experience or your prayer experience provides.

Some notice that the Offertory Moment is another time that shakes one out of a settled inward turn.

But certainly the worst culprit for breaking that sense of worshipfulness must be that aspect of our time together that receives the least regard; the time when there is more twittering, whispered conversations in the congregation than anywhere else. Yes, I'm talking about our Announcements.

The Announcements do seem like a box of buttered popcorn at the symphony, don't they? They can come across as a clumsy segment of boorish necessities wedging their way into our hour of inspiration.

I have not researched the matter, but am willing to place a small wager that what happened here at University Christian Church is what happened at many of our Disciples of Christ congregations across the country several decades ago. There used to be a time in most of our churches when the congregational announcements, the prayer concerns, the highlighting of upcoming events, the encouragement to be making items for the church bazaar; a call for folks to join the ministries of the prayer team, and the men's breakfast, and church lawn mowing...you know what I mean, some of the most mundane activities that we do in church would be shared just before the time of the pastoral prayer, far along into the service itself. That way we could be sure to tie the churches needs to the church's prayer time. And it didn't hurt that all the latecomers would've arrived by then, either.

But the Announcements there seemed so awkward, so intrusive. So many of our churches and gave up that order and moved the announcements up to the beginning of the service or back to the end of the service itself, so folks could slip out while the deacon read on, and on from that announcement list. And the reason for moving the Announcements made sense, because they were seen as too detrimental to the maintenance of that liberating, high-flying, worshipful spirit we are really after when we gather in church. ⁱⁱⁱ

I remember those days of the older order. There were so many times in worship at my home church in Florida when I had been lifted to the heights of inspiration by the singing of the choir or the profundity of an Elder's prayer at the Communion Table, only to have the vulgar crash to earth again with, "we still need 4 more women to sign up for the kitchen cleaning next Saturday morning." And the spell was broken! I was rudely jerked back to mundane living. I have a feeling that you know what I mean.

But, my friends, I believe our Scripture passage for today challenges us to see this differently, to focus not only on the Incarnation of Jesus, but also the Incarnation in us. You see, if you think carefully about it, I suggest you will discover that it is in the Announcements where we best see how the rubber of the church's theology hits the road.

It is in the Announcements that we discover the needs and the hopes of the Fellowship.

It is in the Announcements that we discover what the church values enough to spend our energy and our precious time on. Oh yes, the choir anthem may bless you, the sermon may intrigue you, the Communion Service may confirm in you the very presence of Christ, but it is in the announcements more than any place else that we discover whether or not our faith has legs, whether or not our faith has the power to really move us into significant action in nurturing growth in the church

and in serving the wide world's needs in the name of Jesus Christ. It is not in our worshipful listening and appreciating nearly so much as in our being, and especially in our doing, that we will know if and how Jesus Christ is being incarnated in us.

Perhaps that old order of worship is especially fitting in that it doesn't segregate the sacred and the mundane. One moment you are singing the sublime, "All Creatures of Our God and King" and the next we are caterwauling our need for a 3rd grade church school teacher. It is so messy, but if we can see and claim these both as equally needful elements in the life of the congregation...that the victorious anthem makes sense only when we're also wrestling with a church budget ...Then perhaps we are closer to that incarnation we seek.

This morning we might recognize that while our Johannine (Jo HAN in) version of Jesus often seems far removed from the flesh and blood Marcan version, but on this point they as well as Matthew and Luke do all agree. The God towards which our Jesus Christ points is not about to be segregated into the emotional highs of any service of worship. The message is Incarnation. And for those of us who want to be called "Christians," whether we can believe that God was incarnated that night in the Bethlehem manger, or whether we cannot believe that literally, we jolly well better find a way for that incarnation to take place inside of us.

To that end, then, let me close this morning with a prayer attributed to St. Theresa of Avila:

"Christ has no body now but yours,

no hands but yours,

no feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which

Christ's compassion must look out on the world.

Yours are the feet with which

He is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which

He is to bless us now."

My friends, may we go forward then as agents, as ambassadors of Christ in Christmas joy sharing the Good News in our words, incarnating that Christ spirit in our deeds, and freely sharing it with all who will receive God's blessing.

Amen.

ⁱ Many will understand this exclamation of high Christology as the best faithful response to the revelation of Christ, but we must recognize that it is precisely in these grand titles, this high understanding of who it is that Jesus Christ is, that we have as Christians elevated our claim to understand and our claim to absolute truth to become a terrible barrier of separation from less exalted Christological fused and even more, separating us from all other religions.

ⁱⁱ John Shea, *The Hour of the Unexpected* (Allan, TX: Argus Communications, 1977) p. 68

ⁱⁱⁱ Now, I confess that I have on numerous occasions in this church and in others been one who has advocated the moving of the mundane matters to the beginning or the end in order to maintain or better maintain that level of the service. s