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Trinity Episcopal Church

Isaiah 52: 7 – 10
 Hebrews 1: 1 – 4 (5 – 12)

Ps. 98
 John 1: 1 – 14

*An upturned bowl of blackened sky
 explodes with holy song.
 A world cracks open
 and with joyous abandon
 heaven spills over the jagged shards.
 For a moment.....
 the rough places become plain
 the crooked way becomes straight
 the dry bones dance with life
 the deaf hear
 the lame leap for joy.....*

EMMANUEL

*God with us –
 No matter what.*

(Mary Avram)

Welcome to the Christ Mass – Christmas – to the celebration of God with us, no matter what. These words from a poem by my spiritual director, Mary Avram, say something to us of the splendor, the wonder, the ineffable nature of this new morning. These words help us see the larger picture of a world in ecstasy over the immeasurably loving gift of God's salvation, of God giving God's self to us. The canvas of Creation, awash in radiant and brilliant light, and the colors of new birth. A cataclysmic moment in time, forever changing absolutely everything. The Incarnation changes everything. Mary's poem gives voice to that which is bigger than we can ever grasp or ever completely articulate. But then, how do we ever describe the indescribable, or as Madeleine L'Engle refers to it, The Glorious Impossible?

In the beginning of James Kilgo's book, *The Hand-Carved Creche and Other Christmas Stories*, Mr. Kilgo writes, "The [stories] I'm about to tell here come from my own experience and they are true; most of them are even factual." That is a telling statement: that truth cannot be circumscribed by mere fact. We try to describe the indescribable, but after a point, we are limited by our finitude as human beings. After a point, we must simply know it as truth and run with it. Or sing and dance with it.

Our readings on this Christmas Day resound with a veritable symphony of voices that weave and re-weave the themes of God's glory, victorious triumph, redemption, peace, fulfillment, and of God's steadfast faithfulness and unbounded love. The sentinels of Zion lift up their voices and, together, sing for joy, writes the prophet, Isaiah. Even the ruins of Jerusalem are to sing of the Lord comforting the people of God. "Shout with joy to the Lord, all you lands; lift up your voice, rejoice and sing. Sing to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the voice of song. With trumpets and the sound of the horn shout with joy before the King, the Lord," says the Psalmist. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews waxes lyrical, writing "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful words."

And there are few more glorious and rhapsodic passages in Scripture than the prologue to John's Gospel:

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.

If ever it was possible to try to get our minds completely around the impossible, inexplicable mysteries of creation, time and salvation, let alone God, then this is probably as close as it gets, at least for me. And so, with these passages, we sing: Jesus Christ is born. To us. Today.

The lessons on Christmas Day are so completely different from those of Christmas Eve. At least superficially, because they also have a lot in common. Instead of Luke's nativity songs, we have John's hymn to Christ. Instead of Luke's birth story, we have John proclaiming that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. John doesn't write that the One conceived by the Holy Spirit will be the Son of God, but John does say that the One who became flesh was with God from the beginning, and what God is, the One is. John doesn't have God's Son wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger, but John does write that God's revelation in the person of Jesus is 'veiled in flesh.' John paints big, bold, abstract strokes across time and eternity, while Luke paints impressionistically with delicacy and details. Both are taken from experience. All of it is truth. Some of it is even fact.

The Incarnation changes everything. And John has much to say about it. Author Elaine Pagels, in an article from the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, noted that, deeply woven into John's prologue, there are three 'negations.' And it is through these negations that John tells us who Jesus really is and what the Incarnation means for the world.

In John 1:5, John writes, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." That's what we always hear, but, according to the Rev. Rick Morley, a better translation of the Greek word behind 'overcome' is 'understand.' The darkness did not 'understand' the light. And if you think about the duality of light and dark and their symbolism in all of John's Gospel, this makes perfect sense. The darkness does not understand Jesus.

In John 1:10, when the Light comes into the world, the whole cosmos comes into being through him, Jesus, yet the world does not know or recognize him. The nations of the world do not recognize Jesus. They do not see Jesus as sent from God. They do not recognize God in Jesus.

And then, in the very next verse, John 1:11, which reads, "He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him," Jesus' own people fail to receive him. Meaning the people of Israel, God's own chosen, the people who *should* know God, fail to receive him, in a land and a culture where hospitality is everything. Jesus' own people do not receive him.

Three negations: The Light, Jesus, is not understood or recognized or received. The turning point, as John sees it, begins with this enfleshment of the Word. "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." The enfleshment, the Incarnation, begins to change everything. It is, as the Rev. Rick Morley describes, an 'aha' moment for all of Creation, and for the people of God. For us. The Incarnation is when God coming into the world is finally understood, recognized, received and given the glory due God's name. It doesn't happen all at once, but it begins with God's revelation to Mary and Joseph, to Elizabeth, to the shepherds, and to the magi. It will take time, and eyes to see and ears to hear, and reflection by people like John the evangelist. But, Jesus, the Incarnation, is the hinge, the turning point on which all of

history pivots. It is when our relationship with God fundamentally changes as we begin to know God as revealed in Jesus.

This day, Christmas Day, is a day unlike any other. It is a day made holy and special by a sacred mystery, the Incarnation. It is not merely another day in a weary round of time. On this day, eternity enters into time, and time is sanctified and caught up into eternity. On this day, Jesus, the eternal Word of God, who was in the beginning with God, in whom all things were made, and by whom all things are sustained, enters into the world which he has created in order to reclaim souls who have forgotten their identity. On this day, God enters the world to redeem our brokenness and to reveal, once and for all, what relationship with God really looks like. On this day, we celebrate Emmanuel, God with us.

No matter what. Merry Christmas! +

(Elaine H. Pagels, Journal of Biblical Literature, 118 no 3 Fall 1999, p. 481, via the Rev. Rick Morley, Dec. 22, 2010)