

## **Christmas Day, Year A, 2022**

Gospel: Christmas Day: John's Prologue, John 1:1-14

*"Immanuel, God With Us: Open us to your Presence." Amen*

### **Immanuel (Emmanuel): God is with Us**

Hello everyone, and Merry Christmas on this beautiful cold blue-skied Christmas morning. I have a question for each of you. You don't have to come up with your answer right now, but at some point today think about this: What is your favorite passage from scripture? I don't think it's an easy question to answer. There are so many options. I remember the first time someone posed that question to me. It was around 15 years ago, when I was enrolled in a program at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, long before seminary and long before I had much spiritual formation at all. Shalem is an ecumenical group based in Washington DC that focuses on contemplative living as a way toward wholeness. I was a student in two of their programs. My first retreat was in Dalesford Abbey in Philadelphia, and during a casual conversation one day the program director Ann Dean asked me "What is your favorite passage from scripture?" Well, I was a little unnerved, first because I knew very little about scripture then—not that I am a scriptural scholar now, because I am not—but also because I didn't want to appear like a complete idiot to this wonderful well read and scripturally well versed loving person who I grew to greatly admire. So, with my mind spinning anxiously I came up with one scripture, that being Psalm 49, which reads:

"The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the firmament shows his handiwork."

She liked it, and I was pleased, and relieved! Those verses from Psalm 49 are still meaningful to me, as I hope becomes clear to you today. But later I found a new passage which has become my favorite. It's the Prologue in John, the gospel for today and which Jim just read. The Prologue is John's birth narrative. In John's gospel there is no mention of the many people and events we have all come to know and love and celebrate at Christmas time. There is no angel visiting Joseph, no Gabriel appearing to Mary at the annunciation, no birth of the baby Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem, no shepherds, no bright star leading the

wise men from the East, no exodus of Joseph and Mary and Jesus to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. No, the author of the Gospel of John tells the birth narrative from a much different perspective, going all the way back to the beginning of time, to the creation itself. This is not a historical narrative, but rather an exploration of the meaning of Christmas, and its fundamental message is incarnation. In John's birth narrative Jesus the Christ exists with God before the creation of the world. He is the "Word," the "Logos," the "Wisdom through which all things are created." In John's words "All things came into being through him....and what has come into being through him is life, and the life is the light of all people." What John is describing here is what Father Richard Rohr calls "The First Incarnation," that moment in time when God/Christ empties Spirit into the creation, into all created things. It is our direct connection with the Creator God, with the Christ. It is that moment when spirit and matter become united, when the Light of the sacred enters the material world. Heaven and earth are joined. The transcendent becomes imminent. We are one with Christ, and we are one with all created things, with all life forms, made of the same atoms and same elements, and with our home Earth, this tiny planet within the boundless expanse of God's infinite universe. A universe in which everything is inter-connected, inter-dependent, every atom infused with that light that comes through Christ.

Let's move forward in time now, to that incarnation that happened a little over two thousand years ago in Bethlehem. Why is the birth of the baby Jesus so meaningful? Why did God decide to literally physically enter into humanity? Incarnation may be a difficult to explain, but I think it is all about love. It is love, God enfleshing that love into the form of a human being, that being Jesus the Christ. It is about Christ, the Maker of the universe, willingly and lovingly coming to this poor struggling planet to live with us for a few years to show us what we ought to be and could be and what we in truth are. Christ came to us as Jesus of Nazareth, wholly human and wholly divine, to show us what it means to be made in God's image.

Where do we find this God? How does God reveal God's self to us? How do we see the divine? How do we feel it, touch it? Our Contemplative Prayer class at All Saints' just this week finished the program, in which we read Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul by John Philip Newell. The book is exploration of God's presence in everything created. We talked about how to find God in the smallest and the largest of created things: in a leaf, a tree, running

water, the sky, the wind, animals and plants of all types. We did at home practices aimed at opening us up to that presence in the out of doors, deep examination of an object in nature, praying in the morning to notice God in everything we encounter and then reflecting and journaling about those encounters, walking barefoot on the earth to literally feel with our feet our direct connection to our home Earth and to all created things. But perhaps most important of all to see God's presence in one another, in all people we meet, and in ourselves. Our oneness in Christ, revealed to us most deeply in the life of Jesus, the embodiment of the Spirit which God first emptied into creation nearly 14 billion years ago. Yes, that is where we find God, in each other, in ourselves—in you, each and every one of you! Some may ask “Where is this God hiding in my life? I can't see God.” While God may at times seem to be hiding, the mystery we celebrate at Christmas is saying that God has chosen not to hide, but rather to live in the world, and it's in all material things. Where is this God being revealed? It may be easy say we see God in the safe comfortable world most of us know, and in our grand church buildings, the cathedrals. But God is perhaps most present at the margins, at the bottom, among those where we don't look for God, where we don't expect to see God—in the eyes of those living on the street without homes, the sick, the abused, those who suffer, the oppressed. It seems sometimes that our religion, our church, Christianity itself is all about being nice, pretty, “normal,” accepted, and under the law. Yet our Gospel stories tell us that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were none of those things. Perhaps we need to look elsewhere for God. The Incarnation of Immanuel, God with us, places Jesus among the most vulnerable of people, those hurting and cast aside by society. Perhaps we need to recognize that the Christ is in each of us, and then live our lives the way Jesus models for us, seeking justice and peace and wholeness and most of all love. Perhaps we can join Jesus as incarnations of God's justice and peace on this earth, walking in solidarity with humanity and with our home Earth, sharing in our sufferings and in our moments of hope, doing our part to build the Kingdom Jesus talks so much about. Amidst all our hardships, God is with us. Immanuel, always present. And we are the instruments for Christ to act in the world. It has been said there is really only one love in the world, and one suffering. That is because we are all part of the whole of creation, inter-connected, and all filled with Christ. We enter into that love and into that suffering, in solidarity with one

another, just as Jesus did, showing us the path toward God's hope for creation, the Kingdom of God.

As we celebrate the mystery of the incarnation this Christmas, let us pause, sit in the silence of God's presence made known to us since the beginning and again with the birth of Jesus, and let us know that the Christ is alive in each of us, calling us to live out the gospel message, the message of love.